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Strengthening Parks Canada Management of the Rideau Canal

Context and Parks Canada Role

The Rideau Canal is a large and complex waterway, containing a variety of ecosystems. As a federal waterway, Parks Canada (PC) must take a clear leadership role, to conserve the Canal's environmental health. The PC mandate and responsibilities are directed in the *Parks Canada Agency Act* (“to maintain ecological integrity”), the *Species at Risk Act*, and other legislation.

Climate change is already placing major environmental stress on the Canal. Further stresses include invasive species, and shoreline and other sub-watershed development leading to habitat loss and nutrient loading. There is also growing recreational boat traffic (noise and wakes). Many “in water” structures (docks, boat lifts, etc.) remain “undocumented”, with undocumented construction regularly occurring during fish spawning periods.

Covid 19 has only served to accelerate many existing sources of environmental stress (e.g., development, more full-time residents, etc).

For its part, PC staff (beyond operational staff, such as those at the locks), are not readily accessible to the public, nor even visible through enforcement activities. For too long, PC has not met its legislated mandate to protect the Rideau's ecological integrity.

Addressing these challenges – let alone solving them - requires that PC lead dynamic ongoing engagement of other orders of government (including Conservation Authorities), and civil society groups (including lake associations). Perhaps most importantly, PC must actively engage the public- the conservation of ecological integrity cannot be done by PC (or even governments) alone, it requires the cooperation of residents on the shores of the Rideau Canal.

Fundamentally PC and others must consider the Canal an organic whole, comprising interrelated and co-dependent ecosystems. And, PC is the only Agency with a mandate for the entire length of the Rideau Canal!

In 2021, PC released (5 years beyond its statutory deadline) a draft “Management Plan” for the Rideau. This draft plan not only falls well short of its 2005 predecessor Plan, it fails to include even the most basic elements that would allow for effective management of the Rideau. There are few objectives that deal specifically with ecological integrity, nor any commitments to inventory vital wetlands, littoral areas and species at risk. The draft plan lacks clear objectives with measurable targets, and timelines for their achievement. The draft fails to include measures to engage partners on the environment. Remarkably, the vision laid out is oriented largely at “tourism” and associated revenue generation.

In short, the draft management plan not only does not meet the minimal requirements of a “management plan”, it manifestly will not lead to a more robust ecology of the Rideau Canal, over a 10-year period.

Lake Associations are calling for PC leadership in these 3 areas:

Environmental Integrity (As a new objective, in “Strategy 2” of the draft plan):

Proactive conservation management (e.g., conducting “base line” physical inventories (wetlands, species at risk, shoreline development); scientific research, monitoring and impact analysis), on an ongoing basis, with results posted on the Rideau Canal website;

- More controls on unnecessary boat speeds in sensitive areas, boat wakes, and noise, to reduce overall environmental impact, given increasing boat traffic; and
- Commitments to develop actionable environmental protection programs that will support the maintenance of ecological integrity on the Rideau Canal.

Effective “governance”:

- Updating Authorities, associated Regulations (which are decades out of date), and allocating sufficient enforcement resources for visible effective enforcement activities on PC jurisdiction;
- Defining clearly the permitting system for any “on water and near shore” activity, including the roles of other agencies that are part of overall the permitting process, and posting this information on the Rideau Canal website; and
- Annual reporting on the progress measured against the benchmarks in a robust re-invigorated Management Plan.

Engaging and leading others:

- Committing to ongoing, “21st Century” dynamic engagement with public stakeholders such as lake associations, with both Parks Canada policy makers (managers) and environmental staff specifically tasked with the ecological integrity of the Rideau Canal;
- Exchanging scientific data regarding ecological integrity of the Rideau Canal (e.g., areas at risk, water quality indices, emerging scientific research) with lake associations, Conservation Authorities, municipalities, and key academic researchers (e.g., Dr. John Smol); and

- Working with other government agencies, contributing to a public education of waterfront owners regarding the role they can and should play in the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the Rideau Canal.
- John Mcdowell, President, Upper Rideau Lake Association
- Grant Leslie, President, Big Rideau Lake Association