

A Coherent Vision for the Great Lakes- St. Lawrence River Basin Ecosystem

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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. By the 1960s much of the natural wealth - forests, fish, soils - had been badly overexploited and major water, coastal zone and inland parts of the area had been reduced to ecological slums. The forms of industry and commerce that had been the proximate agents of the ecosystem debasement had become technologically obsolete, economically inefficient and socially unacceptable.

In retrospect we may note that a reorientation toward sustainable development occurred here as a joint result of a number of uncoordinated 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. The anti-reform efforts of the federal politics of this decade 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 initiatives of the 1960s. Thus commitments to social equity, cultural dignity, economic sustainability and ecological integrity are beginning to come together in the 1990s; a commitment to "ecosystem integrity" involves all of these.

This melding of reforms is occurring at a time when global environmental threats are replacing local ones. What kinds of visions and policy guidelines are now realistic for the Great Lakes basin ecosystem? Basin-wide governance is beginning to address this broad, complex challenge, and current initiatives will be described.