

# Great Lakes Heritage Coast: Opportunities for Protection and Community Development

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## Abstract

*As a result of a major Crown land planning exercise in the late 1990s, the Province of Ontario established the Great Lakes Heritage Coast concept. This concept applies to 4200 km of coastline and about 1.5 million ha of land from Port Severn in Georgian Bay to the Pigeon River on Lake Superior. It includes 71 parks and protected areas covering approximately 45% of the total area. The overall management intent established for this area is to protect its outstanding beauty and natural ecosystems; to promote its recreational and tourism potential; and to foster cooperation and partnerships in its planning and management. It was recognized that further work was required to determine how this should occur. The challenge is to determine what needs to be done to meet the management intent for the area in a manner that is both participatory and accountable. The presentation will discuss what has happened to date with the Heritage Coast, opportunities and needs identified through initial consultations and the multi-step, iterative process being used to develop future direction for the Heritage Coast. It will discuss ideas and the range of opportunities present on the coast as well as challenges identified to date.*

## Introduction

The Great Lakes Heritage Coast (GLHC) is a special initiative of the Ontario Government designed to examine requirements for long-term natural resource protection and tourism promotion and development within the coastal area of the upper Great Lakes in Ontario. This is to be done in collaboration with the many different stakeholders, First Nations, municipalities and government agencies now active on the coast.

The GLHC includes all Crown lands, waters, lakebeds, Crown islands, and intervening coastal areas along the Great Lakes shoreline from Port Severn in Georgian Bay, through the North Channel of Lake Huron, to the international border on the Pigeon River south of Thunder Bay on Lake Superior. The designation varies in width generally from 2 to 5 km inland along the shoreline.

The Heritage Coast spans approximately 4200 km of shoreline and covers in excess of 1.5 million ha. of land. There are 25 Indian Reserves and more than 20 communities, including the cities of Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie, within or adjacent to the coastal area with a total population of approximately 300,000 people. Private land is concentrated around Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Manitoulin and southern Georgian Bay. Approximately 48% of the Coast is Crown land, 39% patent and 13% Indian Reserve. Thirty-six percent of the total area falls within 51 parks and 27 conservation reserves.

*Ontario's Living Legacy Land Use Strategy* provides the framework for the planning and management of Crown lands. It establishes the GLHC as a premier Signature Site that has a range of highly significant values that warrant special strategies. In addition, the Land Use Strategy indicates that the coast contains extremely significant tourism and recreation potential that merits increased planning, management and promotion, and that further work is required to define the scope of the Heritage Coast, the associated policies, and a management structure (OMNR, 1999)..

*Ontario's Living Legacy Land Use Strategy* establishes ecosystem protection, tourism promotion and partnerships as being the long-term goals for the coast. It also identifies the permitted use for Crown lands and conditions for further development. It provides the ground rules for the Heritage Coast initiative (OMNR, 1999).

## Great Lakes Heritage Coast Initiative

The GLHC initiative began in February 2000. The Minister of Natural Resources requested his Parliamentary Assistant, Mr. Ted Chudleigh, to undertake consultation with communities and stakeholders on the coast to determine what was required to meet the protection, tourism and partnership objectives. Consultations over a six month period including many meetings with individual stakeholders and more than 30 community meetings, resulted in a report *Charting the Course* being recommended to government (Chudleigh, 2001). Cabinet adopted the report and its recommendations in June of 2001

Among the seven main recommendations of the Chudleigh report, were recommendations for:

- the development of a GLHC Strategy;
- continued promotion of cooperation and partnerships; and,
- a commitment for implementation of the Strategy.

The GLHC is a large scale regional planning exercise attempting to define implementation strategies for potentially conflicting ecological and tourism development

objectives; focusing on cooperative management amongst various levels of government, First Nations and a variety of stakeholders; while retaining the appropriate level of accountability.

The approach provides an example of the provincial government participating with others in the co-management of natural resources, ensuring overall co-ordination of government programs, and supporting alternative, perhaps non-traditional delivery mechanisms. This approach should have application to other regional planning situations where there is the opportunity for co-operative management amongst various governments and stakeholders.

### **Strategy**

Public discussion confirmed that a strategy should be developed for the GLHC.. This strategy would identify actions that are both consistent with the Vision for the Heritage Coast and in keeping with the Guiding Principles for planning and management. The strategy should focus on ecosystem protection, tourism development and implementation.

While maintaining the wilderness characteristics, beauty and ecosystems of the Heritage Coast, the strategy would build upon the existing economy and identify opportunities for increased tourism and recreation, tourism promotion, and required infrastructure and facilities. It would include a distinct Aboriginal tourism component developed in cooperation with First Nations.

### **Partnerships**

The success of the Heritage Coast Strategy, including both its development and eventual implementation, requires the active involvement of stakeholders, including existing resource industries, the various provincial ministries and the federal government. At the same time, there must be recognition of the considerable efforts undertaken by existing non-government organizations on activities along the Coast and support for the efforts of these organizations to protect and promote the Heritage Coast.

There are opportunities for enhancing the involvement of First Nations in the future direction of this initiative. Early discussions indicated an interest in both the protection and tourism components of the Strategy. The specific approach to involvement with First Nations is to be discussed with the Union of Ontario Indians and worked out with communities themselves.

A partnership approach will also be required in pursuing protection of resources on private lands, which may be important to Heritage Coast conservation and protection objectives. Partnerships and cooperative working arrangements will be important with educational institutions, existing community and non-government organizations, industry, local communities and provincial and federal governments and their agencies.

## **Implementation**

The vast scale of the coast, its distance from markets, the presence of many small communities and a dispersed population necessitates a special effort to provide coordination, encouragement of partnerships, advice and assistance in resource protection and tourism development and promotion. There is a need to build linkages among communities, organizations and people that are dedicated to the future of the coast and to facilitate the focusing of government programs.

