

UNIQUE REPORT ON ST. LAWRENCE RIVER HAD INPUT FROM 50 SCIENTISTS

Author of the article: **Todd Hambleton**

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< A Stephany Hildebrand photo of Andrea and Norm Seymour, long-time residents of Hamilton Island, speaking with Great River Rapport project lead Dr. Leigh McGaughey. Handout/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network Handout Not For Resale Supplied

Will the Great River Rapport be, well, great?

Dr. Leigh McGaughey isn't a neutral observer, but the research scientist, the GRR project lead and coordinator, certainly is entitled to an opinion.

"It's already great!" McGaughey said enthusiastically, of what's been a long-term effort going back to 2018, a project that's taken its time as it continues flowing smoothly toward a finished product likely late this summer, and with a soft rollout of information starting later this month.

The report, er, rapport, a play on words – largely aimed at starting conversations, and including large public input components – is described as an ecosystem health report on the Upper St. Lawrence River, produced by the River Institute, in partnership with the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne – Environment Program.

On the cover page are the words, the mission statement, "we want this report to inspire you to become engaged, interested, and aware of how the health of the ecosystem is intrinsically linked to all of us."

And in a teleconference interview Wednesday, along with the River Institute's Mary Ann Perron (technical report lead) and Stephany Hildebrand (graphic designer and photographer), McGaughey said the project has been unique for her in more ways than one.

"I've never worked on a project that brings together the people like this one, the caliber of the team and the willingness of people to be involved," McGaughey said.

She said 50 scientists made contributions, to the selection of the indicators – eight months of workshops, with dozens of indicators, the list trimmed eventually, with difficulty, to 35.

Data continues to pour in, with Perron coordinating all of it – "people have been really fantastic about sharing the data," McGaughey said.

There have been volunteers on the project from as far away on the continent as in Mexico, and across Canada including from British Columbia and Alberta. The effort has involved the large team at the River

Institute, from executive director Jeff Ridal, to many scientists, communication experts, writers, designers, and visual artists.

External advisory committee members include Clarkson University's (Potsdam, N.Y.) Michael Twiss, and it unites a diverse group of collaborators that include Indigenous peoples, federal and provincial government agencies, academia, environmental non-government organizations, community groups, and citizens; from Ontario Power Generation, to the Cornwall Lunker Club, to the Université de Montréal.

Sure, it's taken a bit longer to compile and pull together than was the original plan. McGaughey sees that, ultimately, as one of the report's strengths.

"We're very happy with having more time," she said. "It gives it more depth."

A website is accessible, and the rollout starts in about a week. There are 10 community stories that'll be told, with essays first appearing in Perch magazine. Henry Lickers, the MCA's top environmental scientist, leads off with Dare to be Great, coming April 16; and diver Ron Macdonald writes about the Power of Water, on April 30.

McGaughey was enthusiastic about the report, going back to the start of the heavy lifting in the fall of 2018; she said she was thrilled about public involvement components of it, and that the project would lead to accessing quick facts about river health, and how to get involved in caring for the shared ecosystem.

At the launch, the River Institute said ecosystem health reports exist for many of Canada's waterways at national, regional and local scales, but none focus on the Upper St. Lawrence.

The Great River Rapport is based on science and river stories; the Upper St. Lawrence River encompasses the region from Kingston/Cape Vincent to Lake St. Francis, and it includes the international waters shared by the Mohawks of Akwesasne, Canada and the United States.

The full report will be at www.riverrapport.ca