

Ottawa River cleaner than many capital rivers around world: experts

BY JEN LAHEY, OPENFILE AUGUST 12, 2012



Chloe Despatie, age 9, and friend Rob Mann, have some fun in the water at Westboro Beach in July.

Photograph by: Mike Carrocetto, Ottawa Citizen

Meredith Brown says that the Ottawa River is one of the cleanest urban rivers in the world.

Brown, the Ottawa Riverkeeper, says the fact that the urban river is open to swimmers is “extraordinary and rare” among urban rivers, when compared to rivers that run through other capital cities around the globe.

Oliver M. Brandes, the co-director of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria, says waterways are the reason cities sprung up in the first place.

“The fact that these big systems are there is why the city is there,” he says. “Co-existence is part of the history of the city, because of transportation routes, which was obviously critically important, but also for the ability to trade, to interact, and then to reap all these economic and social benefits that come with that—and then to be able to grow.”

But the urban development that sprung up around, say, the Ottawa River, or Washington D.C.’s Potomac River, or the Thames River in London, U.K., have had very specific effects on those waterways.

“Probably the two most obvious are direct pollution, so manufacturing or what we would call economic activity. But the other one, which is equally important but more subtle, is what we would call the hardening of the landscape,” says Brandes. “As the landscape becomes hardened, it sheds water in entirely different ways, and that has a significant and severe impact on the waterways.”

Despite the Ottawa River’s relatively clean status, it’s not without its problems, says Brown, who is currently working on a research project entitled “The Capital Rivers Project”.

“The Ottawa River has a little bit of every threat you can imagine, from sewage to agriculture, dams, nuclear, you know, we’ve got it all, we’ve got a lot of it,” she says. “But we also have a fairly low population density and a huge watershed, so we’ve got that going for us.”

“And so, in terms of water quality and recreational water quality, you have to choose your time and place ... and you can swim in the

Ottawa River in the nation's capital. You know? That's pretty great," though she does express concern that there is "no management plan, no conservation plan, no action plan," for the Ottawa River.

The city's pursuing its own Ottawa River Action Plan, of course. But that only deals with Ottawa's interaction with the river, and Brown says no matter how many jurisdictions along the river develop their own plans, there's no comprehensive strategy in place for the whole watershed.

Brown says that the Ottawa River is home to some rare animals, including some species of mussels. She says, however, that we can do better when it comes to protecting such endangered species as the American eel, which used to be plentiful in the river but are no longer—despite the discovery of a swarm of eels in early August. She also says that the lake sturgeon is a threatened species in the Ottawa River.

In Washington D.C., efforts to reduce pollution and make the urban Potomac River swimmable and fishable all year are not enough, according to the 2011 "The State of the Nation's River", a report issued by the Potomac Conservancy.

That report notes that each day, the Potomac is the "victim of poor development and agricultural practices, inadequate runoff controls and insufficient sewage treatment [which] allow a wide range of contaminants to flow into the Potomac, threatening both river life and the water we drink." It also noted that "despite substantive efforts, water quality in the Potomac has not improved in the last decade."

Overall, the report rated the Potomac River's health a D. Swimming is prohibited.

Washington's ambitious "Vision for a Sustainable D.C." sets the bold goal of making the Potomac River—and all other urban waterways in the district—swimmable and fishable by 2032.

The Thames River, which runs through London, U.K., was declared biologically dead in 1957. Over the past few decades, it has since been rejuvenated into a living, breathing home for a variety of animal species, some of them rare.

Swimming without a permit, though, is prohibited by the Port of London Authority. A guide produced by the Thames Estuary Partnership for visitors planning activities around the Thames warns of the risks posed by treated sewage effluent, which may carry risky viruses, along with raw sewage, which may also be discharged into the Thames in the London area (as it is in the Ottawa River).

The guide warns visiting groups to use gloves when performing such activities as litter pickups or working with wildlife; to cover broken skin if it will come into contact with the river water; and to maintain good personal hygiene, which includes a reminder "not to eat, drink, rub eyes, suck fingers, poke fingers in ears, etc. after contact with the water."

Brandes says many cities with rivers that run through them are now seeking to restore their urban waterways.

"As the city, the society, the civilization, grows around it, there's direct impacts on the waterway, and that is what is interesting," he says. "How in a modern sense, [the city] is being reintegrated into that watershed landscape."

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