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Niagara Parks Commission, Regional Institute - University of Buffalo: University of New York (SUNY), Great Lakes Center - Buffalo State: University of New York (SUNY), the Environmental Sustainability Research Unit (Brock University), Niagara College, Western New York Land Conservancy, the Niagara Restoration Council, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, Kerry Mitchel and Jocelyn Baker (unaffiliated)

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**DATE:** June 18, 2020

**REPORT TO :** Office of the Regional Chair, Jim Bradley

**REPORT FROM:** Niagara River Ramsar Designation Binational Steering Committee

**SUBJECT:** Niagara River Ramsar Designation Endorsement

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## REQUEST

That the Niagara Region endorse the proposed nomination of the Niagara River as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site).

## PURPOSE:

The purpose of this submission is to provide a refresher on the proposed Niagara River Ramsar nomination process and seek the Niagara Regions endorsement for this designation.

## KEY FACTS

- A nomination for the Niagara River (wetted portion) to become a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site) is being sought in order to recognize the importance of the Niagara River's contribution to the global natural environment.
- The U.S. portion of the Niagara River was successfully designated as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site) on October 3, 2019.
- When Canada fulfills the procedural requirements for designation, the Niagara River will become the first transboundary Ramsar site in the America's. To date, of the 2,391 global Ramsar sites, only 22 qualify as transboundary (shared between more than one country).

- A Ramsar designation as verified by Environment and Climate Change Canada will not impose any additional regulations or restrictions on property owners within or adjacent to the Niagara River Ramsar site.
- A Ramsar designation will open up greater opportunities for expanding tourism, including eco-tourism in Niagara, while promoting increased public awareness of the River's importance to global biodiversity. In addition, the collaborative work of the binational Ramsar steering committee and its partners will continue to foster cooperation between the United States and Canada to ensure the wise-use conservation both within and around the Niagara River Corridor.
- Since 2013 meaningful and inclusive Ramsar designation engagement has taken place with the Niagara River community on both sides of the border. This includes over 50 public participation and partnership opportunities consisting of engaging with our Indigenous partners, stakeholder town hall meetings, science cafes, council presentations and community group meetings. Significant student research resources from Niagara College, Niagara University, Brock University, and University of Buffalo have been supporting designation efforts.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Ramsar Convention is a voluntary global framework signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. The purpose of the Convention is to promote the conservation and wise-use of water-based ecosystems, including wetlands, lakes, and rivers. The wise-use conservation of water ecosystems is promoted through the designation of qualifying sites as Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance. Although a Ramsar site designation is not a United Nations (UN) designation, the UN is a collaborator and the Repository for the Convention through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO.

The Ramsar Convention includes 171 member nations designating 2,391 sites, totaling over 253 million hectares of Wetlands of International Importance. Ramsar sites form the largest network of designated areas globally. Canada entered into the Ramsar Convention in 1981, currently with 37 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance, covering an area of 13 million hectares. The United States entered into the Ramsar Convention in 1986, currently with 40 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance (including the US portion of the Niagara River), covering an area of 18 million hectares.

Signatory countries to the Ramsar Convention agree to:

- 1) Designate sites as Wetlands of International Importance;
- 2) Encourage the wise-use conservation of water-based ecosystems;
- 3) Engage in international cooperation.

In order for a site to qualify for Ramsar nomination, it must meet at least **one** of the following nine criteria:

1. Is representative, rare, or unique;
2. Supports vulnerable, endangered or threatened species;
3. Supports keystone or endemic species;
4. Supports species at a critical stage in their life cycles (i.e. migration, breeding);
5. Supports 20,000 or more water birds;
6. Supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species of waterbird;
7. Supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish species;
8. An important food source, spawning area, nursery, or migration path for fish;
9. Supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of wetland-dependent non-avian animal species. (Something that is not a bird).

In Canada, the Niagara River meets all 9 criteria. Less than 1% of the 2,391 global Ramsar sites meet all 9 criteria. With this in mind, practitioners working on Niagara River restoration and research (in Canada and the United States) came together in 2013 to discuss the feasibility of a Ramsar nomination for the River. Unanimous agreement concluded, a Ramsar designation for the Niagara River would acknowledge the River's contribution to global biodiversity. A Ramsar designation will provide an opportunity to change the legacy of the Niagara River from one of the most historically degraded places in North America to a globally celebrated area of ecological significance. A binational steering committee was formed to help navigate the Ramsar nomination and designation process.

