

An Ecosystem Approach to the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River Basin

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Introduction to the Session

Several hundred years ago, European intruders perceived the Great Lakes Basin as a cornucopia of natural wealth in a healthful, pleasant geographic and climatic setting, and inhabited by natives who were generally more hospitable than combative toward the intruders. By the 1960s much of the natural wealth — forests, fish, soils, — had been badly overexploited and major areas of the waters, coastal zone and inland parts of the Basin had been degraded ecologically. The forms of industry and commerce that had been the proximate agents of the ecosystemic debasement had become technologically obsolete, economically inefficient and socially unacceptable. Centres of cities in the Great Lakes region were generally urban slums. Numerous treaties that European intruders had made with people of the First Nations had been violated to the disadvantage of the First Nations.

In retrospect we may note that a re-orientation toward sustainable redevelopment occurred here as a joint result of a number of unco-ordinated reform activities of the 1960s. Ecological, socio-cultural and economic reforms have been proceeding in parallel since then, — generally in a way that was mutually supportive but not explicitly so. The 1980s brought some devolution of responsibility from the federal level to lower levels of government with respect to issues of sub-basin scale and acceptance of new responsibilities of larger continental and global scales. The anti-reform efforts of the federal politics of the 1980s were generally unsuccessful in the Great Lakes Basin, but did act to slow the rate of progress of reform. The 1987 report of the U.N. Brundtland Commission provided a renewed impetus to reform and especially toward a coalescing of the various separate reform initiatives of the 1960s. Policy guidelines for the natural environment and renewable resources are coming to include the usual swimmable-drinkable-fishable set related to water quality but also the sustainable-enjoyable-equitable set related to ecosystem integrity and consistent with the Brundtland recommendations. There are fears that as global stresses build their effects will exacerbate the only half-resolved effects of the earlier local and regional stresses.