

**HONOURING OUR RIVERS:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS SYSTEM (CHRS)
AND A DETAILED LOOK AT THE CHRS PROCESS**

*Max Finkelstein
Canadian Heritage Rivers System*

Abstract

The CHRS is a vision for rivers which began in the early 1970s with a kind of wild idea-to send out teams of paddlers to survey Canada's wild rivers. The plan was certainly supported, if not spawned by, Canada's paddling Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. From this beginning, the vision evolved, and, on January 18, 1984, became a reality with the announcement of the creation of the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS). The Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) is Canada's national program for rivers. Its objective is to give national recognition to rivers that have played a significant role in Canadian history, and those that have outstanding natural features and values. All rivers in the CHRS must be wisely managed to conserve their natural, cultural and recreational features so that they can be enjoyed and honoured by all of us, now and in the future. The goal of the CHRS is to encompass a collection of rivers that truly represent the diversity of Canada's rivers and to include the best examples of Canada's natural and cultural river heritage. This paper provides an overview of the history and philosophy of the CHRS. The scope of the system, both geographically and thematically, is examined, along with inconsistencies and issues in the program. The steps to be taken in the establishment of a Canadian Heritage River are looked at in detail.

Introduction — Canada is Truly a Land of Rivers

Our rivers and waterways connect us to the land, to the past, to the future, and to our identity as a people and a nation. More than just a blue line on a road map, rivers are blue life-lines to healthy habitats and healthy communities. Our rivers have taken care of us, but we have not always taken care of our rivers. In recent years, there has emerged a growing public concern to ensure that our rivers are honoured and managed wisely. In 1978, at a conference in Jasper, Alberta, Canada's federal, provincial and territorial Parks Ministers, with support from environmental leaders and paddlers, endorsed the concept of a system to give national recognition to Canada's leading rivers and to safeguard their important natural, cultural and recreational values. Unlike the Wild and Scenic Rivers program in the US, which is limited to rivers in a free-flowing condition, this system would encompass a wider range of rivers important to the history and culture of Canada, as well as rivers in a pristine state.

On January 18, 1984, the vision became a reality with the announcement of the creation of the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS). The CHRS is Canada's national pro-

gram for rivers. Its objective is to give national recognition to rivers that have played a significant role in Canadian history, and those that have outstanding natural features and values. All rivers in CHRS must be wisely managed to conserve their natural, cultural and recreational features so that they can be enjoyed and honoured by all of us, now and in the future. The unwritten goal of CHRS is to encompass a collection of rivers that truly represent the diversity of Canada's rivers and to include the best examples of Canada's natural and cultural river heritage. Some interesting quotes related to Canadian rivers can be seen in Box 1.

Box 1. Some interesting quotes related to Canadian rivers.

SOME INTERESTING QUOTES RELATED TO CANADIAN RIVERS

"...a river is the memory of the land through which it flows...Given the threats of our time, the Fraser...is a priceless and very precarious asset. I think from those to whom much has been given, there is much expected." (Iona Campagnolo, Former Chair, Fraser Basin Council, B.C.)

"I like rivers because they make the world look pretty." (Angela Tipton, Grade 3 student)

"The river speaks for itself. It's always nice up there ." (Billy Akavak, Soper River, Nunavut)

"What we're trying to do is find a balance...where we maintain ...biodiversity - all the things that live in the rivers and the riversheds — and make way for us, people, in those riversheds and I think that's the challenge...to come together as a community and find a way to achieve that balance...something that we can pass on to our great-great grandchildren." (Finn Donnelly, Fraser River, B.C.)

"...we must treat rivers like the blood that runs through our bodies..."
(Chief Barry Sevmour, Lheidle T'enneh First Nation, Fraser River, B.C.)

"...being a Heritage River...gives a special label that people all over the country will look at...It's not just a regular river." (Donald Soctomah, Tribal Representative, Maine Legislature, St.Croix River, New Brunswick)

"To stick your hands into the River is to feel the chords that bind the earth together in one piece." (Lopez, 2001)

"Canada's rivers are ribbons of freedom, peace, joy, beauty and adventure." (Kirk Wipper, Canadian Canoe Museum)

CHRS is administered by a Board made up of one representative from Parks Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), and each provincial/territorial government. It is governed by a Charter signed by the Federal government and all provincial and territorial governments on April 22, Earth Day, 1997, affirming their commitment to the goals of the CHRS. The Charter affirms that "all participants in CHRS will respect the rights and concerns of communities, Aboriginal Peoples, landowners and other stakeholders in the nomination, designation and management of Canadian Heritage Rivers. A ten-year strategic plan, reviewed yearly by the Board, sets over-arching goals and objectives.

