



GREAT LAKES **ECOREGION NETWORK**

RÉSEAU ÉCORÉGIONAL DES **GRANDS LACS** **ET DU SAINT-LAURENT**

GLEN Scoping interviews:

Synthesis Report

July 10, 2023 Final
(June 13, 2023 Original)

The Great Lakes Ecoregion Network (GLEN) is drawing near the completion of our first strategic plan. This multi-step planning effort includes: 1) focusing our mission, vision, and fundamental purposes; 2) assessing the need and feasibility for building and sustaining a new cross-border Great Lakes-St. Lawrence organization; 3) developing program priorities; and 4) determining operational structure, functions, and processes.

One critically important input to our exploration has been the 20 interviews that we conducted with a range of leaders in the Great Lakes basin from non-governmental environmental organizations, the funders community, and the Indigenous community, as well as youth, and long-standing Great Lakes leaders. This report pulls together the main messages from these scoping interviews in bullet form. We are sharing it because the findings may be valuable for anyone working on Great Lakes issues.

Please note: the following content highlights individual observations on a range of Great Lakes concerns. This report is not a GLEN position paper, nor should it be attributed as such. Many of our interviewees requested anonymity, and thus, participants are not identified in this report.

In this report, you will find occasional references to five “big” issue areas: climate change, toxics and radionuclides, agricultural impact, habitat and biodiversity, and landscape integrity and to our concept papers on these topics. Our planning team identified these five major drivers of ecological degradation in the Great Lakes as interrelated threats to Great Lakes ecological resilience. We surveyed our membership on these topics in March 2023. The results of that survey and the concept papers are available at

https://greatlakesecoregionnetwork.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/7/5/127517503/glen_survey_results_-_names_removed_march_18_2023.pdf.

Please also note, the compilation in this document does not include all input, but highlights comments and observations derived from all conversations. There are some redundancies across sections. This synthesis is intentionally qualitative in nature, but is rich with potent information.

What’s Working in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin?

- Many pointed to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) as a success, but noted that it isn’t driving enforcement or regulatory improvements/updates or working on transformative change.
- Many also noted the U.S. Infrastructure funds and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds and related opportunities to address water infrastructure and advance climate mitigation and planning.
- Responding to advocacy from the Great Lakes Network, Freshwater Future, the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, and others, the Canadian federal government recently announced that they have allocated \$420 million dollars for Great Lakes issues over ten years, with current expenditures at \$65 million per year.
- Increased cooperation among groups was noted by several.
- Mechanisms for ongoing bi-national cooperation (IJC, GLWQA, LAMPs) are working well in their function of sharing good information, dialog, priorities and determining a course of shared action for the watershed.
- The people-to-people diplomacy of civil society (Track Three Diplomacy)
- Several pointed out efforts to tell the stories of the Great Lakes in new and meaningful ways (including how local actions are resulting from regional efforts) have brought renewed pride and connection to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River watershed.

- More connections to waters through parks and a blue belt around Lakes is meaningful action. High level sewage treatment and swimmable water is building a growing recreational water community.
- One person involved in Buffalo’s Area of Concern said the AOCs have been a good vehicle for organizing and raising money. Another said AOC issues need an overhaul to be more protective of the waterfront in the future.

What’s *not* Working in the Great Lakes- St. Lawrence River basin?

- Actions to address agricultural sources of nutrient and other pollution.
- Toxics –PFAS are often noted as the highest profile chemical now, but far from alone.
- Failing to prioritize areas hit hardest by pollution, and the related environmental justice and equity challenges – “a legacy of racist policy that continues to play out.”
- “Calcified” structural issues, from racism to agricultural policy, to “old ways” of managing fish and wildlife, and barriers to action in existing institutional structures.
- “Access is not going well for all people; cleanups aren’t going in ways where people will be able to access the lake. Public trust doctrines. Our governments get side-tracked by the promise of jobs.”
- AOC strategies need an update to give priority to community and ecological needs over private economic development.
- Lack of political will and power to put regulations in place.
- Lakewide Action and Management Plans (LAMPS) are not being used to inform land use management decisions and policies.
- There is a significant and growing gap between the science and policy.
- Lack of citizen engagement, which is necessary to generate the political will to maintain resources for the ongoing work needed.
- Several people stressed dissatisfaction with the Great Lakes Executive Committee meetings and decision-making processes. One said: “The power all lies with ECCC and the U.S. EPA.” The so-called partners, “have no real role at GLEC.”
- Need new citizen assemblies tied to the watershed to institutionalize more ongoing civic engagement, could be using the Sociocracy decision making Model (circles within circles). This may need to be like Jury Duty – on the lottery system and compensated and expected, not just an altruistic volunteer choice if you have time after work because that limits the ability of people who are economically challenged.
- Public does not understand how decisions that are made by individuals, developers, governments impact the watershed, and then in turn impact their own well-being.
- Lack of understanding of legacy contaminants and the need for ongoing testing and work. Many who are in roles tasked with caring for the Great Lakes are approaching retirement – will anyone know what’s needed? How will knowledge be transferred to the next generation?

