

Engaging Stakeholders and Aboriginal people on the Great Lakes

In partnership with the OECD Studies on Water: Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Governance

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Organisation: Government of Ontario

Country: Canada

Level of government: Regional/State government

Sector: Environmental protection

Type: Organisational Design

Launched in: 2008

Overall development time: 7 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

The deteriorating ecosystems in the Great Lakes, under the pressure of growing population, changing climate and new invasive species, have spurred a call from concerned scientists and citizens to engage in decision-making processes related to the management of water resources in the area. In response, the Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy was established as a commitment from many provincial ministries to support the long-term protection of the lakes. This strategy has included an engagement process across the various stakeholders in the region at different levels.

At the Great Lakes level, the engagement has involved longer term, moderately paced processes. The Great Lakes encompass a large geographic scale with many different environmental pressures that need to be addressed, and includes a wide diversity of stakeholders (i.e. rural and large urban municipalities; non-governmental organisations; industrial and commercial sectors) as well as First Nations and Métis communities that are partners in protecting the lakes.

At the local watershed level of Lake Simcoe, within the Great Lakes basin, stakeholders actively participated in an intense engagement process to develop the Lake Simcoe Protection Act and the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan, and remain actively involved in implementing them.

This Great Lakes basin multi-level engagement process has proven to be an appropriate mechanism to set policy direction and inform the development of a long-term strategy for water protection on a large geographic scale. The more intense process demonstrated in Lake Simcoe shows how a deeper level of engagement on focused issues enables decision makers to further develop protection policies and programmes, as well as implementation partnerships within a watershed. Engagement processes with First Nation and Métis communities and stakeholders have developed strong relationships and partnerships for protecting watersheds over the longer term.

Why the innovation was developed

- There was mounting scientific evidence of the declining health of the Great Lakes. A call for action was driven being by scientists and citizens who were expressing concerns about deteriorating conditions of the lakes.
- Despite past successes and ongoing efforts, the growing population, changing climate and new invasive species are changing how the Great Lakes function, are moving the lakes towards 'a tipping point' of decline (with the exception of Lake Superior).
- Symptoms of a deteriorated ecosystem include ongoing restrictions on fish consumption due to contaminants, increased occurrence of harmful algae blooms and shoreline fouling from excessive algae growth, loss of biodiversity and habitat, and changes in commercial and recreational fisheries.
- There was a growing public concern. Action and the need for engagement was fuelled by citizen concerns that excessive algae was piling up on shorelines, causing beach closures and odour issues.
- Algae blooms also compromise the ability of recreational boaters to travel the Great Lakes water (estimated 1.5 million boaters enjoy the Great Lakes each year), as well as impacting the 70 million tourists that visit the Great Lakes region each year.
- Other governments were taking action. A new bi-national coalition of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities mayors was formed, calling for the protection of Great Lakes beaches, coasts and waterfronts; Ontario signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the "Cities Initiative," and the Canadian and U.S. federal governments signed a renewed Canada-U.S. Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.
- Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy establishes long term goals, performance measures and commitments by many provincial Ministries to support the long term protection of the Lakes.
- The Lake Simcoe Protection Plan includes environmental targets, including a target to reduce phosphorus by 40% in order to restore the cold water fishery.
- The goal of the study is to stimulate an informed discussion about the complexities – and opportunities – when engaging stakeholders and First Nations and Metis communities and organizations on water and ecosystem protection.
- In both the Great Lakes and Lake Simcoe, the targeted stakeholders include other levels of governments (including Federal government, provincial ministries and municipalities)
- First Nations and Métis People (i.e., Ontario's First Nations and Métis communities)
- Watershed institutions (including Conservation Authorities)• Business (water users including industry, commercial, agriculture, recreation and tourism, etc.)
- Civil society organizations (including NGOs and community service groups)
- Public (citizens who live in and around these lakes or are concerned about their well being)
- Science and academia

Results

Effectiveness

- The engagement process has been regarded as a successful model in bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders, with divergent views, and come to an understanding of the issues facing the Lake Simcoe watershed and potential solutions.
 - Stakeholders were particularly satisfied with the development of advisory committees and the level and intensity of engagement with these committees and their overall involvement in policy decision making. The process set up a rigorous schedule of tabling potential policies with these advisory committees to seek their feedback and validate recommendations. Stakeholders were able to directly debate and influence the development of legally enforceable policies.
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Service quality

Responsiveness:

- There was a high level of stakeholder satisfaction with Ontario's efforts to run policy processes, with reference to other Great Lakes-related policy initiatives underway, to enable stakeholders and First Nations and Metis communities to more easily related to the myriad of initiatives that were underway.
- Environmental NGOs formed a Great Lakes Alliance, in support of Ontario's announcement of the Bill 6 (the Great Lakes Protection Act), which would follow the Lake Simcoe approach of enshrining stakeholder and First Nations and Metis people's involvement in Great Lakes decision-making.

