

Overcoming Challenges to Grassroots Environment Remediation in the Rondeau Watershed

Ramsey Hart, Caroline Manson and Heather Prangley
Rondeau Watershed Coalition

Abstract

Rondeau Bay and its watershed contain important natural resources, species and natural communities which are of regional, provincial and national significance. Intensive agricultural and residential development within the watershed have caused serious declines in the extent and quality of natural features. A catastrophic loss of aquatic vegetation in the bay along with chronic problems of incremental wetland loss led to the creation of the Rondeau Bay Watershed Rehabilitation Program (RBWRP) in 1993. Since that time a number of successes have been achieved, yet many challenges still face the organisation. Challenges include maintaining active participation, funding, the need for education, and difficulties with navigating jurisdictional and bureaucratic networks. A new board of directors has provided new direction to the organisation in overcoming these challenges and in developing a positive future of grassroots watershed restoration.

Introduction

Rondeau Bay is one of Ontario's natural treasures. Located in the Municipality of Chatham-Kent, within the heart of Ontario's biologically diverse Carolinian zone, the bay is known as a vital waterfowl staging area, and the wetland and upland habitats of the adjacent watershed are home to a number of rare Carolinian habitats and species. By many measures, the watershed also represents the area of influence or "greater park ecosystem" for Rondeau Provincial Park, a natural environment class park with a very high number of significant species and habitats. Unfortunately, the watershed has suffered severe ecological losses due to land use practices, pollution, and a general lack of awareness in the local populace of the area's ecological significance. The environmental condition of the bay itself hit a low point in 1977 when there was a collapse of the submerged macrophyte vegetation (at the time dominated by the exotic Eurasian water milfoil) and dependent fish populations (Ontario Parks, 2001; RBWRP, 1995). Intensive development, combined with a high native biodiversity and many species of southern affinity create unique challenges for meeting conservation objectives. Rondeau Bay and the watershed

have:

- only 4% tree cover (RBWRP, 1995);
- 54% of the Rondeau Bay shoreline has been severely altered (ibid.);
- 800 ha of provincially and regionally significant marshes (NHIC, 1998a);
- been designated a priority site for protection and rehabilitation under the Great Lakes Wetlands Conservation Action Plan (Environment Canada, 2000);
- extensive areas of submerged macrophytes have recovered (Ontario Parks, 2001) providing habitat for warm water fish species as well as staging habitat for migrating waterfowl;
- along with Rondeau Provincial Park, been designated an Important Bird Area (Cheskey and Wilson, 2001).
- remnant Carolinian forests, including Sinclair's Bush Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) (Allen, 1984).
- 18 species considered to be at risk by either the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) (NHIC, 1998b) or the Committee on the status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

In recent years, expansion of no-till or conservation tilling practices, now common in the watershed (Jack Rigby pers. comm.), has contributed toward improved water quality, but increased tiling and aggressive drain maintenance continue to contribute high loads of sediment to the bay. Monitoring of surface water quality is no longer being conducted, making it difficult to gauge the contribution of practices such as no-till cropping versus the filtering action of Zebra Mussels to improved water clarity in the bay.

The Rondeau Bay Watershed Rehabilitation Program (RBWRP) was formed in 1993 under the Great Lakes Cleanup Fund. The group has made gains toward its goals of integrating natural habitats, assisting the recovery of species at risk and improving water quality, however it has encountered increasing challenges as funding sources have dried up and public interest has dwindled. In addition, the group faces the need to maintain and increase involvement of the agricultural community, and must navigate complicated jurisdictional boundaries.

Since its inception, the program has been actively involved in habitat rehabilitation and species recovery measures. Projects to date have involved over 1535 volunteers and 277 partners, many local to the community. These projects have been made possible through the generous support of agency and private funding, community group and business contributions, and volunteerism.

Challenges in Grassroots Environmental Rehabilitation

Through the years the Rondeau Watershed Coalition (RWC) has had to overcome many hurdles in its efforts to facilitate a program of watershed rehabilitation. At present the group is experiencing very positive developments, yet many challenges still remain.

1. Maintaining Community Involvement

One of the foremost challenges has been maintaining active involvement of watershed residents and other interested parties in the activities of the program. Initially there was strong participation in the group from a wide range of sectors, and the board of directors consisted of 15 people. This participation waned to the point where there were only two active directors working with the Co-ordinator. Possible explanations for this decline include conflicting agendas and points of view within the board, burnout of key volunteers and a decreased sense of urgency with the recovery of the bay's aquatic vegetation. In the past year, there has been a marked improvement in participation and the RWC now has an active board of six members. Unfortunately there is not yet any representation from the agricultural community on the board.

In an effort to stimulate more interest and public involvement, the RWC held a community forum on April 13, 2002. At the forum, a local historian and local naturalist gave presentations about the past and present condition of the area's natural resources. This was followed by smaller group discussions that allowed participants to voice their opinions regarding the work of the RWC. The forum was reasonably well attended with 20 people from a variety of backgrounds. Ideas and suggestions from the forum are included in the discussion below.

In order to further stimulate interest and involvement in the RWC's activities the following options are being pursued:

- network with established agricultural organisations;
- increase profile through local media including farm papers;
- increase involvement of youth volunteers; and,
- improve its website including new URL and domain name.