- Some said that we need to elevate the concept of stewardship and for people to see themselves as stewards and get involved in the process. It seems that the community of people who have been stewards have done it really well. This knowledge and involvement seems not to have been transferred to a new generation. There is a generational gap.
- One person spoke of the need to change the focus in our society from “rights” to “responsibilities.”

The Great Lakes movement

- Many leaders recognize that transformational leadership and policy changes are needed.
- We lack the sufficient public ethos (an over-arching collective ethical mandate) and passion to drive transformational change in major policy.
- Successful efforts have secured funding for restoration, infrastructure in the U.S., but root causes and policy and structural challenges have been difficult to surmount, and have rarely been funded. The situation has been similar in Canada, except that much less money has been allocated to the Great Lakes by governments in Canada.
- At least four key NGO leaders noted that a broken democratic process and/or the rise of global authoritarianism are critical, parallel, and interwoven challenges in the context of rallying public will and/or responsive government policy.
- At least six Great Lakes leaders talked about building power, re-kindling activism, and diversifying the movement as essential for advancing transformational strategies.
- Several leaders emphasized that we need to strengthen our relationships with indigenous communities, disadvantaged and under-represented communities, and youth.
- Because so many groups are now working on water infrastructure, affordability, community access, etc., several asked where these issues fit within our agenda.
- One noted that given the region’s emphasis on water infrastructure, drinking water, and access, there was less funding available for topics such as biodiversity and habitat.
- Several see the need to build the “muscle” for transformative long-term work. Generational changes in institutions, farming, etc., present opportunities now to leverage in the next decade.
- Several people said that a serious flaw in the Great Lakes movement is that the coordination in Canada on Great Lakes-St. Lawrence issues is very weak.
- The same people said that on the US side there is more coordination, i.e., through HOW, but that HOW is mainly, and successfully, involved in bringing funding to the GL basin for restoration. They stressed that in addition we need coordination of ENGOs across the US side of the GL basin on policy development, etc. They also said that inclusion of the community and local and regional groups in the coordination is essential, with them having equal roles in setting policies, etc.
- A recurring comment in interviews from different backgrounds was that non-government groups do not have access to enough funding to be able to achieve what they need to, and want to locally, let alone work on basin-wide Great Lakes issues.

- One person precisely summarized what we heard from so many people about the state of the Great Lakes movement: “If we continue down the path we are on, we can’t win.” Many others made similar statements.

Cross-Border work and the Value of the GLWQA

- It was repeatedly pointed out that only a handful of NGOs are active in the transborder space. HOW, for example, interacts with the IJC and the Great Lakes Commission, sometimes providing comments, and alerting members to opportunities for input. Alliance for the Great Lakes monitors progress against regional goals such as Great Lakes Compact compliance. Beyond this, neither plays a leading role in shaping broader strategies in the transboundary space. Freshwater Future supports issue-specific transborder collaboration through its programs and coordination of the Great Lakes Network subnetworks but is not driving strategies for the transboundary quasi-governmental institutions.
- Several people said there is no longer a cross-border activist coalition or network for the Great Lakes. For example, one person said: “The system doesn’t work without a strong binational ENGO group led by activists telling the government what needs to be done with a long-term vision of what is right. Only ENGOs provide that.”
- Some groups have limited awareness/understanding of the three most notable transborder quasi-governmental bodies (IJC/GLWQA, GL Commission, and GL Fishery Commission); one also mentioned the GL governors’ council. For transboundary NGOS, several mentioned the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative as a positive example.
- Most felt that the GLWQA was valuable (some said “essential; others not so emphatic), but many noted it has limits. In response to the “is it the best vehicle” question, several responded along the lines of, “It’s the best we have.” Limitations include lack of metrics, benchmarks, deadlines, to achieve specific goals especially since the amendments to the Agreement in 2012. A major recurring concern was the lack of “forcing mechanisms” to drive domestic compliance. In this context, several noted that while the Agreement has value, it does not currently have as much value as other domestic processes (funding, litigation, etc.) in achieving specific ends. One said it is not action-oriented now. It has become more procedural because the bureaucrats have figured out how to manipulate the process by making it cumbersome.
- One said that there is “Need for continued multi-national collaboration and coordination. Not just for local interests but also globally – how will we lead on a global issue as big as climate.”
- A few said that “a treaty would be great, but it would probably never happen.”
- Some were unaware that the Agreement played a critical role in driving the Areas of Concern process, or that the Great Lakes Critical Programs Act in the U.S. was used to require compliance with specific goals outlined in the 1987 Agreement. In Canada, the Agreement is a prime driver for the commitments and work that the Canadian Federal government and the province of Ontario make under the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality.
- While many acknowledged the lack of Basin-wide plans or strategies to drive action and coordinate strategies on topics such as climate change or biodiversity, one cautioned that sometimes “mega