The Ramsar Convention **is voluntary and does not impose regulation** or restrict user rights through the designation process. Each signatory country to the Ramsar Convention has its own procedure for Ramsar site designation and encouraging wise-use conservation. Both Canada and the United States do not impose regulation to Ramsar sites, using the Ramsar Convention as a voluntary “hand-shake” framework to promote the conservation of water-based ecosystems.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

Environment and Climate Change Canada oversees the Ramsar site nomination process through the Policy Document: *Nomination and Listing of Wetlands of International Importance in Canada: Procedures Manual*.

### **Process for Niagara River Ramsar Designation (Canada):**

#### **1) Selection of a site nominator:**

- A site nominator is the appropriate Administrative Authority (The Niagara Parks Commission).

## 2) Completion of Canadian nomination package requirements:

- A completed Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS), verifying the criteria met.
- Written endorsement from the Province of Ontario.
- Letters of endorsement from stakeholders and partners (federal, provincial, regional municipalities, Indigenous communities, river users, etc.) will strengthen the nomination.

## **Where is Canada in the designation process?**

### Selection of a site nominator:

- In 2015, the Niagara Parks Commission Board of Directors approved the site nominator role in principle pending an acceptable legal review which has been completed (awaiting final Commission review).

### Completion of a Canadian nomination package:

- A Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS), verifying the site meets all nine criteria has been completed.
- Written endorsement from the Province of Ontario is pending.
- To date, Canadian endorsements have been received from Ontario Power Generation, the City of Niagara Falls (Ontario), the Town of Fort Erie, the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority and various conservation and river user groups.
- Engagement has taken place with the Niagara Falls and Peace Bridge Commissions, who are not required to issue formal support, rather are to be made aware of the designation effort.
- **Endorsements are outstanding from the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Regional Municipality of Niagara.**

## **NOMINATION SUBMISSION**

Although the Niagara River Binational Ramsar Steering Committee is pursuing the first transboundary Ramsar site designation in the America's, both Canada and the United States must submit a separate nomination package to the Ramsar Secretariat, as each country has different procedural requirements. The transboundary designation occurs at the end of the process, once each country has met the procedural requirements for designation. It is possible to designate only one side of the river. The U.S. portion of the Niagara River was officially designated as a Ramsar site on October 3, 2019. Dual designation is required for transboundary status.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications to the Niagara Region associated with this report or the designation of the Niagara River as a Wetland of International Importance.

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Next year (2021) marks the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the signing of the Ramsar Convention. The Ramsar Secretariat is keen to see the Niagara River realized as the first Transboundary Ramsar designation in both North and South America (America's). As the oldest "modern" Convention, Ramsar is rooted in its voluntary approach to wise-use conservation. Without Canada's firm commitment, which includes the Niagara Region, dual designation will not be achieved leaving only the U.S. side of the river as designated.

## RELATED DOCUMENTS

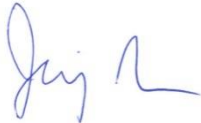
1. Environment and Climate Change Canada Ramsar Designation Letter
2. Niagara River Ramsar Binational Steering Committee Endorsement Request
3. Niagara Region Ramsar designation resolution example

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# NIAGARA RIVER RAMSAR DESIGNATION

## Briefing Note

### BACKGROUND

The Ramsar Convention is a voluntary global framework signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. The purpose of the Convention is to promote the conservation and wise-use of water-based ecosystems, including wetlands, lakes, and rivers. The wise-use conservation of water ecosystems is promoted through the designation of qualifying sites as Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance. Although a Ramsar Site designation is not a United Nations (UN) designation, the UN is a collaborator and the Repository for the Convention through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The Ramsar Convention includes 171 member nations designating 2,391 sites, totalling over 253 million hectares of Wetlands of International Importance. Ramsar sites form the largest network of designated areas globally. Canada entered into the Ramsar Convention in 1981, and has currently 37 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance, covering an area of 13 million hectares. The United States entered into the Ramsar Convention in 1986, currently with 40 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance (including the US portion of the Niagara River), covering an area of 18 million hectares.

