

Panel Commentary

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

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The Great Lakes Heritage Coast initiative demonstrates a concerted attempt by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) to balance the protection of a spectacular natural landscape with tourism and recreation development. Mr. O'Donoghue recognizes that there will be many challenges. The most obvious succinctly expressed in his question: "How is it possible to both protect the quality of the natural resource and its wilderness characteristics while promoting tourism and development use?" He aptly points out that "it is possible to impact the very qualities of the coast which make it most desirable."

If the OMNR is indeed serious about protecting the quality of this natural resource and its wilderness characteristics – a characteristic valued by many stakeholders – then it should follow Mr. O'Donoghue's recommendation that the number of pertinent questions he poses be answered before greater use is promoted and permitted. The Great Lakes Heritage Coast initiative does present a unique opportunity to ensure protection of a high quality wilderness resource while providing important economic contributions to coastal communities, and the OMNR should be complemented for initiating consultations with communities and stakeholders. However, much ecological information remains to be gathered and presented to communities and stakeholders to allow informed decisions. In the absence of this information it would be best to apply the precautionary principle and avoid promoting development until the necessary information is in place.

Biosphere Reserves have proven themselves as a good tool to engage stakeholders and communities in adaptive ecological management. Several agencies and organizations in the Honey Harbour to Parry Sound area are currently seriously working towards the nomination of this area as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Biosphere Reserve – the Georgian Bay Littoral Biosphere Reserve.

Biosphere Reserves are areas of terrestrial and coastal ecosystems promoting solutions to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use. They are internationally recognized, nominated by national governments and remain under sovereign jurisdiction of the states where they are located. Biosphere Reserves serve in some ways as 'living laboratories' for testing out and demonstrating integrated management of land, water and biodiversity. Each Biosphere Reserve is intended to fulfil three basic functions, which are complementary and mutually reinforcing:

1. Conservation function - to contribute to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation;
2. Development function - to foster economic and human development which is socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable; and,
3. Logistic function - to provide support for research, monitoring, education and information exchange related to local, national and global issues of conservation and development. (UNESCO, 2002)

As of May 2002, 94 countries have established 408 Biosphere Reserves. Canada has established 11 Biosphere Reserves (Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association, 2002)

The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve program may be an appropriate tool to apply to the entire Great Lakes Heritage Coast for at least two reasons. Firstly, to provide a solid vehicle to engage communities and stakeholders in cooperative adaptive management planning, and secondly to engage the scientific community in designing integrated research and monitoring programs that will deliver the necessary information to decision-makers.

Canada's Ecological Monitoring and Assessment Network (EMAN), supported by Environment Canada, has developed a suite of indicators for the early detection of ecological change (EMAN, 2002). Monitoring protocols have been developed, in consultation with Canadian experts, for the majority of the indicators. These protocols are being used at many EMAN sites across Canada to monitor ecological change. Georgian Bay Islands National Park and the Georgian Bay Association are establishing terrestrial vegetation monitoring stations throughout the Honey Harbour – Parry Sound area that will collect information and track change in tree, shrub and ground cover diversity, salamander abundance, epiphytic lichen diversity, and soil decomposition, among other indicators. The establishment of these terrestrial monitoring stations will make a valuable contribution to tracking ecosystem change along a portion of the Great Lakes Heritage Coast. Forming collaborative partnerships with other agencies and organizations along the entire coast to establish additional stations would be an effective means of gathering pertinent information on ecological change.

References

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