A cornerstone of the program is that participation is voluntary. Presently, every province and territory is a member of CHRS. Alberta and British Columbia joined the program in 1997. Quebec, although a member, has not actively participated for several years. Interestingly, CHRS has no legislative authority. Voluntary participation, partnership, cooperation and community involvement are what drive it. It is within this spirit of trust and goodwill that governments pledge to work in partnership with the public and one another to build a System that truly reflects the diversity and beauty of Canada's rivers. Governments retain their traditional jurisdictional powers and management responsibilities throughout this process.

Canada's network of rivers is vast and diverse. Canadian Heritage Rivers are its gems, beacons of our natural and cultural heritage. Guidelines exist to ensure that candidate rivers meet the selection and integrity criteria that define Canada's leading rivers. It is not easy to establish a Canadian Heritage River. The process is rigorous and lengthy. A river must be proven to possess the requisite natural values, historical importance and recreational potential. Strong public support must also be demonstrated.

The Heritage River Process

Establishing a Canadian Heritage River is a two-step process: nomination and designation. Each step demands extensive public involvement and local community support. Designation also involves monitoring the state of the river on an ongoing and active basis. Although the rivers in CHRS are managed by the governments of Canada, the provinces, or the territories, the driving force for the nomination of new rivers and the care of established ones comes from people. At its heart, CHRS is a grassroots, community-driven, program.

In the early years, rivers nominated to the CHRS program were in areas already protected to some degree. The first river nominated to the program, the French, was in a waterway provincial park. The next one, the Alsek, was in a national park. Other early candidates include the portions of the North Saskatchewan, Kicking Horse and Athabasca that were within the boundaries of Banff, Yoho and Jasper National Parks, respectively. But in recent years, the tendency has been to nominate rivers that flow through much private land, such as the Grand, Thames, and Humber in Ontario, and the Margaree in Nova Scotia. This makes the development of management plans a more complex process. Central to this process is public consultation. Without public support and consensus, we don't have a CHRS. It's that simple. Recent nominations include the historic Hayes River in Manitoba, the Alberta section of the Clearwater River, part of the historic Alexander-Mackenzie-Voyageur Route across Canada, the Coppermine River in Nunavut, and the Three Rivers on Prince Edward Island. Discussions are ongoing for future nominations that may include such major rivers as the mighty Stikine in British Columbia, the Ottawa, and the Mackenzie. Today there are Canadian Heritage Rivers in every province and territory — 39 rivers totaling over 9,000 river kms. Table 1 highlights CHRs established since 1998.

Table 1. Canadian Heritage Rivers established since 1998.

CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS	
Fraser	• the first of Canada's big rivers to be included in the CHRS
Bonnet Plume	• the designated area for this river includes its entire watershed – some 12,000 square kms
Upper Restigouche	• arguably Canada's most famous salmon river
Margaree	• salmon and scenery on Cape Breton
Humber	• a river being rehabilitated to play an important recreational and spiritual role in the communities it passes
St. Marys	• a part of the Alexander Mackenzie -Voyageur Route, along with seven other CHRS rivers
Rideau Waterway	• a journey back to the 19th century
Detroit	• The first river with dual heritage designation, as it is also an American Heritage River
Thames	• a rural and urban waterway
Main (Nfld):	• designated in the midst of controversy
La Vase Portages	• in 2001, this historic portage was added to the designated area of the Mattawa River

How Your River can Be a Canadian Heritage River

Step 1: Nomination

There are many benefits to joining CHRS and working as part of a team to designate a river to CHRS can be a very rewarding and satisfying experience for yourself, your community and your river. This paper will help you to evaluate potential Canadian Heritage Rivers and will explain the process of elevating a river to CHRS status.

Getting Started

An inquiry or an expression of interest, at the local level, to commemorate and protect a river for its heritage values is how the process usually starts. Local elected officials, community associations, landowners, watershed managers, tourism and economic development officers, educators, members of historical societies, Aboriginal Peoples, environmental groups and local business operators are all frequent proponents of the process. For

rivers on Crown lands, the initiative would originate and be led by the appropriate managing jurisdiction at the federal, provincial or territorial level.

