

# THE CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS SYSTEM: CAN IT KEEP THE WATER IN THE RIVER, AND THE RIVER IN THE WATER?

*Max Finkelstein*  
*Canadian Heritage Rivers*

## **Introduction**

The Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) was established in 1984 and since then has often been touted as the fastest growing river conservation program in the world. It now includes 40 rivers or sections of rivers, of which 30 are designated to the system. The total length of river in the CHRS is almost 10,000 km. To be designated to the CHRS, the government with jurisdiction over the river must table a management plan with the CHRS board which outlines the actions and strategies to put in place to ensure that the heritage values of the river are not impaired.

The objective of the CHRS is two-fold: 1) to recognize, honour and promote Canada's river heritage through the designation of Canada's outstanding rivers; and, 2) to protect and enhance Canada's river heritage by ensuring that Canada's outstanding rivers are managed in a sustainable manner. This commentary paper examines how the CHRS is meeting these objectives. Topics discussed include: how complete the system is and how well it represents Canada's river heritage; how well the needs of a river and its human stakeholders are met in management plans; boundaries and the role they play in river conservation; and, the role of monitoring. Two case studies, the Main and the Bonnet Plume are examined.

## **Impressed? You Should Be.**

The real measure of success of a conservation program is conservation, not size and numbers. As a program, the CHRS has had its share of "successes" and "glitches". We're learning how to do it right, with a lot of help from friends of rivers. I'd like to share with you a sample of the issues the CHRS is wrestling with in its evolution as an effective watershed conservation and management program, and as a model or paradigm for watershed conservation in Canada and the world.

As noted, the objectives of the CHRS is to: 1) recognize, honour and promote Canada's river heritage through the designation of Canada's outstanding rivers to the program; and, 2) protect and enhance Canada's river heritage, and ensure that Canada's leading rivers are managed in a sustainable manner. The following section examines how the CHRS is meeting these objectives from the perspectives of planning, designation, and monitoring.

## **Planning: How Do We Know When the System is Complete?**

A perfect CHRS would include rivers that, taken collectively, represent and reflect the diversity of Canada's river heritage from both a natural and cultural perspective. The CHRS as a system appears to include a random collection of rivers. Although it is a national program, unlike National Parks and National Historic Sites there is no national overriding "system plan" to guide the growth and selection of rivers included in the CHRS.

One of the principles that the CHRS was founded on in 1984 was that all provinces and territories must be able to participate. If a nominated river has natural or historical values that are of outstanding provincial or territorial significance, it meets the program selection guidelines. Thus, to take the extreme range, a river that is significant on Prince Edward Island would probably not even show up on a map of Nunavut. It makes for a rather motley collection of rivers at first glance, from the tiny, and largely tidal Hillsborough, to the mighty Kazan, from the humble Humber in Toronto (not to be confused with the cutover Humber in Newfoundland) to the mighty Fraser.

Although most jurisdictions have a "system" plan (Ontario does not) that ranks rivers for potential inclusion in the CHRS, the plans vary widely in their methodology and philosophy. Two national system plans, one for natural values and one for cultural values, have been developed to assess how rivers fit into the CHRS program from a national perspective, to measure the state of "completeness" of the program, and to identify gaps in the CHRS. These two system plans define Canada's river heritage. But, to date, their application to the CHRS program has been uneven.

Some gaps in the CHRS are intuitively obvious. The Ottawa River, the St. Lawrence, the North Saskatchewan, the Mackenzie.....no national river heritage conservation program can be considered complete without these major rivers. We, along with a lot of other people, are working toward including these rivers in the CHRS.

Some apparent redundancies include the plethora of rivers recently designated in southern Ontario (Coomber, 2001). I offer no solutions or directions in response to these issues if these indeed are issues. They are merely presented for discussion.

## **Designation**

For a river to be designated to the CHRS, a management plan must be prepared that sets forth the policies and practices to be followed to ensure that the river's development, management and use does not impair the values for which the river was nominated. Nice words. But what does designating a river really do?

I have often said in public presentations, in response to this question, that a Canadian Heritage River can be anything you want it to be. Herein lies both a strength and a weakness for the program. The criteria for inclusion in the CHRS are loose enough to include many types of rivers. This "looseness" also implies that rivers in the system can be man-

aged very differently. Management plans for rivers, accordingly, vary greatly.

In retrospect, I think the answer to the question that introduces this section should be: A Canadian Heritage River is anything you want it to be, anything you need it to be, and anything the river needs to be. Balancing the needs of the river, the needs of people and the wants of people must be the heart of any management plan, and management plans are the heart of the CHRS. I have seen the interaction of these three simple phrases played out in many ways during my decade with the CHRS. Too often the answers are often not satisfactory, or at least, do not reflect each question equally.

Rivers can be nominated to the CHRS based on either their outstanding natural values or their outstanding cultural/historical values. Recreational values are tossed into the works too. The point of the management plans for Canadian Heritage Rivers (CHRs) is to ensure that these values are not degraded.

