

# A National Marine Conservation Area Proposal for Lake Superior: Challenges, Opportunities and Research Needs

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## Background

In 1997, the federal government of Canada signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the province of Ontario to explore the merits of a national marine conservation area (NMCA) in Lake Superior waters. This initiative has had its challenges — an NMCA must prove to be scientifically defensible, technically feasible, economically viable, and socially acceptable. No small feat for the 21<sup>st</sup> century! Success would accredit this area as the largest freshwater reserve in the world. This paper offers insight into some of the challenges and opportunities experienced during the feasibility study, forecasts future research needs and reveals some of the lessons learned in the process.

Coastal nations are becoming more aware and concerned about the protection and conservation of oceanic and large freshwater ecosystems. Canada has advanced its commitment to representing this nation's ocean and Great Lake environments through Parks Canada's *National Marine Conservation Area Program*. Unique to this program, and differentiating it from other marine protected area programs in Canada, is a focus on increasing public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of this marine heritage for the benefit of future generations.

Canada's oceans and the Great Lakes have been divided into 29 marine regions (Figure 1). Presently, two of these marine regions are represented by the NMCA program — Georgian Bay Marine Region is represented by Fathom Five National Marine Park and the St. Lawrence River Estuary is represented by the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park.

The global significance of the Great Lakes is readily apparent. Collectively, they hold 20% of the world supply of freshwater and independently, each lake ranks within the top 15 largest lakes in the world. Lake Superior has the dis-

inction of being the first on that list, and was recommended as a binational priority for restoration and protection by the International Joint Commission in 1989. Federal, state and provincial governments accepted the challenge and announced the *Lake Superior Binational Program* in 1991. It was this program that peaked Parks Canada's interest to explore the merits of a national marine conservation area for this Great Lake.

Work commenced on Lake Superior in 1993 with a data-gathering exercise. Geological, oceanographic and biological information was assembled to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of this marine ecosystem. Four areas were selected for their naturalness and inherent ability to represent the Lake Superior marine region. One of the four areas popped up as exemplary — not only did this area best represent the marine region, but it also included some exceptional natural phenomena and cultural resources, and remained relatively undeveloped and pristine compared to the other sites.

On March 17, 1997, the federal and provincial governments signed a feasibility study to fully explore the merits of an NMCA in Superior waters through an extensive consultation process which included coastal communities and residents, stakeholders, First Nations, industry and others. A regional stakeholder committee was established the following year to help to develop the proposal and to advise the planning team. After three rounds of open houses and numerous discussions with their neighbours, stakeholders and governing bodies, the advisory committee gave a nod of approval for the initiative and submitted 100 recommendations on the establishment and management of a prospective NMCA.

A third party review of the committee's finding likewise concluded that there was support to proceed with an NMCA, clearing the way for Parks Canada to present its vision for the area. Parks Canada's vision, presented in 2002, was well received by local residents and area municipalities. Negotiations to establish the NMCA began in 2003 and are ongoing.

## **Challenges**

The planning team that worked on this initiative has met many challenges. As with any new program, it commenced at ground zero. At the beginning of the process, there was no cohesive vision for the area under study and all the answers were not there — the NMCA program was young and was still in a

