

Reflections on successful partnerships in designating
the Hayes River as a
Canadian Heritage River.

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Last summer I had the pleasure of seeing the Hayes officially designated as a Canadian Heritage River. This moment brought with it a real sense of accomplishment after working with so many people towards this goal for about 8 years.

With the benefit now of hindsight I would like share with you some reflections on what I thought made this a successful project.

It would be unfair to you for me to talk about the Hayes River without giving you a sense of fabulous a river it is. The Hayes is so ripe with the cultural value of the fur trade, has such pristine natural values, and enormous recreational potential it is really the quintessential Canadian Heritage River. One cannot help but think that those who conceptualized and created the CHRS did so after traveling the Hayes.

The Hayes River flows through northern Manitoba from near the north end of Lake Winnipeg to Hudson Bay. When I refer to the Hayes I am actually referring to three rivers that form the historic fur trade route. The route consists of the entire Hayes River, all of the Echimamish River and a 43 kilometre section of the East Channel of the Nelson River going from Norway House to the mouth of the Echimamish. All together this is a 600 km route. It passes through the traditional territories of Norway House, Bunibonibee, Shamattawa and York Factory First Nations.

The Hayes encompasses both Precambrian Shield landscapes and the Hudson Bay Lowland ecoregions right to the shores of Hudson Bay. At the Hudson Bay coast it has one of the planet's most active areas of crustal rebound (rising 1 metre per century). At the other end of the route it has the amazing two way flow of the Echimamish River, which drains into both the Hayes River to the east and the Nelson River to the west.

The real strength of the Hayes is its cultural heritage. The Hayes was the major fur trade route for the Hudson Bay Company for some 250 years. It was also an exploration route traveled by Kelsey, Thompson, Hearne, Franklin and Tyrrell. It is rich in Cree heritage and has modern, vibrant First Nations communities along its shores. The Hayes today has the added values of a recreational river – it is one of Canada's notable wilderness and historic canoe routes – where one can pretty much relive the trip of a fur trader. It also hosts one of Canada's largest and most exclusive fly-in fishing lodges on Knee Lake.

Bringing the Hayes River into the CHRS has been a long process. It started with the preparation of the Background study in 1987. After a lengthy hiatus, work started again in 1998 and the Hayes was nominated in 2000. Work on the management plan started immediately thereafter and the Hayes was eventually designated a Canadian Heritage River in 2007.

Throughout the nomination and designation process Manitoba Conservation, Norway House Cree Nation, Bunibonibee Cree Nation at Oxford House, Shamattawa First Nation and York Factory First Nation worked closely together. I think the working partnerships that were formed were a key element in having a successful conclusion to this initiative.

There were four aspects of this initiative that I think are worthy of noting as best practices that made the partnerships work or made the initiative work. *Common goals, clear planning and work processes, well established working relations, and a management approach that is workable for all partners and stakeholders.*

Common Goals

1. The Manitoba Government and the First Nations all had a common goal of achieving Canadian Heritage River designation for the Hayes River. The commitment to this goal by all five partners was very clearly stated and understood by all the partners. It was also clear to all the partners that their collective commitment to this goal was essential for the river to be designated.

From 1994 through 1997 the First Nations along the Hayes River wrote to government asking that the Hayes be designated a Canadian Heritage River to help them in their efforts to protect it against hydro-electric development. The 1997 Manitoba CHRS system study showed the Hayes as a strong candidate for designation and Manitoba wanted to pursue this. Though for slightly different reasons, the goal of CHRS designation was the same for everyone.

Importantly this goal of CHRS designation for the river reflected the community vision for each of the first nations. They all saw the Hayes as a clean, healthy river long into the future as being essential for their individual, community and social well being.

The importance of this common goal was made so apparent to me when elder Thomas Crate at Oxford House told his councillors in a meeting that CHRS designation was the right thing to do, and then eight years later talked to the crowd at this designation ceremony, describing the history and importance of the river.

2. Clear processes

The CHRS gave all of the partners a clear process through which they had to work. This process has the major steps of background study, nomination, designation, and then monitoring. Many of these steps had clear requirements. It was within this framework that the partners designed their own processes. It was the management planning process that was most complex and involved the public the most.

The Management Planning Process for the Hayes extended over 5 years. It was managed by a planning team of staff from Manitoba Conservation, with a First Nations Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from each first nation, and was facilitated by a consultant. This committee provided advice on how to design the citizen involvement process in each community so it was appropriate for that community.

The citizen involvement program consisted of two rounds of public drop-ins in each of Winnipeg, Thompson (the regional centre) and the four First Nations. We had additional workshops with government, with First Nations and with stakeholders to address concerns raised by the minerals sector. About 200 people participated in the process either through drop-ins, meetings or written submissions.

The committee also did internal reviews of the plan and other documents in the planning process, scheduled and facilitated public reviews and stakeholder workshops, and planned the designation ceremonies.

3. Well established working relationships

Throughout most of the project the contact people at both Manitoba Conservation and the First Nations remained constant. This allowed for the development of sound working relationships between these people and clear lines of communication. We became friends working together. This allowed for the easy exchange of views, knowledge and concerns amongst the partners. Over the course of five years the public in these communities recognized us as the CHRS people, thereby building a relationship of recognition and trust.

The value of having clearly identified contacts was so significant that it was included as a recommendation in the management plan for the Hayes – that the First Nations identify a councilor portfolio with responsibility for CHRS at the Band level. The plan also commits to convening the partners into a management committee as might be required to deal with issues that extend the entire length of the river, thereby maintaining the working relationship.

4. Management approach

Outside of the partnership themselves, a reasonable management approach was also critical to the success of the initiative. We developed an approach that requires all river citizens to incorporate into their own responsibilities common goals that reflect the values of the river.

“The goal of the Hayes River Management Plan is to complement and apply existing processes for cooperation and integrated resources management that will recognize, promote and sustain the natural heritage, cultural heritage and recreational values for which the Hayes River was nominated to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.”

In this we recognize that, for the most part, the tools we need to manage the river as a CHR already exist. What we, and others who use these tools, need to do is apply these tools in respect to the CHR values. This means knowing the values more fully and having an improved understanding of the sensitivity of the values.

This management approach was a critical part of the process because it was intended to be the way for people to share in creating and embracing a vision of the Hayes to help guide their own activities in the future. The approach was inclusive and non-threatening, even to industry (with a bit of convincing). It is an approach that will help the people who call the Hayes “home” to manage it as a CHR. We must remember the Hayes is the water they drink, the highway they travel, the food they eat, their history and culture, their recreation and their future.

Conclusions:

The process to designate the Hayes has proven to be successful. In addition to achieving the designation of the river that all partners sought, a working relationship amongst the partners has been strengthened and will be useful for implementing the management plan. With designation achieved we will take a bit of a breather now, but look forward to continuing the partnerships as we implement the plan and monitor the river.

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