All CHRS management plans must define a boundary for the management area, and herein lies an inherent challenge to the effectiveness of the CHRS as a river management program. Imposition of artificial political boundaries impedes conservation efforts. For example, the North Saskatchewan River is only a CHR within Banff National Park. Of course, just downstream of the park, the first major dam blocks the river, changing forever its natural flow regime and aquatic ecosystem. Similarly, the Kicking Horse and Athabasca are the only CHRs found within the boundaries of national parks. The Yukon River is only represented in the program by a short 48 km segment. But we are trying, and most recent nominations include entire watersheds, or major tributaries.

The program has experienced significant management plan “growing” pains. Lets look at two examples that I am personally familiar with: the Main River in Newfoundland and the Bonnet Plume River in the Yukon.

When the Main River was nominated to the program in 1991, the area defined in the nomination was a narrow corridor along the river, varying in width from several kilometres to several hundred metres. Normally, only three years are allowed from the date of nomination to the tabling of a management plan, but almost a decade passed before a management plan for the Main was proposed. In that decade, the Main had become the last remaining significant unlogged watershed on the island of Newfoundland. And it wasn't going to stay that way for long, according to the cutting plans of the local logging company.

The Main, as a brochure published in 2000 by the Protected Areas Association of Newfoundland stated, is “no ordinary river.” Its watershed harbours old-growth forest that is unique in Newfoundland, Canada, and perhaps the world. Research was on-going in the forest during the development of the management plan. The watershed contains prime habitat for the endangered Newfoundland pine marten, which relies on old-growth forest to survive. The river, and its tributaries, provide habitat for one of the healthiest surviving runs of Atlantic salmon, as well as caribou, moose, black bear, lynx and waterfowl. The Main was (not is) the essence of wilderness. And that was why it was nominated. (Government of Newfoundland, 1991)

In the decade after nomination, the Main came to be looked upon by the local logging company not only as the last wilderness river on the island, but also as the last source of wood. The management plan tabled by the Newfoundland government did not protect its wilderness values to the extent that many people wanted, and felt, that the river deserved. Instead, it proposed no-cut zones along the main stem and tributaries, and a limited-cut zone within the "viewshed" from the river, so that to a paddler, no logging would be visible. The viewshed boundary includes a significantly larger area than the original boundary defined in the nomination document. (Newfoundland Department of Tourism, 2000)

Without getting embroiled in too many details about the interplay of meeting the needs of the river and watershed, the needs of the stakeholders, and the wants of the stakeholders, the final plan can be looked upon as both a failure and a success. A failure to protect the wilderness values of the watershed, but a success in that this represents a big step forward. It was the first time (Cornerbrook Pulp and Paper will probably take exception to this statement, given that they have not cut another area significant to the pine marten!) that a logging company on Newfoundland has made significant concessions to protect an area for its natural and recreational values. The Main River will now be managed as a Provincial Waterway Park, which provides it the legislative teeth to preserve and protect the river as a "working river", with provisions to protect representative examples of old-growth and unique habitat. The plan protects what I call a "storefront" wilderness. It looks like wilderness, but, as in Algonquin Park, if you walk away from the river, you realize that the wilderness is really a façade. How well it all works for the protection of the salmon and the pine marten and other wildlife remains to be seen, and perhaps will be the subject of future PhD theses.

What can be learned about the Canadian Heritage River Process in all of this? The program has no legislative teeth to enforce its objectives. Instead it relies on existing legislation to safeguard the heritage values, and, most importantly, through public consultation, to come to a common shared vision for a river among all stakeholders. I feel safe in stating that many stakeholders in this instance feel that consensus was not reached. But its better than clear-cutting the entire watershed, and a provincial watershed park is better than no park at all. It also emphasizes the need to think about entire watersheds, as opposed to corridors, to protect river values. However, even an entire watershed included in a CHRS nomination is no guarantee of adequate protection. A good example where this might be the case (and I emphasize "might") is the Bonnet Plume River in the Yukon.

I have travelled the entire length of the Bonnet Plume, and can attest to the beauty of this river. From its headwaters high in the Selwyn Mountains, it tumbles 350 km through the Wernecke and Mackenzie ranges to its confluence with the Peel River 300 km south of Fort McPherson. The river was named for Andrew Flett Bonnet Plume, a Gwich'in chief who worked as an interpreter for the Hudson Bay Company, and was reported to have assisted travellers trying to cross the mountains to reach the Klondike goldfields. The Bonnet Plume flows through rugged mountain country, with high alpine meadows, forested valleys, and extensive flood plains where the river forms braided channels. These habitats support a rich fauna and flora-Dall's sheep, caribou, grizzly bears, moose, wolf, beaver are the most obvious big fauna. The wetlands are important waterfowl nesting and staging areas, and at least 10 species of raptors, including peregrine falcons, nest in the

watershed. The lower reaches of the river provide valuable spawning grounds for several species of fish. The abundance of wildlife has made the river a traditional hunting ground for the Gwich'in people for thousands of years. The Bonnet Plume has been very lightly touched to date by modern civilization. It is wilderness primeval personified, or as close to it as you can imagine.