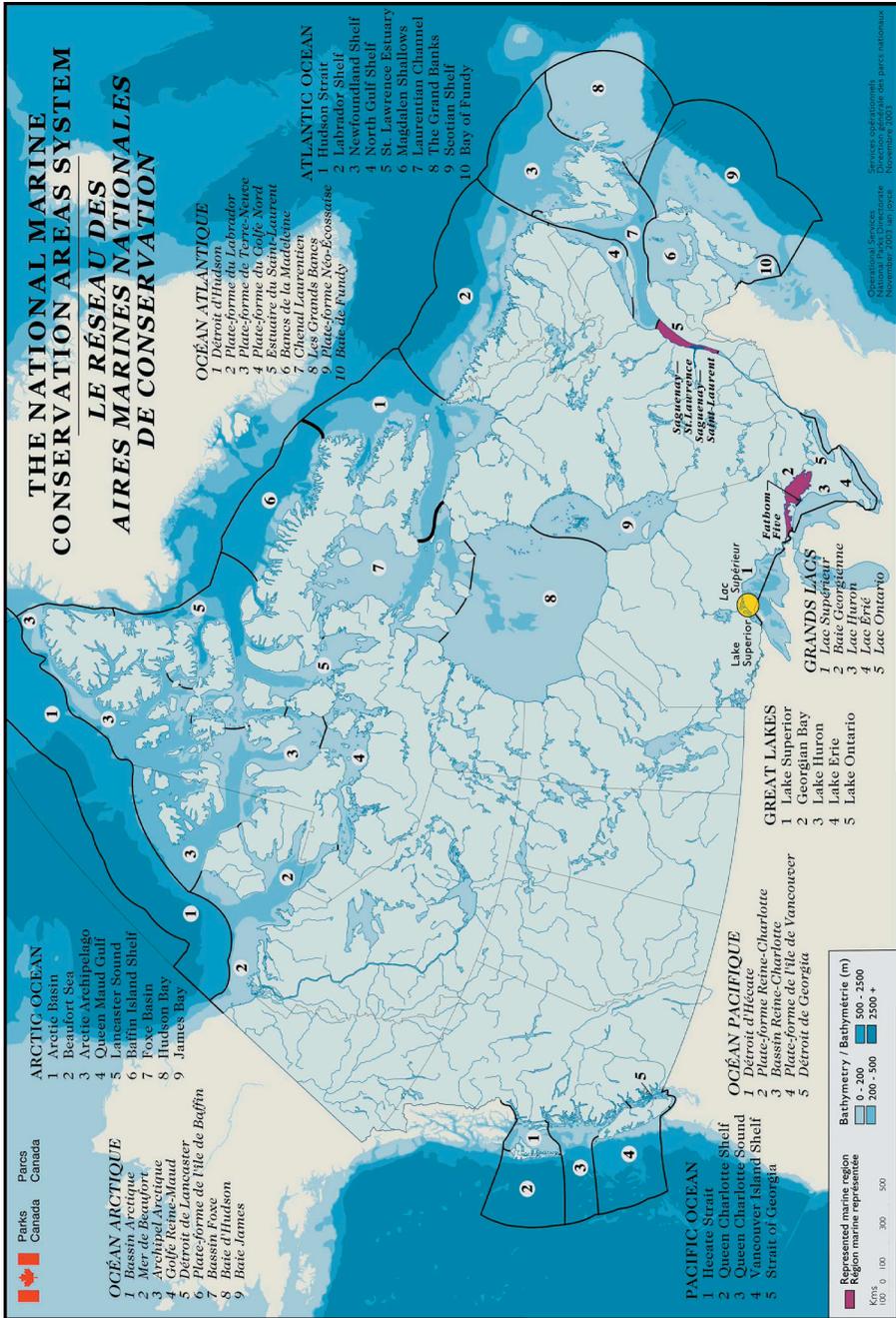


Figure 1. The National Marine Conservation Area system.

learning phase. In fact, the Lake Superior NMCA initiative was the first to test the 1994 *Guiding Principles and Operational Policies* and proved instrumental in helping to formulate the legislative component of Parks Canada's marine program. Legislation to establish and manage NMCAs received Royal Assent in 2002.

These challenges quickly became opportunities. The Lake Superior NMCA initiative was strongly committed to engaging local people and stakeholders in the program. A broad vision was developed with the local people who had been the stewards and custodians of this area; policy and practice were clarified; and a proposal was developed that had the strong support of area residents and local municipalities. The real strength of the program rests on the desire of local people to "keep things the way they are" and on their passion and commitment to this great inland sea.

Gaps in knowledge were quickly filled. Additional research which moved the Lake Superior national marine conservation area initiative forward included:

- a comprehensive and manageable GIS database;
- an understanding of the scope of human uses in the study area, including early aboriginal use, and impacts of human uses on the ecosystem;
- a consolidated history of the lighthouses and shipwrecks;
- a tourism assessment and economic impact projections; and,
- the public perspectives on the protection of this freshwater ecosystem.

Once a federal-provincial agreement is signed, an interim management structure will be prepared as a legislative requirement under the *Canada National Marine Conservation Areas Act, 2002*. A zoning plan will be an important component of the interim management plan.

National marine conservation area objectives will be defined in three core areas — the protection of the natural, self-regulating ecosystem, the visitor experience and public education and understanding. Future research needs will include the development of a comprehensive monitoring and research strategy, public education and outreach programming and identification of a suite of targets and indicators to measure success and ensure accountability.

Engaging local people and building a strong constituency of support has been the strength of the Lake Superior initiative to date and will contribute to the future success of this NMCA. Inherent in the design of marine protected areas is the need for partnerships including all levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal), First Nations, industry, private interests, non-government organizations and more.

## Reflections

I would like to share with you some personal insights about parks and protected areas, and about establishing them from ground zero.

- *You cannot create any more wilderness.* This should be self-explanatory in a developing society where there are increasing more and diverse demands place on the land or seascape. Wilderness is a dwindling and non-renewable resource.
- *“Unless the hearts and minds of the local people are on the side of conservation, there is no hope that a protected area can achieve its purpose.”* This is a quote from the Duke of Edinburgh at the Ramsar Convention, 1987. This statement holds true on Lake Superior, and I rather suspect is universal for all new protected area designations.
- *Vision is a required element.* This is based on the premise that if you don't know where you are going, any path will take you there.
- *Action is also a required element.* Vision alone will not get you what you seek. There are many dreamers who do nothing more. The next step involves will and passion.
- *There is a certain amount of risk in moving forward.* You might fail. You cannot discover new oceans without losing sight of shore – just ask Christopher Columbus!
- *Communications is the key to success.* Communications is a two way street — both actively listening and actively expressing. The line down the middle is assimilation and understanding; it is critical for one side not to run into the other.

One final lesson prolongs the process — patience is a virtue. I am often asked how long it will take before the final federal-provincial agreement is signed. As the eternal optimist, my unwavering response has been “at least six months”. Four years later the response remains consistent. Social and economic paradigms combined with political realities offer no guarantees. Thank you for the opportunity to address this audience today.