

# DESIGNATING THE THAMES AS A CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVER

Cathy Quinlan<sup>1</sup> and Michael Troughton<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Upper Thames River Conservation Authority

<sup>2</sup>Department of Geography, University of Western Ontario

## Abstract

*The objective of this paper is to review the stages in the process of securing a river's designation within the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS), using the Thames as the example. The presentation describes the initiation of the process, the gaining of the necessary community and financial support, and the work entailed to develop the Nomination Proposal, the Background Study, the Nomination Document, and the Thames Strategy. Included is the local committee's presentation to the Canadian Heritage River's Board (CHRB)\*. Finally, the results of designation, both actual and potential, for the Thames River, the watershed and its communities are reviewed.*

As Max Finkelstein has already noted, the Canadian Heritage River System (CHRS) designation is a national approach to the conservation of Canadian rivers, which has been in operation over the last 20 years. During that time, the majority of rivers designated as Canadian Heritage Rivers were those in more remote and/or already protected areas, such as national parks. However, beginning with the Grand River in Southern Ontario, the designation process has broadened to include rivers and their watersheds (or catchment areas) in more populated regions, and including rivers whose course may have been modified by human constructions such as dams and weirs. We in the Thames watershed saw an opportunity, based on similarities between the Thames and the Grand River, and the latter's success at achieving designation. If the Grand was worthy of designation, so too, we felt, was its 'sister river' the Thames

Our objective of this paper is to briefly review the process whereby the Thames was nominated and, after four years, was designated as a Canadian Heritage River. Each river has its unique character, and each designation process will reflect that uniqueness, including the particular responses of those attempting to secure the designation. However, the process involves a set of stages, in accordance with the procedure and guidelines set out by the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board (CHRB) as the ultimate deciding authority. Thus, this paper, framed within the dual framework of local conditions and CHRB requirements will, it is hoped, provide a generally useful guide to those contemplating designation of their own river.

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\*The CD ROM presentation is not included in these proceedings, but can be obtained by contacting Cathy Quinlan at the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA).

## **Getting Started**

The move to designate a river in any region, but particularly in a populated watershed, must involve the local population and river users. The initiative to generate interest and to begin the process may come from a number of sources, for example, the conservation authority, a local user group, a university or college in the watershed, or a dedicated individual. In the case of the Thames, a local individual was the catalyst. Dr Douglas Bocking, retired Dean of Medicine at the University of Western Ontario and an avid canoeist, took up the cause and actively promoted it in the local community. Based on his initiative, interest was expressed by a wide cross-section of individuals and organizations in the watershed, including the Upper Thames River and Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authorities and the Department of Geography at the University of Western Ontario. During the Fall of 1995 and early 1996 a series of meetings of interested persons were held. With the help of Barbara Veale from the Grand and John Fisher, the Ontario representative on CHRB, the concept, goals and procedures were reviewed and the pros and cons of entering into a four-year process were discussed (TRCC, 1996).

## **The Decision to Begin**

The outcome was a strong consensus in favour of the decision, in March 1996, to begin the attempt to designate the Thames River and its watershed. By then we knew that although we had a river system with important natural environment heritage values, that because the Thames was not a free-flowing stream, but contained several major and many smaller impoundments, our emphasis had to be even stronger in the areas of human-cultural and recreational values of the river. We also realized that because the Thames watershed is a highly populated area, with many different populations and interests, we should try to develop a broad-based community approach; not least to forestall any of the type of opposition that had derailed the plans to designate the Trent-Severn system.

The combination of the need to address designation on several fronts and to involve the community, resulted in the decision to establish a set of committees with two main objects; first, to begin to develop the initial request to CHRB to proceed toward designation, and second to develop a more formal network of interested persons and organizations within the watershed and its constituent municipalities. The structure was built around the Thames River Coordinating Committee (TRCC), together with its six sub-committees; three to address each of the key CHRS values (i.e., Natural Environment, Human Cultural, and Recreation Sub-Committees), plus the additional Fundraising and Communication sub-committees, to which was added the Background Studies Committee. Each one of the sub-committees met regularly and worked to involve and gain ideas from a wide array of co-opted members, while their chairs were the nucleus of TRCC. The latter had as its primary objective the development of a Preliminary Nomination Proposal.

It is important to mention that, operating parallel to the designation process, a group in the London area (the main population focus of the Thames) was working to promote the river through a series of special public events. Their organization, Celebrate the Thames, which was active from Spring 1996 to Spring 1997, did much to heighten awareness of the value

of the river to the largest community in the watershed. Along with other centres along the river, which had also developed local river-oriented events, they helped to develop and crystallize opinion in the watershed in favour of designation. This type of community involvement is vital, both to the designation process and in fostering an ongoing attachment to the river.