The CHRS comprises the best of Canada's river heritage. Before investing time and energy in the rigorous task of including a river in the system, you should first determine whether the river meets CHRS objectives and guidelines. The river may be a perfect fit, or you may find that a different type of recognition is more appropriate to your needs. Should there be questions or unresolved issues, it may be important for you and the managing jurisdiction to collaborate on the preparation of a prescreening report for review by the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board.

Collecting Information

Once it has been determined that your river merits further consideration for CHRS status, a background study should be prepared detailing and assessing, in a comprehensive way, the river's natural, cultural/historical, recreational and economic values, and its suitability for management as a Canadian Heritage River. Particular attention should be paid to assessing the river's integrity values. This work may take some time to complete. Fortunately, financial support is available through the Board. Remember also that you must demonstrate that there is strong community support for the initiative. Without community support, there cannot be a heritage river. It's that simple.

Nominating Your River

Assuming that the background research affirms your river's candidacy to CHRS, and local support for the initiative remains strong, you are now ready to nominate your river. A standard nomination document must be prepared. Clear substantiation is required of the river's merits as a Canadian Heritage River. The river must be shown to be of outstanding Canadian value, as defined by CHRS selection and integrity guidelines. All of the river's CHRS values must be able to be maintained. The river must also make a meaningful contribution to CHRS, from a national perspective. Local support for the initiative must also be demonstrated. Financial assistance is available through the Board for the preparation of a nomination document. All nomination documents are presented to the Board for review and discussion. Upon the Board's acceptance of the document, the Board Chair will recommend, to the appropriate provincial or territorial Minister and the Minister responsible for Parks Canada, that the nomination be approved. The approval of both Ministers is required before a nomination can be formalized.

Step 2: Designating Your River

Designation is the formal proclamation of a river to CHRS based on an approved management plan (often referred to as a heritage strategy). Before a designation request can go to the Board, host government approval must be given to a management plan that sets forth a shared vision of the river and agreed upon strategic direction. Specifically, the plan is required to present the policies and practices to be followed to ensure that the river's development, management and use are consistent with CHRS objectives and guidelines. The plan's implementation schedule must demonstrate a commitment by the host government and concerned stakeholders to conserve the river's heritage and recreational values.

The approved plan is normally lodged with the Board within 1-3 years after the river's nomination. Upon the Board's acceptance of the designation request, the Board Chair will recommend, to the Minister responsible for Parks Canada, that the designation be approved. A successful designation request sets the stage for a future plaque unveiling ceremony.

In the past, most CHRS management plans were government-prepared. While public input was sought, government control over the process was strong. Today, plans are increasingly community-developed. The federal, provincial and territorial governments are playing more of a facilitation role, providing guidance, encouragement, technical support and financial assistance. However, for a CHRS management plan to be validated, the host government must still give it its final approval. Financial assistance is available through the Board for the preparation of a management plan.

Step 3: Monitoring Your River

The strength of CHRS relies on monitoring. Canadian Heritage Rivers are regularly monitored to ensure that they are being managed according to their management plan. Rivers in the system should also have their original nomination values maintained. This is a further role for monitoring. Check-ups are performed annually and every 10 years. It is important to be aware of any changes to a river's heritage and integrity values on a yearly basis. Related activities, issues and management actions that could affect these values should also be known. Every 10 years, following designation, a comprehensive and detailed report is prepared for Board review and discussion, assessing present and past initiatives and changes, and reporting on the status of plan implementation. Responsibility for monitoring rests with the managing jurisdiction(s) and the Board. Financial assistance is available through the Board for the preparation of 10-Year Monitoring Reports.

References

- Akavak, B. 2002. Soper River, Nunavut. Personal communication.
- Canadian Heritage Rivers System. 2002. *Policies and Guidelines of the Canadian Heritage Rivers System*. Department of Canadian Heritage. Ottawa: ON.
- Canadian Heritage Rivers System. 2002. *Your Heritage, Your River, Your Future*. Department of Canadian Heritage. Ottawa: ON.
- Campagnolo, I. Fraser River, B.C. Personal communication.
- Donnelly, F. Fraser River, B.C. Personal communication.
- Lopez, B. 2001. *Arctic Dreams*. Knopf Publishing Group.
- Sevmour, B. 2002. Fraser River, B.C. Personal communication.
- Soctomach, D. 2002. St. Croix River. Personal communication.
- Tipton, A. 2002. Personal communication.
- Wipper, K. 2002. Canadian Canoe Museum. Personal communication.