Development

Design

The Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MOECC) is the lead provincial Ministry on Great Lakes on behalf of the Province of Ontario, responsible for policy development and implementation of commitments Ontario has made to protect the Lakes. MOECC coordinates action across most provincial Ministries.

MOECC led the development of the Lake Simcoe Protection Act and Lake Simcoe Protection Plan under the guidance of two advisory committees, working with four provincial ministries, the Federal government, local First Nations communities, municipalities, conservation authorities, environmental organizations, recreational and tourism industry, developers and scientific experts.

Testing

- No methods were used to test the innovation.
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Implementation

Tools used:

- Formal Environmental Registry Posting for Public Comment
- Multi-Stakeholder Face-to-face Meetings
- Funding for community-level awareness-raising and actions
- Separate engagement process to engage First Nations and Métis people
- Phone/Push E-mail Notification
- Web-Based Technology

Resources used:

- Funding for both Ontario's Great Lakes and Lake Simcoe engagement is primarily provided by the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MOECC), the designated lead for Ontario, working with other provincial Ministries who have responsibilities related to Great Lakes ecosystem protection and management (e.g., the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs).
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Challenges and solutions

- Engagement fatigue: A limited number of engaged and Great Lakes-literate stakeholders are repeatedly called upon by multiple levels of government to provide input into policy decisions. This can be solved by a willingness to enter new alliances, such as the binational Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative.
- The psychology of despair: Current social research on how the Great Lakes are perceived by Ontarians revealed a "psychology of despair" resulting from negative and fear-driven messages that lake health is getting worse. To enable citizens and communities to become "Great Lakes Guardians" requires to reframe a negative image to a positive, enabling one, creating the space to communicate the wonder of the Great Lakes as a living treasure.
- Ensuring different types of experts can be heard: The dichotomy of deep expertise and a breadth of understanding should not be underestimated when having discussions on a wide range of issues. It is important to ensure that people can engage in a discussion without 'talking past' one another because they are in such a rush to make their points heard.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Engagement that covers a large geographic scale must be flexible. To a degree, Ontario decides the number, format, and scope of meetings to be held on any particular decision. Especially in the case of First Nations, it seeks input from their communities on their preferred approach.
 - Multi-stakeholder meetings can be effective when engaging on high-level policy. This reduces the number of one-off meetings with sectors (i.e., less intensive so takes less time) and this format helps reduce the rhetoric that is common to like-minded organizations or sectors.
 - Providing for adequate geographic representation: The Great Lakes basin covers an enormous large geographic area which presents multiple challenges. Seek opportunities to learn more about regional preferences – and sub-cultures – to avoid having meetings appear too ‘Toronto-centric’ or foreign to participants.
 - Aggressive timelines do not lend well to engaging First Nations and Metis Communities.
 - Articulate clear rules and a process when making the transition to a new water protection regime. Early and ongoing engagement of developers, industry and others with vested interests is critical to ensuring smoother implementation.
 - Engage local champions and potential implementation partners early on. For example, the role of existing key partners (i.e. Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority) may have to be either increased or decreased, depending on what is envisaged.
 - Progress takes time: Expect debates about science; is the lake improving or not? Sensitivity around progress made to date and speed of progress in the future.
 - Ensure engagement includes discussion of whether tougher environmental laws should be instituted alongside a suite of other policy tools, such as versus voluntary measures.
 - Be careful targeting individual sectors as sources of problem, e.g., farmers, aggregates, sewage treatment plants. It is important to be fair and base policies on clear science.
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Conditions for success

- Pick the ‘right sized’ geography around which to organize engagement.
 - Help people appreciate their lake or ecosystem (don’t inadvertently drive them away from it).
 - Build and Maintain strong relationships for the long term.
 - Be prepared – opportunity will eventually knock.
 - Opportunities – the benefits of early engagement.
 - Set clear expectations.
 - Consider ways to treat all stakeholders fairly.
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Other information

The Great Lakes provide a rich study of how multiple water-related engagement processes can converge and inform each other. Even at an enormous geographic scale, it is still possible to work productively with a diverse cross-section of governments, stakeholders and First Nations and Métis people.

This case study underscores the importance of early engagement (e.g., the early, regional meetings that were held across the Great Lakes Basin in 2009-10), contributed to its participation as observer to the bi-national Canada-US Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement renewal process. This engagement process also informed the development of Ontario’s Great Lakes Strategy, the proposed Great Lakes Protection Act, and the negotiation of a renewed Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health (draft 2014).

The engagement experience in Lake Simcoe could be replicated, but should be modified to fit the particulars of the lake and issue being targeted for action. Science should drive action, legal policies should be set in conjunction and with the advice of those who will be impacted, setting up targets can help provide direction and focus action, and formal or informal governance structures can help guide action and ensure ongoing sustained engagement of communities and leaders.