



Gatineau River
Watershed
Committee
www.COMGA.org

Gatineau River Watershed

Diagnosis and Issues



Summary

October 2007

Cover page: Gatineau River, view from Pagan Power Station, end of winter 2007
Photo courtesy of Giorgio Vecco



INTRODUCTION

The Gatineau River Watershed Committee (COMGA) undertook a water resource diagnosis of the territory within the framework of the integrated Water Management Policy established by the *Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et des Parcs* of Quebec.

COMGA serves as a “round table” for all the players concerned with water and water-related issues at the municipal, economic, industrial, community and governmental levels. Its mission is the protection, improvement and development of the water resource of the Gatineau River watershed as well as the natural resources and special habitats that are associated with it within a sustainable process. This process is as follows: the establishment, implementation and follow-up of a Water Master Plan for the watershed, the diagnosis being one of the initial steps.

WHAT IS A DIAGNOSIS?

According to the definition of the *Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et des Parcs* of Quebec, a diagnosis is a study of the problems connected to the water and to the associated systems. These problems can concern surface waters (quantity, quality), ground waters (quantity, quality), drinking water, aquatic milieu, wetlands and habitats etc. Contrary to the portrait which describes the current situation (causes of the problems), the diagnosis analyzes their effects (consequences) and establishes a relationship between causes and effects of the problems.

During the last months, COMGA got down to this task, that is to consider the effects of the issues raised in the Portrait of the Gatineau River watershed published in January, 2007. To tackle the question, COMGA decided to split this diagnosis into three sections – a theoretical analysis, public consultations and a questionnaire – with the objective of obtaining varied sources of information and thus offering a comprehensive analysis.

Theoretical Diagnosis

A master's degree student, Anne-Marie Saint-Laurent, was tasked with the first stage, that is to establish a theoretical diagnosis. This university research gathered the essential knowledge and the basic facts for identifying the sources of the problems and their ongoing effects, and then to identify the possible priority issues connected with the quality of the water.

Public Consultations

The public consultations took place from April to May at Chelsea, Low, Wakefield and Maniwaki. Thanks to these consultations, we engaged users in large numbers pertaining to the water resource of the Gatineau River watershed. They shared their concerns and the way they envisaged the problems in their environment. The diagnosis not only allowed COMGA to broaden its knowledge, but also to make a local analysis of the various situations. Another benefit of these meetings was the networking COMGA was able to establish between the users of the water resource who, after all, are the ones to whom COMGA will have to engage in order to solve the problems pointed out.

Questionnaire

Knowing that dates and places of the public consultations could not be convenient for all, COMGA created a questionnaire which it posted on its web site (and which was also distributed to the participants of the public consultations) to obtain the opinion of the population as to what the problems were, and their relative severity, in the Gatineau River watershed. The answers obtained came to confirm the consistency of problems already raised in the theoretical analysis and during the public consultations. Thanks to the questionnaire, we were able to start quantifying the most marked concerns of the respondents, which served to clarify priorities.

PRIORITY ISSUES

To draw the list of the priority issues which will be reflected in the future water user contracts, foreseen for 2008, COMGA established the following criteria: concurrence between the theory, the consultations and the questionnaire, the financial and practical feasibility, and a consistent level of concern.

As just mentioned, common themes were found across the results of the theoretical diagnosis, the public consultations and questionnaire, which helped confirm the challenges and priorities.

Nevertheless, not only is it necessary that issues be clear and perceived as urgent or a real need, it is also necessary to be able to act on problems to improve the situation. It is therefore important that proposed actions be achievable both in financial and practical terms, and seen as the means whereby water resource management objectives will be met.

Finally, the proposed solutions have to provide for the overall common good and not benefit or negatively impact specific users. In other words, it is necessary to take measures that benefit the most users without creating negative impacts on other people.

1. Assertion and Improvement of the Quality of Water

While the water quality in the Gatineau River watershed is generally good today, we must ensure that we maintain the actual level or improve it. The purpose of an integrated water management plan is to have not only responsible use of the resource, but also to protect and ensure its quality, as one of the priority interests. To achieve this, it will be necessary to educate the population on norms and regulations linked to the sustainable use of water and against irresponsible behaviours. The proposed water user contracts will stipulate conditions which will guarantee a sustainable use of water by which users must abide in order to maintain and improve the quality of the water.

2. Reducing Degradation and Erosion of Shoreline

To reduce shoreline erosion, speed limits for boats, restoration of shorelines and guidelines for cottagers pertaining to bank protection, are some of the measures available. Any action plan will have to consider these priorities. Since shoreline erosion increases runoff, many problems stem from this: the increase in turbidity affects water quality indicators, and the inflow of excessive amounts of nutrients stimulates the proliferation of cyanobacteria and invasive plants. To establish this issue as a priority will have a long-term beneficial outcome on the quality of the water resource and natural habitats within the watershed of the Gatineau River.

3. Control and Prevention of Cyanobacteria

The recent proliferation of cyanobacteria and the public interest in this problem demands that COMGA establish priorities regarding public education and awareness and the publication of pertinent information and means of preventing the bloom. It is necessary to inform the population concerning cyanobacteria and the associated risks, especially by indicating to people, the sources of phosphorus and by recommending means to reduce emissions in order to modify their behaviors and eliminate this form of pollution. Appropriate actions will result in a better control of cyanobacteria and maybe, save our lakes from eutrophication.

4. Control and Prevention of Invasive Plants

Invasive plants worry users of the water resource just as much as cyanobacteria, not only because of their impact on water quality, but also because of the negative consequences on recreotouristic uses of the water body. The population will have become better informed as to the provenance and the means of reproduction of these plants in order to prevent their proliferation and to slow down the eutrophication of the lakes.

5. Drawing the List of Information Sources and Data

Drawing the list of information sources and reliable data is of capital importance if we want to address all the issues. Such information and data will allow us to better qualify and quantify the ground and surface water resources within the watershed of the Gatineau River. They will also identify the sources of contamination and local problems allowing us to act effectively. Furthermore we need the complete picture to establish a precise and strong, long-term, integrated management plan with everyone's support within the watershed.