

Canadians thirsty for a national water strategy

Published on Saturday July 28, 2012

Jesse Baltutis and Bob Sandford

In the future, prosperous nations will be those with enough water for food, cities, industry and nature — and know how to ensure each gets the amount it needs. But Canada's prosperity is at risk because our water is increasingly at risk. Indeed, there is a growing awareness that the way we currently manage our freshwater resources poses significant challenges to our ability to ensure the future environmental well-being and economic prosperity of our country.

Jurisdictions across the country face water-related concerns. Yet, Ontario has been one of the most progressive provinces in driving innovation in the water-quality sector, with a legislative framework that addresses various aspects of water management, including the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#), the [Clean Water Act](#), and most recently, the [Water Opportunities and Water Conservation Act](#).

Ontario's good news is trumped by overarching concerns across the rest of Canada. They include critical supply and quality challenges related to a changing climate and increasing population pressures, accompanied by a growing concern for our watersheds, which are vital for sustainable and prosperous communities, yet suffer from overuse and poorly planned development.

Despite these threats, many Canadians believe in the myth of "limitless water." We are among the world's most prolific users — and abusers — of water. According to Environment Canada, over a 10-year period — from 1996 to 2006 — our collective water withdrawals increased by 13 per cent. Even more alarming is the rate of withdrawal between 1972 and 2006 — a whopping 112.5 per cent increase.

Yet water is so deeply woven into the very fabric of what it means to be Canadian that in a 2012 RBC Water Attitudes poll Canadians overwhelmingly agreed that it is our most valuable natural resource.

Canada needs a national water strategy. This was the message Canadians gave during the [Forum for Leadership on Water](#) (FLOW)'s cross-Canada water discussion tour held last fall, as national water expert and FLOW co-chair Bob Sandford visited 16 cities to share lessons learned from the Northwest Territories water stewardship strategy. During his visit to Toronto, Sandford talked with students, community members and local water champions about how the innovative N.W.T. strategy could serve as a model for water policy reform in the rest of Canada.

The cross-Canada tour made clear the urgent need for more discussion about what a national water strategy might look like, the attributes it must possess, and the priorities it must emphasize to confront competing demands for finite water resources.

One need only look to the floods and droughts experienced in Manitoba in 2011, which caused almost \$1 billion in damage, to recognize the scale of the challenges we are facing. Regardless of whether we are on the "wet" coast of British Columbia, the vast expanse of the N.W.T. arctic tundra, or the burgeoning technology centres of southern Ontario, we must rethink our approach to managing water. Pan-Canadian water challenges demand and deserve a comprehensive response.

The recently released report [Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future](#) captures the essence of what Sandford heard from panellists and audience members during the tour.

The report, co-authored and published by the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria and the Adaptation to Climate Change Team (ACT) at Simon Fraser University, illustrates that concerned Canadians are increasingly aware of the need for a national strategy, especially because water management decisions based on historical climate trends are no longer sufficient to address the challenges surrounding future water management.

The national tour confirmed what many in the water policy community in Canada already know — lawmakers need a more fundamental analysis of how we use our water supplies, why we make certain choices to use water in the ways we do, how we will plan for the future, and what our



Paddlers on the Don River. Water is so deeply woven into the fabric of what it means to be Canadian that in a 2012 poll Canadians overwhelmingly agreed that it is our most valuable natural resource. (May 1, 2011)

COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

governance structures will need to look like.

Spurred by the Walkerton crisis of 2000, progressive water policy reforms in Ontario have encouraged innovation in water use and have led to a broad recognition of the strategic role water plays in the economy — and, crucially, the deadly impacts it can have on our communities when not responsibly managed.

While development is necessary to ensure a robust and healthy economy, it is essential to ensure water for nature first. Water must be seen as more than an economic input, as it holds tremendous ecological, spiritual and sentimental value. Through concerted efforts at water conservation and demand-management policies, we can begin to bring water back into the public consciousness and show the link between healthy watersheds and healthy communities.

More than any other issue in Canada, water has the power to unite Canadians, transcending differences in political philosophy, ethnicity, or geographical location. We all share the most basic of needs: clean water for our families and communities. To provide for this, it is critical to have healthy ecological systems that function within responsibly managed watersheds. Our natural environment has been left to us in trust for future generations, who will likely be faced with far greater environmental challenges and increasing economic and social uncertainty.

By clearly identifying government's role — and crucially, enabling community and citizen engagement, Canada will signal that it is serious about tackling those threats and challenges to our water resources that we so often associate with tomorrow, yet have started to rear their head today.

Bob Sandford is EPCOR Chair of the Canadian Partnership Initiative of the UN Water for Life Decade, director of the Western Watersheds Climate Research Collaborative, and co-chair of the Forum for Leadership On Water (FLOW).

Jesse Baltutis is the Water Policy and Governance Research Assistant with the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance.