

REAL is a
non-profit volunteer
organization.



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Rideau Environmental Action League

September 4, 2012

Hon. Peter Kent
Minister of the Environment

Dear Minister Kent:

Re: Planned Parks Canada and Rideau Canal Budget Cuts

The Rideau Environmental Action League is a grass-roots, non-profit, volunteer-run environmental organization serving Lanark, Leeds and Grenville Counties, through which the Rideau Waterway flows. REAL is based in Smiths Falls, "The Heart of the Rideau Canal". Our organization's headquarters backs onto a provincially significant wetland that is part of the Rideau Waterway. Our mission, in part, is to protect, preserve and enhance our environment for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. As such we feel we must weigh in on the ill-conceived and short-sighted plans to severely cut the Rideau Canal budget.

Parks Canada's mandate is to protect and promote public understanding of these examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage. These sites are not intended to be revenue generators. But yes, we can all work harder to find ways for these parks to better offset expenses. Many revenue generating suggestions have been made in other letters you have received, such as reorganization, introducing conference, hiking, and canoeing packages, or renting out the lock residences.

These budget cuts are alarming as it will be difficult if not impossible to maintain the heritage, social, cultural and economic values of the Rideau waterway, especially when the locks and their heritage values are being inadequately maintained even now. Given the World Heritage Status recently granted the Rideau Canal by UNESCO, the timing of these cutbacks couldn't be worse. How are we to prove to the international body that we are maintaining the heritage values when we have just reduced its funding?

REAL is concerned about the potential long-term implications of these cutbacks on natural systems. The construction of the Rideau Canal forever altered the flows of water and ecosystems of this region. People have built whole communities around the canal and cities and towns are wholly dependent on the ongoing maintenance of this system. The canal system maintains water level controls, which are particularly important in times of flooding or drought. Both problems will be more frequent with climate change, as we are all experiencing first hand this summer. Municipalities and property owners along the waterway could be severely affected from a combination of high water level fluctuations and an unmaintained canal.

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Water quality could also be affected by water levels, particularly in communities that take their water directly from the Rideau. Parks Canada is legally responsible for responding to spills and contamination issues along the waterway. Further, a handful of revenue generating hydroelectric generation points along the system depend on maintained water levels.

And what might be the impact on vegetation and wildlife? The Rideau is home to 60 Species at Risk, including, for example, the Least Bittern that nests in The Swale behind our Environment Centre. Will Parks still be able to play a role in their protection?

With fewer dollars and staff on the ground monitoring all of these conditions, serious situations could develop, and potentially, ones from which recovery would be slow, impossible, or extremely costly due to the damage done.

The Rideau is not just a facility for wealthy recreational boaters. Most users are average Canadians, and the majority of visitors are land-based. The Rideau is the lifeblood of our region and our natural systems. The sweeping changes recently made in omnibus Bill C-38 reduced the effectiveness of environmental assessments, weakened environmental legislation, and slashed research centres that were in place to maintain Canada's ability to monitor and respond to environmental threats. Canada can't keep making giant steps backwards if we are to protect our natural resources.

Please rethink plans to reduce the Rideau Canal budget. It is a unique example of both a natural and a cultural resource that needs to be properly maintained and preserved for now and the future, for both the people and the wildlife. The government of Canada has an obligation of its citizens to do so.

Respectfully,

Barbara D. Hicks

Barb Hicks, President
for the REAL Board of Directors

cc. Gord Brown, M.P.
Scott Reid, M.P.