In the particular context of Southern Ontario, it is also of key importance to involve the Conservation Authority (CA) responsible for the river in question. In the case of the Thames, two authorities, the Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority (LTVCA) and the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA) were key supporters. The UTRCA became particularly important, providing leadership and cooperation in the areas committee membership, and allocation of staff time, space and technical assistance. In real terms the CA mandate for management of a given watershed coincides strongly with the goals of designation towards conservation the river and its watershed values. Several CA staff members played lead roles in the Thames designation process and have continued to be actively involved.

### ***The Preliminary Nomination Proposal***

The first requirement of the designation process is to make a formal approach to CHRB for permission to begin to develop the case for heritage designation. This has a twofold purpose; first, to allow a preliminary assessment as to the merit of the proposed river, and second, if permission is granted, access to funding to support the more detailed research and presentation of the case. The funding from CHRS is modest, but it, along with the official sanction and encouragement to proceed, acts as an important lever to support applications for financial assistance from other funding sources.

Development of the *Preliminary Nomination Proposal* (TRCC, 1996) was a fairly long process. It was developed over the period from March to the end of 1996 by the TRCC, with input from each of the three heritage sub-committees, which were making the initial identification of the natural, cultural and recreational heritage values, while also working to build up the local base of support. Several drafts of the Proposal were discussed before the final version was submitted to the CHRB, for consideration at its Annual Meeting in February 1997. The CHRB reacted favorably and its approval initiated the period of greatest activity over the balance of 1997.

### ***The Background Study Report and The Nomination Document***

The next stage was/is to amplify the case made by in the *Preliminary Nomination Proposal* into a more detailed case for designation and to develop the two specified documents to support the case, namely the *Background Study* (BSRT, 1997) and the actual submission to CHRB, the *Thames River Nomination Document* (TRCC, 1997c). Although closely related, the documents serve different objectives. *The Background Study* is designed to be a comprehensive report, detailing all aspects of the river and watershed in terms of both its heritage values and the support base for designation (i.e. funding bodies, individual and institutional support). *The Nomination Document* is, essentially, a distillation of the broader set of materials, and is the document upon which CHRB members make their final assessment.

Work on the *Background Study* began in earnest in March 1997. While the sub-committees continued to operate, the detailed research was focused on a team of researchers hired by TRCC members at the UTRCA and the Department of Geography at the University of Western Ontario. This group made up the Thames River Background Study Research Team (BSRT). Funding for the work included the mix of CHRB funds, HRDC grants and financial support from local and national foundations, including the London Community Foundation and the Richard Ivey Foundation. Work to secure funding was paralleled by efforts to secure institutional support from all MPs, MPPs and all municipalities within the watershed, and from the range of local organizations with interests in the river and its watershed.

The *Background Study* (BSRT, 1997) document grew on the basis of detailed information on the many aspects of natural, human-cultural, and recreational values identified within the watershed. The CHRS guidelines for the designation process included a detailed check-list. While attempting to follow this, we recognized that the particular nature and characteristics of the Thames required some modification. As we had been aware from the beginning, the shift to include rivers like the Grand and Thames necessitated a change in emphasis in the designation criteria, with greater stress on the human-cultural and recreational values, alongside the natural environment. Overall, we needed, as per CHRS guidelines, to identify features and values that were of national, as well as provincial, regional and local significance.

In our case, we knew that, despite impoundments and other human modifications, the physical values in support of designation were still considerable. The research gave prominence to such aspects as the watershed's location within the restricted Carolinian Zone, to the large number of faunal and floral species restricted to that zone, and the presence within the river and its watershed of a significant number of endangered species. On the other hand, there was detailed documentation of the role of the Thames in the cultural development of Southern Ontario and Canada. Cultural values included a long First Nation heritage, establishment of the prosperous agrarian landscape of European settlement and features associated with cities, towns and villages in the watershed. In addition, the considerable tourism and recreational values, many focused on the river, including boating, angling, and in the riparian communities. Information on all these aspects, together with illustrative items, key listings and bibliographic materials, were written up by the Background Study Research Team.

The result was the *Background Study* volume (BSRT, 1997) of some 162 pages, plus 38 appendices. In addition, and as an important bonus, the *Background Study* was also converted into a CD ROM. While a limited quantity of the bound volume was printed, enough CDs were made to enable copies to be presented to every school and library within the Thames watershed. As the deadline approached for the presentation to the CHRB and the background materials became available, the study team and the members of the Coordinating Committee combined to draft the *Thames River Nomination Document* (TRCC, 1997c). This was a shorter document but contained a distillation of the rationale and support for designation. Complete preparation of the *Background Study* took from March to December 1997; the *Nomination Document* was written in October and November and sent to the members of CHRB in December, in advance of their Annual

Meeting in February 1998.

## **Presentation to the CHRB**

Three members of the team (Dr. Bocking, Dr. Jerry Killan, and Mr. Ian Wilcox) attended the CHRB meeting in Quebec City and made the presentation for CHRS designation on behalf of the Thames River. Their colourful multi-media presentation, which further distilled the salient facts of the watershed case for designation, was enthusiastically received and Approval for Designation was given.