plans” fail to be responsive to local needs and that local action was needed on most if not all the “big five” threats. At the same time there was acknowledgement that across the system, coordination was valuable and necessary on issues that affect the whole system.

- There is not an advocacy organization for cross-border work; Great Lakes Network provides some coordination.
- Citizen input [in transboundary issues] is significantly less than what it was in the late 1980s and 1990s. There was concern that the bureaucratic processes in transboundary institutions are a barrier for citizens.
- No funding to support grassroots engagement in transboundary work.
- Several spoke to concerns about connecting transboundary work and/or the GLWQA to specific viable action, building political will and using tools such as power mapping. Don’t need “just talk” (between the Parties/across the borders). Instead need to get clear on real-world goals of the work. Need to generate action priorities and strategies first.
- Some people stressed that the GLWQA has been weakened but they remembered that it used to work until it lost most of its metrics in 2012. Some also noted, “There is nothing else for us to turn to. We need to revive the Agreement, especially for the principles that are there.
- The structure of the Agreement for communication was/is there and supports important exchange.
- Form of transboundary institutions should follow functions we want them to provide to spur the actions that will make change.
- Several questioned the value of the Agreement and bi/nationalism in terms of being able to drive action. One said, “Binational plans/structures, etc., may not be the best vehicle to get things done [domestically],” although acknowledging that maintaining transboundary relationships was important.
- Slightly different perceptions in U.S and Canada on need for binational cooperation. Canada tends to see more need for binational cooperation.
- Some people doubted that the current regime has moved us down the right path saying that we need fresh, new strategies.
- Several people said that we mustn’t drop the GLWQA. As one of them said, “The biggest benefit of the GLWQA is that it has escalated cross-border discussion.”
- The GLWQA used to be a mechanism for local people to generate action at the international level. This led to actions like the international Persistent Organic Pollutants Protocol.
- One said, “We will never force the two governments to work together, if we don’t use the agreement to do so.” He went on to say, “Without a strong cross-border wide non-government organization using the Agreement, we will just be left with the foxes guarding the hen house.”
- Several expressed that cross-border coordination is “vital.”
- One pointed out that limiting the GLWQA to a political border and not embracing the full St. Lawrence River, creates problems because it ignores the natural ecosystem connections.
- Include Indigenous governments in consultation/planning/decisions. Including:
 - Provide sufficient resources to Indigenous communities to consult within their community.
 - Provide institutionalized opportunities & mechanisms for representatives of Indigenous governing bodies to be present and involved at decision making tables.
 - Include Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous governments, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

- On changing the Agreement:
 - Review no less than every 5 years.
 - Make resulting amendment process responsive and transparent.
 - Tribes and First Nations and Métis as signatories

Big-Picture Challenges/Issues.