In 1998, the Bonnet Plume was designated as a Canadian Heritage River. Unlike the Main River, when the Bonnet Plume was nominated to the CHRS; it was recommended that its entire drainage basin (approximately 12,000 sq. km) be included. The management plan recognizes the cultural and spiritual value of the Bonnet Plume River and watershed to the Gwich'in nations and their desire to use and manage this legacy in a sustainable manner. The Gwich'in people were very supportive of the CHRS designation to provide the cooperative mechanism to achieve the "higher duty of care" that they desired for the river.

This sounds wonderful, but (yes, there is a "but") the Gwich'in aren't the only folks interested in the Bonnet Plume. There are minerals in 'them thar hills'. There is nothing in the management plan that precludes the possibility of development of potential mines. Of course, there is the over-arching CHRS objective that the heritage values of the river must not be impaired. But there is only a written commitment of the Yukon Government, the management plan, that pledges support to CHRS objectives.

According to Juri Peepri, of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, "*The Bonnet Plume Management Plan has really had little if any effect on activities in the watershed ...in general the government ignores the Heritage River status and the management plan. There is certainly no funding that I am aware of to implement the management plan.*" (Peepri, 2003)

All is quiet now. The caribou still wander freely across the river. Grizzly bears still roam the meadows. Paddlers still revel in the beauty and solitude of the Bonnet Plume. But there are no specific actions outlined in the management plan that address the fundamental question of just what will be done to protect the natural and cultural heritage of the Bonnet Plume. There are no areas identified for full protection, no proactive actions recommended to ensure protection of the river's heritage values. All is fine within the watershed now. But the potential for major changes still exists. Like the Main, the question will be: "*Can you have your Heritage River and your resource exploitation industry too?*" Will the Bonnet Plume become another "storefront" wilderness, like the Main. Will its ecological integrity really be maintained through its heritage river status?

If this sounds too negative, remember that Saskatchewan created its first wilderness park on the Clearwater River after its nomination to the CHRS, and Manitoba created Atikaki, to include much of the Bloodvein. On the Shelburne, the Bowater-Mersey Logging Company cooperated to change logging practices on land that it owns along the river to protect the river's values. The positive examples of cooperation between industry, government, and communities can be found on many Canadian Heritage Rivers. Other panel members can speak to this topic from a first-hand perspective.

## **After Designation: Monitoring**

When you're about to enter parenthood, all the focus is on the birth. I recall (and this is still a fairly recent experience for me) that after my son Isaac was born, mother and father were both unclear about what to do next—like for the next thirty years. When Connie was ready to leave the hospital, she said to me: “Well, that was a great experience. Now let's get back to normal life.” “But Connie, I said, “what about Isaac?”” She replied, “Oh, yeah, almost forgot about him. Doesn't he stay here at the hospital? Then she winked: “Just kidding...”

Similarly, in the CHRS process, most of the focus is on the designation of a river to the CHRS. But what happens after designation? This is the real challenge. As the program has matured, more and more attention is being focussed on monitoring the condition of rivers. All Canadian Heritage Rivers have to be monitored and reported on annually, and every ten years, a detailed “state-of-the-river” report must be tabled to the Board. The amount of energy dedicated to monitoring, and the methodology, to date has been very uneven among the various rivers in the program. The CHRS Secretariat cut its Science Advisor position several years ago during a most recent round of federal government cut-backs. The political focus on the CHRS in the member jurisdictions also varies. For example, Quebec has not sent a delegate to CHRS Board meetings for several years. Jurisdictions do not have equal capability to monitor rivers from both a scientific and budgetary perspective. How to address these problems is a major challenge to the CHRS program.

## **Canadian Heritage Rivers: So What?**

I think the real value of the program lies in its ability to be a catalyst for changing attitudes. It celebrates the living relationships of all peoples of Canada with Canada's rivers, in particular the relationship of Canada's First Nations to the land and waters of the Canadian landscape. It enshrines rivers in our national consciousness. It reveals the significance of rivers to all Canadians, in the past, present, and future.

The CHRS process brings governments, communities, and people together in a model of democratic action that many other government institutions (I could name a few, I'm sure you can too) could learn from. More than that, I hope that it helps to build in Canadians a spiritual relationship with rivers. Rivers generate much wealth today for Canadians. But wealth measured in dollars is only one of many ways to rank quality of life. And as material wealth has increased, it could be argued that spiritual wealth has diminished. My dream is that the CHRS can, in some small way, inspire people and touch the lives of all Canadians. I hope and dream that it can, in some way, help to keep the beauty in the river, and the river in the water.

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