Notwithstanding this key event, however, the process was not yet complete. Approval by the Board had to be ratified by the appropriate authorities, namely the Federal Heritage Minister whose department is responsible for the Heritage Rivers program at the national level, and by the Ontario Minister of Natural Resources who is the official responsible at the provincial level. Official Ratification took some months, but the two government ministers duly signed during 1998.

## **Developing *The Thames Strategy***

Despite CHRB approval, and government ratification, the designation process requires one more step, namely preparation and submission of a *Management Strategy* document. The rationale for this document is for the group or body who take responsibility for a designated river and, particularly the process of maintenance and enhancement of its heritage values, to submit a statement to the CHRS indicating their commitment. In the case of the Thames, this involved a reconstitution of the Coordinating Committee into a new Strategy Committee, and additional fund-raising to undertake the technical studies and policy and program review, within which a management strategy would be placed. The process took from Spring of 1998 to the Fall of 1999. The management document sought to identify the major concerns surrounding the maintenance of the Thames, and the key stakeholders who would assume some responsibility. A major part of the process involved a survey of stakeholders, especially river users and organizations with a concern for the three heritage values. Their concerns and objectives vis-a`-vis the 'health' of the river, were incorporated in a draft document, which was put out to public review. The document also included a draft program for monitoring the river and initiatives to enhance its heritage character. In addition, the work resulted in the development of a detailed *Thames River Directory* (1999) listing sources of information and contact persons in offices and organizations throughout the watershed. The Directory subsequently has become the basis for the TRSC mailing list.

## **Designation**

Finally, in October 1999, the final version of the *Thames Strategy* (TRCC, 2000) was complete and was submitted to the CHRB. Thereafter, the TRCC was reconstituted as the Thames Heritage River Committee, and assumed overall responsibility for periodic

review and submission of regular reports on the health of the river and watershed, according to the CHRS requirements. At this time, with all requirements for designation complete, Heritage Minister, the Honorable Sheila Copps, made a formal declaration to the effect that the Thames River was Designated as a Heritage River as part of the Canadian Heritage Rivers System. It remained to arrange public ceremonies at the Forks of the Thames in London to un-veil a multi-lingual plaque summarizing the history of the Thames and the values contributing to its designation.

## Follow-up and On-going Activities

In the *Thames Strategy* it was specified that a number of follow-up studies and ongoing activities would be undertaken within the watershed, organized either by the CAs and/or the Thames Heritage River Committee. Consequently, over the period following designation in 2000, several initiatives have gone ahead. Four, of particular significance, and which are among those documented in a twice-yearly *Thames River Happenings: the Thames Strategy Newsletter*, are as follows:

- An annual Thames River Symposium; a one day meeting held in different locations within the watershed [i.e., 2001 in London; 2002 in St.Marys; 2003 in Chatham; 2004 (planned) in Woodstock]. The meetings include a mix of papers and displays dealing with various aspects of the river and watershed, plus a short field trip in the local community. The symposia provide both a local focus and help to keep the whole ideal of designation values to the forefront.
- Detailed surveys of the natural environment of the watershed. These include work on water quality, natural vegetation, and endangered species, involving the efforts of a number of researchers, focused by but not exclusive to the CAs. This information adds to the background, as well as being oriented to the improvement of the natural heritage values throughout the watershed.
- More detailed investigation of the cultural heritage of the watershed. This includes studies by individual researchers and heritage organizations (e.g., LACACs), focusing on key aspects of the built heritage (e.g., mills, schools, churches, etc.) and local history. The latter includes a set of re-enactment societies, whose activities are major elements in gatherings which have become significant tourist attractions.
- An annual Thames River Clean-Up, in which local volunteers collect garbage and debris from the river and banks of the three main branches and tributaries of the Thames. This event has grown in numbers and sponsorships, and along with efforts such as riparian tree planting, is particularly geared to younger persons.

In addition, the Thames Heritage River Committee meets on a regular basis, monitors the overall situation, and entertains and tries to coordinate suggestions for other efforts to promote the river and its watershed, including active and passive, water- and land-based recreation and tourism.

In a diverse and heavily populated watershed, there are always concerns over maintaining

both natural and cultural elements and values, and there are both general and specific threats to the integrity of the Thames and its watershed. However, to-date, the net result of achieving designation has been generally positive and in line with the objectives of the CHRS and the Thames Strategy. Designation has led to a more integrated approach to the Thames as well as encouraging local activity. More people are directly involved with what they recognize as 'their river' and willing to take responsibility for its values. Rivers are important agents for linking people to their environment, and the cause of designation is one that empowers.

In conclusion, we encourage persons living in any presently un-designated watershed to pose the question — if the Thames can do it, why can't we?

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