Most pressing issues

- Many named climate change, but topics ranged from our “big five,” to some specific concerns. One summed it up this way: “It’s not only the direct impacts of climate change we need to be concerned about, but also the cascading impacts of climate change, such as the industrial, agricultural and population shifts that it will bring.”
- The “Ramp-up threats” (old threats getting bigger) as well as threats that have reached a steady state (but remain serious threats): nonpoint, PFAS or other toxics, invasive species.
- Lack of capacity within the federal regulatory agencies is a threat –even more significant. States are stepping up doing more, GLNPO less and less. Need a national push for GLNPO to be able to step up. Canada is doing even less.
- Others specifically noted:
 - PFAS; dangerous algal blooms, erosion, access to waterfront.
 - Water quantity issue (current work on climate change is not paying enough attention to this potential issue, e.g., impact on pressure for diversions);
 - Toxics prevention, zero discharge, etc. “No group is focusing on using the principles of the GLWQA to avoid future PFAS-type disasters, etc. This needs a serious full-time effort because it is very challenging to make progress.”;
 - Need to develop the science on understanding the impacts of the mixtures of chemicals in the Great Lakes (“we must stop being focused on our pet chemical”);
 - Coastal development (“huge and impacting everything”);
 - Mining expansions;
 - Spread of algae;
 - Discharges from water vessels and the threat of spills from transporting on the lakes and rivers, e.g., radioactive materials.
 - Need to fund more science and community science work and Indigenous knowledge;
 - Interrelated challenges from influx of people moving into the Great Lakes region for climate and conflict reasons;
 - Need a significant shift in how we respond to microplastics and nuclear waste disposal;
 - Loss of biodiversity, loss of wetlands;
 - Increased development pressure as a result of rising populations and housing demand, leading to less stringent application of integrated water resource management principals and GL policy.
 - Flooding and other impacts of climate change.

The Big Five Drivers

Climate:

- Many noted that there are many useful and significant but disparate efforts underway, but no common goal other than “more/faster.” One described our lack of binational coordination on climate as “Messy. A bit of a struggle.” Another said, “Haphazard is baked into the system.”
- Cross-border work on climate needs a focus and articulated goal – a strategic direction, otherwise “talk is talk--nice, but not enough.”
- Some raised concerns about taking on resilience and adaptation without addressing the region’s need to address mitigation. “We are not just climate victims, but part of the larger problem.”
- It was noted that nationally, there are not many groups working on mitigation; similarly, there is not a basin-wide strategy to reduce the region’s emissions (albeit some states and provinces are active in this area.)

Toxics/Radionuclides:

- Several interviewees stressed that the biggest hole in ENGO advocacy around toxics and radionuclides is in the preventive and precautionary space. The rise of PFAS is an example of our failure to have policies based on an effective preventive and precautionary system. One explained this by saying: “What happened to prevention is that it is hard to take credit for avoiding a disaster that didn’t happen. Humans don’t invest in prevention.”
- There is a big gap in leadership and policy development; many efforts around local PFAS battles, but no regional/national/cross-border coordinating strategy.
- One interviewee stressed that GLEN needs to work to get the biggest scientific gap in our work on toxics and radionuclides filled, i.e., the need to understand the effects on health of the mixtures of substances in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence system, instead of looking at them one by one. Our policies and programs need to be based on an ecological understanding of the interacting effects of large numbers of substances.

Agricultural policy impacts:

- Awareness and general agreement around limitations of voluntary programs and lack of U.S. regulatory framework and of funding in both countries to support appropriate agricultural action to protect the Great Lakes.. Concerns about acceptance that “that’s just the way it is” and very limited activity within the Great Lakes community in addressing the gaps or the driving policy (Farm Bill and US Clean Water Act). “It is pretty clear what the impacts are on the environment. What isn’t clear is if anyone is willing to do something about it.” One said, “Focus on the connection between the Farm Bill [and environmental impacts.]. Take on the Farm Bureau. Step into the 10-year battle.”

- “It is piecemeal, we don’t talk to the community about why it is important, why are my wells contaminated? [We need] a public service campaign. What does it mean-- the family farm and agricultural big beasts? We must talk to people and engage communities.”

Habitat and Biodiversity:

- Several noted the need for expanded leadership here, and noted the United Nations goals, which Canada has adopted, of conserving 30% of lands and waters by 2030. Concerns were raised as to how these goals do or do not connect with other ecological needs/goals including landscape connectivity in the region. At least two noted the huge challenge of private land for this topic and landscape integrity.
- A few interviewees raised the need to shift the mind-set for the fishery to protecting keystone species instead of sports-fisheries, and move beyond “old ways of doing things.”
- Some noted that biological diversity—beyond trying to address invasive species--seems to have faded from regional priorities and the connection to “biological integrity” for the ecosystem.

Landscape integrity:

- Landscape integrity is critical to biodiversity and habitat goals and critical for climate resilience.
- Some people said, “there is a need [for work] in this space.” Need to have natural waterfronts instead of “economic development” as a goal for Areas of Concern, for example. Life after de-listing needs a sociological perspective. People who have lived in these sites need to be heard on access and local decisions.”
- Interest in reconnecting living tributaries (without all the dams, barriers, etc.) to the Great Lakes. Private property a concern.
- Need to engage the community in hands-on restoration actions and decisions.

