

THE CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS DESIGNATION:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES AND OTHER  
GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE GROUPS ENGAGED IN WATERSHED PLANNING  
AND MANAGEMENT

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In 1987, the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) spearheaded a participatory process to have the Grand River and its major tributaries declared a Canadian Heritage River. This coveted status was achieved in 1994, based on the outstanding human heritage features and values and the excellence of river-related recreation opportunities found within the Grand River watershed. The management plan tabled with the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board as part of the requirement for the designation was called *The Grand Strategy* (1996). This document provides a framework for managing these resources and for collective actions that strengthen the knowledge, stewardship and enjoyment of the heritage and recreational resources of the Grand River watershed.

*The Grand Strategy* embodied a new approach for managing watershed resources based on community involvement, cooperation, consensus and commitment. It was founded on beliefs, values and principles that provide a framework for initiating actions which strengthen the knowledge, stewardship and enjoyment of the valley's resources.

In 1995, the next step in *The Grand Strategy* was initiated. Participants supported a more holistic approach to resource management and indicated that the scope should be broadened to address pressing watershed resource issues and the process become *The Grand Strategy for Sharing the Management of the Grand River Watershed*.

The Grand River watershed is one of the fastest growing areas in Canada, with anticipated population growth of over 30% over the next 20 years. It has a large industrial base and a productive agricultural community. In economic terms, the watershed's contribution to Canada's gross domestic product is comparable to that of Nova Scotia. The communities of the Grand River watershed are almost all dependent on inland surface and groundwater sources for water supply. However, watershed municipalities are facing rising costs for treating wastewater. Development and agricultural intensification are adding pressure to watershed lands, including the forests and wetlands that are essential for healthy groundwater and river systems. The health and resiliency of the natural environment is diminishing. Communities along the Grand River are looking to the river for a viable tourism industry, while increased recreational use is straining natural and heritage resources. Tackling resource issues and securing a healthy future depends on our ability to work together to find creative and balanced solutions and to stretch limited dollars.

Pressing issues include:

- keeping the watershed healthy while accommodating growth;
- developing a viable tourism industry while protecting the resources on which

it is based;

- improving water quality using a cost-effective balance between cleaning up urban wastewater and controlling sources of pollution;
- water supply and water allocation;
- reducing flood and erosion damages using a mix of structural and non-structural approaches; and,
- conserving heritage and a sense of place.

Over the past eight years under the umbrella of *The Grand Strategy*, the Grand River Conservation Authority has been working with watershed municipalities, federal and provincial agencies, businesses, community groups, educational institutions and First Nations to address these issues and determine priorities for action.

Priority actions include:

- expanding the Rural Water Quality Program to address non-point source pollution;
- pursuing excellence in wastewater treatment;
- slowing increases in water use and advocating the wise use of water
- protecting ground water resources;
- developing long term water quality and water budget/water supply plans;
- maintaining the water control system;
- implementing a Fisheries Management Plan;
- developing community-based plans that advance forest, wildlife and natural heritage management;
- developing community riverfront plans;
- developing the watershed's potential for outdoor recreation, cultural and ecotourism; and,
- building a sense of community around the river and celebrating successes.

Within *The Grand Strategy* network, information is shared and resources are pooled. Progress is documented and celebrated through monthly newsletters, special events and an annual Registry of Accomplishments. Opportunities to directly participate in *The Grand Strategy* are offered through various working groups and public forums. The philosophy is that everyone who shares the resources of the Grand River watershed is encouraged to be part of a concerted and collective effort to address watershed issues. Since 1994, there has been a notable increase in the number of residents and visitors that explore and enjoy the watershed's many natural and cultural resources and the general level of concern for the way the river is treated has increased.

The opportunities revealed during the designation process and the subsequent implementation of *The Grand Strategy* include:

- Working toward a common goal (the designation) helps build existing and new relationships/partnerships;
- The public can be engaged in a positive and meaningful process that leads to results.;

- The designation process exposes more watershed residents to the Conservation Authority and its programs and services in a direct way;
- Increased profile for the Conservation Authority and the river can lead to other recognition — international or national (i.e., the Grand River Conservation Authority won the prestigious international Thies Riverprize in 2000 for excellence in river management, as well as the national Red Fisher Award for conservation).
- The designation encourages governments, private operators and others to discuss the management of river-related heritage and recreation on a land scape/watershed scale rather than at the municipal or site scale.
- The designation provides opportunities for private entrepreneurs and public recreation providers to build viable recreation businesses (fishing, canoeing, camping, conservation areas).
- The designation provides opportunities for tourism marketing organizations to promote river experiences and cultural diversity which increases public awareness. In the Grand River watershed, Grand River Country was formed to jointly promote “Grand River Experiences” throughout the watershed.
- The designation can be a trigger that inspires artists, singers, filmmakers and writers (*The Grand View*, *A Year on the Grand*, Waterloo and Area Quilt Festival; *The River Grand*, *The Grand-The Story of A River*; *An Artist of the Grand: Journey Through Festival Country*; *The Grand-Great Canadian Rivers*, *The Grand Adventure*) which in turn raises awareness. In my observation, increased awareness and enjoyment equal a greater level of stewardship and action.
- The designation process provides opportunities for an ongoing dialogue with municipalities, groups, schools and other stakeholders and an opportunity to recognize successes (Grand Actions Newsletter/Grand Actions Registry).

Over the past 10 years, the Grand River Conservation Authority and its partners in *The Grand Strategy* have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the Canadian Heritage Rivers designation to develop a participatory process which provides the cornerstone for future collective actions.

The continued growth and economic prosperity of the watershed relies on a healthy Grand River. A high quality of life is linked to a healthy environment, of which the river is a major component. Through *The Grand Strategy*, partnerships are being forged with municipalities, community groups, schools, businesses, agencies and others towards ensuring the health of our Canadian Heritage River.

## References

Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA). 1996. *The Grand Strategy: a shared management plan for the Grand River watershed*. Grand River Conservation Authority: Cambridge, ON.