WATER RECREATION

A paper presented at the Canadian Institute of Planners Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, August 6, 1979

by

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While recreational use of water may not appear to have the planning urgency of other uses, such as supply and energy production, it deserves much greater priority than it usually gets. The following discussion is intended to alert land and water use planners to the significance of water recreation.

1. Water is the most powerful natural resource for recreation.

From the standpoint of recreation in its broadest sense (physical and mental), water is the most important natural resource asset. While forests, climate, mountains and wildlife are important, surface water, in the form of streams, rivers, waterfalls, coastlines, lakes and ponds is even of greater significance. As people, we want to be on it, in it or near it.

And, the element of water has ancient roots. It has been important for thousands of years and to many civilizations. Not only was water the key to transportation and early settlement, it also held mystic, romantic and esthetic properties. Evidence is abundant even today, especially in Europe. Rivers in the ancient cities, such as Paris, Vienna and Amsterdam, offer physical and landscape linkage, not barriers, between segments of the cities.

Both Canada and the United States have exploited Niagara Falls as a major tourism-recreation feature. Visitors are awed by the magnitude and
audio-visual power of such a spectacle. Both countries have experienced explosive growth in boating, swimming, beach use, fishing, cruising, diving and other recreational water uses. Water is appealing to both sexes, all ages, all income brackets and all occupational groups.

In addition, we are discovering the touristic and recreational values of many waterfront and land uses that were not established primarily for recreation. The bustle of waterfront shipping, the romance of watercraft in the harbor and the interest in waterfront nostalgia and history are increasingly appealing to visitors. Much of the esthetic appeal has come from heightened interest in amateur photography.

If we don't have natural waters, we create water recreational facilities. Swimming pools, reservoirs and fountains are increasingly finding their place in urban and rural settings.

Water is the foundation for a great amount of recreation, now as well as in the past.

2. Water is a badly abused natural resource.

After the rise of environmental quality as a religion throughout North America, it seems redundant to emphasize the ways surface water has been abused. But, the problems do not seem to go away.

We still hear of new seepages of toxic substances. We hear of new levels of industrial and municipal waste in streams, lakes and oceans. We learn of new dumpings of PCB's. Apparently, the battle against water pollution has not been won.

Among the abuses of water for recreation, few are as serious as that made along the water's edge by recreation, itself. Especially along waterfronts and coastal areas, highrise apartments and condominiums create massive concrete walls that block out both vistas and access for all lands behind
the walls. Backlands are depressed in appeal, utility and even economic value. It is a pleasure to see citizen battles, and winnings, against such developments in recent years. Commendable is the visual plane legislation in Halifax that prevents future encroachment on the views from the historic Citadel.

Much work is yet to be done to ensure water quality for recreation.

3. **Urban water resources are special.**

Because they can enhance the lives of so many millions of people, urban water resources have great potential, if developed. Exemplary are several Canadian cities.

Victoria, British Columbia, has for years been extremely sensitive to its harbor and waterfront esthetics and recreation. Hence, it has had little need for wholesale redevelopment. The pleasures of being in, walking in and observing the waterfront zone have been maintained for many years. Few other waterfront communities have so successfully mixed harbor use, parks, government, lodging, business and transportation. The esthetics of night reflections across the harbor is as dramatic as any landscape today.

Another relatively recent development utilizing water is Ontario Place, an imaginatively designed pleasure spot derived from past abuse and ugliness. Here can be found a delightful escape from congestion and city tension with opportunities for waterfront fun for all ages. Creative playgrounds, restful park areas, theaters, entertainment, colorful marine development and a variety of food services now add much to the lives of both local residents and visitors.

Stratford, Ontario, has turned itself inward from busy streets to the central ribbon of parkland and recreational uses along and on the Avon River.
Gardens, open space and focal points for festivals and events are now beginning to turn adjacent businesses around. And, both visitors and citizens of Ottawa can gain much insight and personal pleasure by touring the Ottawa River alongside the city because of the improved design and development of the waterfront.

In Texas, the San Antonio River Walk, a landscaped horseshoe bend covering only a few downtown blocks, has completely reversed the social and economic status of the city core. Other locations, such as Georgetown, (Washington, D.C.), Mystic Seaport and Charleston, have turned waterfront and downtown depression into prosperity with well-planned recreational, touristic and esthetic redevelopment.

Urban recreational waters are special, not because they are big but because they are urban.

4. **Rivers and streams require special corridor planning.**

Redeveloping a few blocks of waterfront is one thing but converting an extensive ribbon of land and water for many miles into recreational use invites many problems even though it has great potential.

In New York State, park and transportation agencies are beginning to link segments of old commercial transport canals into recreational waterways. But planning for such uses is being met with many obstacles of jurisdictional turf protection, conflicting policy and provincial attitudes. Progress at a few pilot locations along the Erie Canal is currently taking place.

In Canada, much greater progress has been made in converting the Trent-Severn, Rideau and Quinte commercial canals to recreational waterways. All locks are operational and the waterways are completely useable for a variety
of watercraft. Excellent parks have been developed at lock sites. While the waterways are providing increased use, improved linkage with features alongside (historic sites, natural resource attractions) as well as lodging and food service is needed.

Great potential lies ahead with greater planning integration of land and water uses throughout the full length of waterway corridors.

5. **Commitment to recreational water development is needed.**

Obvious to the student of political science but less practiced by recreational water developers is commitment. Many locations, especially those in many cities, have obvious physical assets. Yet, nothing is being done to convert rough resources into fine cultural complexes. Research shows that this is not due to lack of technology, design ability, or management knowhow. It is usually due to lack of commitment.

The San Antonio River Walk, now so popular with millions of people, would not yet be available if the local citizenry had waited for that new authority to plan and create it. Through a series of individual planning efforts over many years, members of several agencies pulled together and became committed to the concept of a river walk. The San Antonio River Authority controls the water flow and quality. The Parks Department maintains a narrow ribbon of landscape beside the river. The Paseo del Rio Association protects the interests of the business establishments along the river. The Conservation Society keeps watch over the natural and cultural resources and the River Walk Commission coordinates both development and management.

6. **Research and planning are essential.**

It appears that, in spite of sporadic accomplishments in both the United
States and Canada, water recreation continues to receive very low priority. Federal, state and provincial agencies seem to be preoccupied with other matters. Certainly, other water uses are important but citizens of both countries in recent years have increasingly placed high values on the quality of life, especially on recreation and leisure. But, the mandates of few public agencies give water recreation more than token consideration. No one is asking for undue consideration--just an equal place when water-related decisions are made.

Much of the lack-luster dilemma of water recreation is due to the lack of adequate documentation. Too little research and too much opinion seem to dominate. More study needs to be devoted to factors of physical potential, recreational behavior of visitors and public support by local citizens. One study of 100 cities in the U.S. with water resource potential produced the following guideline factors:

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<tr>
<th>Motivating forces</th>
<th>Natural resources</th>
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<td>Organizational Structure</td>
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<td>Existing development</td>
<td>Economic/legal controls</td>
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<td>Flood protection</td>
<td>Overall concepts</td>
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<td>Transportation and Access</td>
<td>Project design</td>
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A final conclusion:

Exciting, valuable and enriching experiences for people as well as economic spinoffs await better and more development of water resources for recreation. Water recreation is not a frivolity that will go away if ignored long enough. Just because it has not enjoyed a strong constituency for planning and development is no proof of its unimportance. On the contrary, water recreation should have priority equal to all other uses when water planning and implementation decisions are being made.