
Kelly Egan on the Ottawa Riverkeeper

The following article appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen* on Sunday, May 28, 2006, page A11, and is reprinted with the permission of the writer, Kelly Egan.

Ottawa Riverkeeper stands on guard: Despite the myriad authorities on both sides of the Ottawa River, none of them are taking responsibility for the waterway's health

In 2002, the pulp and paper industry discharged more than 163,000 billion litres of toxic effluent into the Ottawa River. The very same water travelled through 50 major dams and power stations, generating at least \$1 million worth of electricity every day, in excess of 4,000 megawatts in total.

I did not know those things. Did you?

The Ottawa River is both mother and orphan. She feeds and sustains, but without a single guardian of her own.

The Ottawa Riverkeeper is trying to arrest the sense of drift. It is giving the old girl a checkup; taking her temperature, tucking her in at night under the stars. It is, more than anything else, sitting up at night; watching, worrying.

The Riverkeeper, founded in 2001 as an offshoot of Robert Kennedy Jr.'s Waterkeeper Alliance, has just published the first of a series of reports on the state of the river. This 81-page document concentrates on the basic ecology along the 1,271-kilometre waterway and the impacts of human habitation.

Meredith Brown has been Ottawa's Riverkeeper for two years. She has been struck by the myriad of authorities on both sides of the river that have some regulatory stake in the waterway.

"One of the big messages I want people to take away is that nobody is taking responsibility for the health of the river," said Ms. Brown. "We really have a big miscommunication problem on our hands."

There is very little ongoing monitoring of water quality on the river, she explained, making it difficult to answer the question: How's the river doing?

"I get asked that question all the time and it's not an easy answer. We don't really have a great idea."

This first report is an overview and a sketch of the sectors having a major impact on the river.

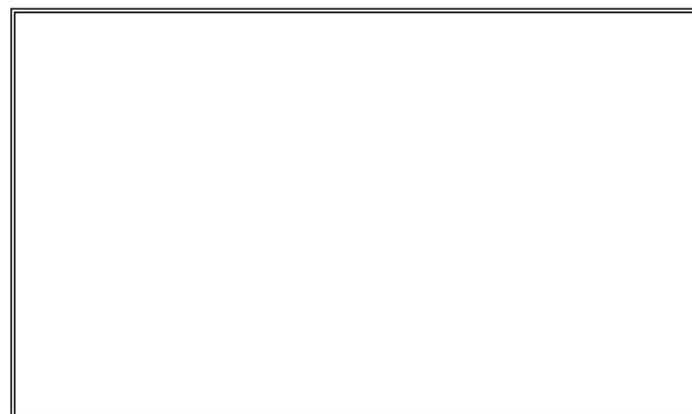
Among the findings:

- 1.7 million people live in the Ottawa River watershed, at least 25 per cent of whom are on septic systems. There are 93 municipal wastewater treatment plants in that area, with varying levels of treatment.

Ottawa, for all its multi-million-dollar investment in sewage infrastructure, still has room to improve, the report says. "The Ottawa facility is currently being upgraded to increase its capacity so that it can receive sludge from the Lemieux water filtration plant. This aluminum-laden sludge is currently being dumped directly into the river on a daily basis, despite the fact that the effluent is a pollutant and does not comply with provincial or federal regulations."

Ms. Brown says the nature of pollutants in the river is a common question. "The public knows very little about what's going into the river and they want to know. I talk to people all over the watershed and they're floored when they find some of the stuff I tell them."

- Of the nine pulp and paper makers, Tembec's mill in Temiscaming contributes the largest amount of wastewater, an astounding



158,284 cubic metres a day in 2002, or about 35 per cent of the total. "Unfortunately," says the report, "they also have the worst record of compliance with environmental regulations."

- The river is home to 96 species of fish, the largest and longest lived being the sturgeon, which can be 2.5 metres long and weigh 135 kilograms. "Within the Ottawa River, the status of lake sturgeon varies by reach," writes fisheries specialist Tim Haxton, from the Ministry of Natural Resources.

"Some of the reaches have a seemingly healthy population, meaning they display good recruitment, have diverse and size classes and decent abundance. Other reaches have poor recruitment and only few adults remaining."

- The Ottawa River has more than 50 dams or power stations; the total in the watershed (including tributaries) is in the hundreds. None of the large dams have fish ladders. Remarkably, the report says the Dumoine River is the only one without a dam in the entire watershed. The Ottawa has 13 main reservoirs, the largest two being the Baskatong and Dozois.

- Within the watershed, there are five plant species, including American ginseng and butternut on the endangered list, one fish (copper redhorse), four birds (Henslow's sparrow, barn owl, Kirtland's warbler, loggerhead shrike) and one reptile (spotted turtle). Many other species are threatened or of "special concern."

The Ottawa Riverkeeper hopes to produce a second book within a couple of years. The full report is to be on the group's website as of Wednesday.

So what we have is a good start. Finally, an organization — albeit a tiny one with two employees — is looking at the Ottawa River stem to stern, shore to shore, from plant life to plant discharge, from dams to damn catfish. The watch is on. Action, it must surely follow, cannot be far behind.

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Dinner with the Riverkeeper

We had a successful dinner where over 80 cottagers and residents mingled over cocktails and appetizers before enjoying a dinner at the Hotel Pontiac on August 13, 2005. Over coffee and pie, we listened to Meredith Brown, Ottawa Riverkeeper, describe background in the environmental movement, her organization, and how we can get involved in the riverkeeper's work. She is employed as a professional Riverkeeper to facilitate the maintenance and enhancement of the Ottawa River's ecological integrity through monitoring water quality; original research; identifying breaches of the law and reporting them to the appropriate authorities. Through her expert understanding of the river's ecological values, processes, and special features, and the protective framework offered by various federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions she creates additional methods to sustain and enhance the ecological health of the river. Meredith also develops educational programs and projects in order to increase the public's understanding of the Ottawa River, so that they are able to become stewards of the river. Many were surprised that the River is not tested for water quality, and consequently, we are going to work with Meredith in order to seek testing of the water at various locations on our stretch of the River. Shortly after Meredith's speaking engagement at our event, the *Ottawa Citizen* ran a story on her. We'll bring copies of this article to this year's AGM on July 15, 2006.



Sheen Hall
From George Quay



On November 1, Joann and I attended a Riverkeepers tea at the Marriot Hotel in Ottawa. The guest speaker was Robert Kennedy Jr., who traced back the beginnings of the organization. As well Riverwatchers around the country were introduced.

This organization is successful largely due to volunteers, and if anyone is interested in joining our initiatives, please get in touch with one of us.

Your New Riverwatchers

by Chris Graham

Last summer the OFWCA had a dinner evening with Meredith Brown, the Executive Director and Riverkeeper of the Ottawa Riverkeeper Association. It was a huge success. I think we all learned a lot about the Ottawa Riverkeeper organization, what it does, and what it hopes to achieve. The organization is largely run by volunteers who have an interest and passion for the River.

Joann McCann had already been in touch with Meredith Brown for some time, so Joann made the suggestion that maybe we could start a Riverwatchers program for our stretch of the River.

One of the initiatives caught our interest. When Meredith stated that water samples were being tested in other parts of the Ottawa River, we thought that it was important that some water testing be done in our area. Hence, Joann McCann and I are your new Riverwatchers. Our area encompasses from the Short Turn near the Petawawa Yacht Club to Oiseau Rock. Our role will be to keep an eye out for environmental and shoreline issues, raise awareness of the River, and to participate in water testing.