Signatory countries to the Ramsar Convention agree to:

- 1) Designate sites as Wetlands of International Importance;
- 2) Encourage the wise-use conservation of water-based ecosystems and their resources;
- 3) Engage in international cooperation.

In order for a site to qualify for Ramsar nomination, it must meet at least **one** of the following nine criteria:

1. Is representative, rare, or unique;
2. Supports vulnerable, endangered or threatened species;
3. Supports keystone or endemic species;
4. Supports species at a critical stage in their life cycles (i.e. migration, breeding);
5. Supports 20,000 or more water birds;
6. Supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species of waterbird;
7. Supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish species;
8. An important food source, spawning area, nursery, or migration path for fish;
9. Supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of wetland-dependent non-avian animal species. (Something that is not a bird).

In Canada, the Niagara River meets all 9 criteria. Less than 1% of the over 2,300 global Ramsar sites meet all 9 criteria. With this in mind, practitioners working on Niagara River restoration and research (in Canada and the United States) came together in 2013 to discuss the feasibility of a Ramsar nomination for the River. Unanimous agreement concluded that a Ramsar designation for the Niagara River would acknowledge the River's contribution to global biodiversity. A Ramsar designation will provide an opportunity to change the legacy of the Niagara River from one of the most historically degraded places in North America to a globally celebrated area of ecological significance. A binational steering committee was formed to help navigate the Ramsar nomination and designation process.

The Ramsar Convention **is voluntary and does not impose regulation or restrict user rights** through the designation process. Each signatory country to the Ramsar Convention has its own procedure for Ramsar site designation and encouraging wise-use conservation. Both Canada and the United States do not impose regulation to Ramsar sites, using the Ramsar Convention as a voluntary framework to promote the conservation of water-based ecosystems.

In Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, represented by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), oversees the Ramsar site nomination process through the Policy Document: *Nomination and Listing of Wetlands of International Importance in Canada: Procedures Manual*. In the United States, the Federal Government, represented by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services oversees the Ramsar nomination process.

The Ramsar Secretariat determines which nominated sites are to be included on the *List of Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance*. Although the Binational Niagara River Ramsar Steering Committee is pursuing the first transboundary Ramsar site designation in the America's, both Canada and the United States must submit a separate nomination package to the Ramsar Secretariat, as each country has different procedural requirements. The transboundary designation occurs at the end of the process, once each country has met the procedural requirements for designation. It is possible to designate only one side of the river. The U.S. portion of the Niagara River was officially designated as a Ramsar site on October 3, 2019. Dual designation is required for transboundary status.

### **Process for Niagara River Ramsar Designation (Canada):**

#### **1) Selection of a site nominator:**

- A site nominator is the appropriate Administrative Authority (parties holding title to land or water).

#### **2) Completion of Canadian nomination package requirements:**

- A completed Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS), verifying at least one of the nine criteria is met.
- Written endorsement from the Province of Ontario, represented by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (OMNRF).
- Agreement from the landowner (The Niagara Parks Commission).
- Letters of support from stakeholders and partners (federal, provincial, regional municipalities, Indigenous partners, river users, academic institutions, etc.) to strengthen the nomination.

### **Where is Canada in the designation process?**

#### **Selection of a site nominator:**

- In 2015, the Niagara Parks Commission Board of Directors approved the site nominator role in principle pending an acceptable legal review which is currently being completed.

#### **Completion of a Canadian nomination package:**

- A Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS), verifying the site meets all nine criteria necessary for designation has been initiated. The species documentation list is completed.
- Written endorsement from the Province of Ontario, represented by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is required.
- To date, Canadian endorsements have been received from Ontario Power Generation, the City of Niagara Falls (Ontario), the Town of Fort Erie, the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, Niagara College, Land Care Niagara, the Niagara Restoration Council and the Niagara Falls Nature Club.
- Endorsements are required from the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Regional Municipality of Niagara.
- Engagement has taken place with the Niagara Falls and Peace Bridge Commissions, who are not required to issue formal support, rather are to be made aware of the designation effort.

Engagement with Indigenous partners, stakeholders and community members is on-going. Over 50 community engagement initiatives have taken place to date (for both U.S. and Canada).