Community consultations confirmed the need to examine initiatives to help coordinate activities on the Heritage Coast. Such action will assist in establishing a network of support, expertise and advice to municipalities and landowners to encourage private land stewardship and support local decision-making.

There may be a variety of ways of meeting these needs. Accordingly, as the Heritage Coast Strategy is developed, special implementation needs and common opportunities will be assessed and appropriate delivery mechanisms identified.

There is very little downside to the initiative as it has the broad support of the public and various government agencies as demonstrated through public consultations to date (see Charting the Course Report). It is consistent with overall government direction re partnering. There is a desire and recognized need to address environmental, tourism and delivery needs from an overall coastal perspective.

There are a large number of programs, agencies and jurisdictions active within the Great Lakes Heritage Coast. While there appears to be agreement on the direction for environmental protection, tourism promotion and partnership building, there will be a major challenge in determine how this is to be delivered and maintained amongst the many agencies, jurisdictions and stakeholders within the coast.

## **Current Work**

In March of 2002, consultants were hired to assist the development of a strategy for the coast as recommended by Mr. Chudleigh. The strategy is to build on the information learned in earlier consultations, and focus on identifying actions necessary to protect the natural resources of the coast, realize tourism opportunities and potential and ensure successful implementation. Natural resource, tourism, social and economic information will be collected and analyzed; comparable cases studies studied; and government programs analyzed and gaps identified. There will be ongoing discussions with each of the First Nation communities to determine how they wish to participate in the initiative, meetings and focused workshops with stakeholders and broader public consultation once a draft strategy is prepared.

Once complete, the strategy will be presented to government with an action plan identifying short-term actions, which could be undertaken to initiate implementa-

tion of the strategy. This will include recommendations on any necessary administrative structure (e.g., secretariat, commission, foundation) to facilitate successful delivery of the recommendations.

## Key Opportunities

The GLHC is a spectacular natural landscape running through the central portion of the province within driving distance of large populations in Ontario and the U.S. It contains developed areas as well as significant stretches of undeveloped coast. Communities of different sizes are scattered throughout its length including the cities of Thunder Bay and Sault Saint Marie. These centres provide a range of services for travelers as well as educational institutions providing information and research capabilities. Twenty-five First Nation communities account for thirteen percent of the area. Highways #69 and 17 provide access throughout its length, while retaining the remote character of a considerable amount of its shoreline.

There are a number of stakeholder organizations committed to protection and complementary recreational use of the coastal environment, and there is significant interest in promoting complementary tourism activities. There are existing government programs directed to the protection and management of natural resources as well as to the development and promotion of resource-based tourism. There is international cooperation and active management programs directed to the resources of the Great Lakes.

Thirty-six percent of the coast is in formal protected status in the form of national and provincial parks or conservation reserves. These protected areas are generally distributed throughout the coast, and in many instances, are located close to existing settlements.

The Great Lakes Heritage Coast provides significant opportunities for increased recreational and tourism use. Market analysis indicates a growing demand for natural resource based experiences such as hiking, cruising, touring, viewing, nature and cultural appreciation, canoeing, kayaking, camping and fishing, activities for which the coast is well suited. As well, coastal communities are well located to provide services to these tourists and recreational users and to benefit from increased economic activity.

In terms of protection, existing institutions whether federal, provincial or municipal, have the mandate and in many cases programs to ensure the resources of the Great Lakes are protected. Coastal communities and stakeholders are committed to the protection and tourism objectives of the Great Lakes Heritage Coast and would participate cooperatively in implementation.

## The Challenges

While there are many opportunities for the GLHC, there will be many challenges in working to meet its resource protection and tourism objectives. One concern, which has been raised by many people, is the apparent dichotomy between the protection and tourism objectives. How is it possible to both protect the quality of the natural resource and its wilderness characteristics while promoting tourism development and use? This is an extremely important question, as it is possible to impact the very qualities of the coast which make it most desirable.

It has been pointed out many times that future tourism depends on a healthy natural environment on the coast. To ensure the natural values are maintained as tourism is promoted, it will be necessary to clearly understand and be able to manage our relationship to the environment. There are many questions that require answers before we begin to promote greater use of this resource. What are the natural values on the coast? Where are they? What are the critical habitats? How much use/disturbance can different resources sustain? Are they sensitive to type, extent, frequency and time of use? What level of inventory is necessary to be confident in making decisions on use? What should be monitored and how? Are there effective mitigating measures?

Also important in considering additional recreational and tourism use is the perceived character of the coast. The Vision statement in *Charting the Course* refers to preserving the coast “in its wild and pristine state” and to protecting its “scenic beauty”. While most would agree with this Vision, retaining or protecting the character of the coast will be challenging, as people perceive the character of the coast differently. What is wilderness or pristine conditions to some people, will not be to others. The important questions for management of the coast become, how do you measure its present character? What are its wilderness qualities or attributes? Who is the audience? How can this be monitored?

## Conclusion

The GLHC initiative presents a unique opportunity in Ontario to ensure protection of a high quality wilderness resource, and to provide an important economic contribution to coastal communities through increased tourism activity and development. This can be achieved through cooperation and partnerships in management among communities, First Nations, stakeholders, government agencies and educational institutions; the proper use of scientific, economic and social information; and the commitment of resources from all parties in working towards the Vision for the coast.

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## References

- Chudleigh, T. 2001. *Charting the Course, Recommendations Prepared for the Great Lakes Heritage Coast Project submitted and approved by the Ontario Government*. Part of Ontario's Living Legacy, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Toronto.
- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR). 1999. *Ontario's Living Legacy Land Use Strategy*. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Toronto.