2. Increasing Landowner Interest

In past projects there has, at times, been insufficient participation from landowners to meet project objectives. It is unclear whether this low participation is due to a genuine lack of interest in participating in environmental and conservation-related projects, insufficient outreach to potential participants, or inappropriate selection and design of projects. By re-establishing relations with the agricultural community

and improving the visibility of the Coalition through enhanced outreach programs, we hope to stimulate increased interest and input from landowners. The re-location of the Coalition office from the MNR in Chatham to the Ag-Business Centre at Ridgetown College should help facilitate improved networking with agricultural organisations, several of which are located at the Centre.

3. Developing Awareness and Positive Attitudes

One of the long-term challenges that the RWC faces is the lack of environmental awareness and appreciation for natural areas within the general population. The RWC is addressing this challenge through educational activities with schools, which it hopes to increase in the future. It has been suggested the RWC develop curriculum-based education programs addressing local environmental issues. First hand exposure to nature is a key component of developing a positive environmental ethic, and the RWC will be enhancing its efforts to provide opportunities for experiential education. Outreach through local media, as detailed above, should also assist in overcoming this challenge.

4. Funding and Support

Though initially the program was started with substantial financial support from the Federal Government, this core funding has not been available for several years, forcing the program to finance itself through individual project applications. Two planned wetland restoration projects on Rondeau Bay could not be implemented largely because the funding dried up before they were completed, though jurisdictional and other bureaucratic impediments also came into play (see below). The constant need to seek funding sources means that little time is available for longer-term planning, research or activities that do not relate to “funded” projects. In order to increase operational funding for the RWC, community fundraising initiatives are being pursued. In the coming months the RWC will be incorporated as a non-profit organisation, which will increase its ability and flexibility to pursue funding opportunities. While these initiatives will improve our ability to fund our work, it is likely that funding will remain the key challenge in pursuing the Coalition’s objectives.

Ontario Parks has made a commitment to working toward ecosystem management in the areas of influence around provincial parks (Ontario Parks, 2002). Despite this commitment, at Rondeau Provincial Park there has been no additional funding or staffing support provided to pursue or assist initiatives in the “greater park ecosystem”. Further complicating potential partnerships with Ontario Parks is the concern of park managers that direct participation in watershed rehabilitation would give the appearance of over-stepping their bounds and create conflict within the local communities.

5. Jurisdictional Issues and Bureaucracy

Like other areas being rehabilitated around the Great Lakes, the Rondeau watershed has a large number of governmental agencies involved in its management.

These include provincial ministries (e.g., Natural Resources, Environment, Agriculture), federal departments (Fisheries and Oceans, Environment), the Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent. Navigating the maze of jurisdictions and responsibilities in developing projects for wetland restoration is a daunting undertaking and has complicated past efforts. In the short term, efforts will be focussed on working with landowners in the upper watershed to avoid the difficulties of working along the shoreline of the bay. In the future, partnerships with other groups more experienced in navigating the bureaucracy and building the capacity of Coalition members and staff will enable the RWC to take on more ambitious restoration projects along the bay shore.

6. Municipal Policies and Practices

During the community forum held on April 13 it became clear that there is a need to work with or pressure the Municipality of Chatham-Kent to introduce more progressive environmental protection through by-laws or incentive programs. Four areas of municipal jurisdiction are of particular interest to the RWC – the construction and maintenance of drains, the growth of intensive livestock operations and nutrient management, the taxation of woodlots and other natural features, and the absence of controls on tree cutting. The RWC will become active in fostering awareness of these issues within the local population, but it has not yet been decided whether or not the RWC will take a formal position and lobby the Municipality accordingly. Direct lobbying would be a departure from past approaches for the organisation, which has generally attempted to remain politically neutral.

Conclusion

The need to restore and protect the Rondeau watershed remains as great as it was nine years ago, when the Rondeau Bay Watershed Rehabilitation Program was formed. Significant challenges face the future of this grassroots organisation. Waning public interest and participation and a decline in funding may be among the greatest threats to the group's future effectiveness. Currently the RWC is attempting to generate increased public awareness and participation through community events and is investigating possible sources of funding on a project-by-project basis, as well as to maintain its day-to-day business. The RWC is also addressing a need to further involve the local agricultural community, a continued need to foster environmental awareness in the local population, and the necessity of navigating jurisdictional boundaries. Overcoming these diverse challenges will be an ongoing process requiring creative approaches to grassroots watershed rehabilitation.

References

- Allen, G.M. 1984. *A Life Science Inventory and Evaluation of Sinclair's Bush, Kent Count Ontario: An Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI)*. Ministry of Natural Resources, Queen's Printer. Toronto.
- Cheskey, E.D. and W.G. Wilson. 2001. *Greater Rondeau Important Bird Area Conservation Plan*. Important Bird Areas of Canada. Guelph.
- Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). 2002. [online]. www.cosewic.gc.ca/eng/sct5/index_e.cfm
- Environment Canada. 2000. *Sustaining Wetlands in the Great Lakes Basin*. [online]. www.on.ec.gc.ca/wildlife/factsheets/fs_sustaining-e.html
- Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC). 1998a. *Natural Areas Database*. [online]. www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/queries/.
- Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC). 1998b. *Rare Species Query for Kent County*. [online]. www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/queries/countquery.cfm
- Ontario Parks. 2001. *Rondeau Provincial Park Vegetation Management Plan*. Queen's Printer for Ontario. Toronto.
- Ontario Parks. 2002. *Park Planning: Managing Greater Park Ecosystems*. Queen's Printer for Ontario. [online]. www.ontarioparks.com/eco.html
- Rondeau Watershed Rehabilitation Program (RWRP). 1995. *Action Plan*. V. McKay, (Ed.). n.p.