Cautions and Concerns and Directions

- Concerns were raised about the possible confusion of GLEN with other Great Lakes organizations in the region, from identity to concerns about duplicative roles. How would GLEN add unique value to what is already going on? None raised a direct concern about funding or turf, although some made suggestions about where our efforts could be most complementary. One felt that our approach of pointing to gaps in leadership could be better re-framed by identifying where we would add value to the movement.
- Several felt we should elevate the human and community needs (equity/justice) in our concept papers.
- Others said that we need to see ourselves as one of many communities (human and non-human) in the basin and have “respect” for all those communities.

- One emphasized that GLEN needs to work to change the culture and the spirit in the Great Lakes: “We now focus on our rights as defined by law – not on our responsibilities.” Having new ceremonies will help develop the connections and adjustments in the culture.
- Another expressed concern that the federal advocacy space is already very active in the U.S., [suggesting it not be a focus of our work] but they would find a policy-generating organization complementary and compatible.
- U.S. EPA is overwhelmed with the paperwork and oversight involved in pushing dollars out to projects under GLRI [and now IRA] which makes it hard for them to focus on other things.

Key Observations

- “Deep Resiliency.” The need for resiliency came up in several interviews. One interviewee pointed out that all our “big challenges” in the concept papers are essential components of overall Great Lakes health and resilience, and as such, the unifying “big issue” and strategy needs to form around what restores, protects, and sustains the greatest capacity for the ecosystem to be resilient. Perhaps GLEN could add “deep resiliency” as an umbrella issue that embraces the “big five” and other threats. Our leadership team, in reflecting on this, urged that we expand this concept of the over-arching challenge to look “upstream” in terms of protecting and restoring the health and vitality of the Great Lakes and not just their ability to rebound from damage or disturbance—both being essential components of a healthy system.
- One discussion about the IJC/GLWQA led to this observation: “Are we trying to maintain the institutions for their own sake, or should we be pursuing actions and outcomes that require the institutions to change (or new ones to be created) to address the new and pressing challenges.”
- There were comments on how our work is all taking place in the context of a global rise of authoritarianism and eroding democratic process. Defunded public agencies (especially regulatory), gerrymandered non-responsive legislative bodies, deep partisan divides, and a growing sense of loss of efficacy and agency in activism are part of the challenge in shaping strategies and mobilizing public action. It seems important to be explicit about this.
- Some who we interviewed emphasized that, because of the presence in GLEN of many people with decades of experience working in the Great Lakes, we should share the lessons learned with the upcoming generations as well as learn from them. A couple of different words were used for this, including “mentoring” and “wisdom house” How will we collect, house, and share that wisdom?
- One noted, in response to concerns about engaging wider constituencies in advocacy, “I see evidence of strong engagement of new generations of advocates all the time, and lots of policy success as a result. It may not be in the ways that this occurred in prior decades, and I think that’s because the way some of these advocates define important Great Lakes goals and how to achieve them has changed a lot, especially in the last ten years. More people who have historically been excluded from those conversations are now being included, and they bring a clear understanding of what their communities are facing and what needs to change for them to achieve their goals.”

Near term Leverageable opportunities

- GLRI Plan IV. In the next generation of GLRI can plans be focused to restore habitat/biodiversity/landscape integrity? A few people suggested that GLRI be renamed to be Great Lakes Stewardship Plan or Great Lakes Resiliency Plan.
- Corps of Engineers coastal resilience planning.
- Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and infrastructure funding.
- HOW (internal priorities-setting process)
- Strategies for how new Canadian Funding will be best spent.
- Great Lakes & St Lawrence Cities Initiative (<https://glslcities.org/>) could have more leadership on these issues.

Discussion Points and Questions to Us from Interviewees

- Convening to what end?
- Lead with the issues, follow with the institutions.
- Recommendations about several more people to talk with.
- Movement diversification strategies.
- Generational knowledge transfer.
- How does GLEN want to work with other groups/organizations? What's the partnership strategy?
- How is the existing tacit knowledge of GLEN members (of the "wisdom house") being collected & housed and intergenerational knowledge exchanged?

Recommendations and Next Steps

GLEN's leadership team developed a set of recommendations based on this input for decisions at its first annual meeting, held on June 22, 2023. The twenty-eight members who attended affirmed a document entitled "GLEN Planning Guidance," which was based in part on the findings in the survey and interviews. This document is available on our website on the Press, Publications & Videos page: https://greatlakesecoregionnetwork.weebly.com/glen_press.html

(Direct link: [GLEN Potential Roles Decision-Making Criteria - Approved June 22, 2023 7-13 Final](#))