

Natural Resources as an Economic Lever in Outlying Regions

Roméo Bouchard, the author of "Y a-t-il un avenir pour les régions?"

By organizing this Summit to protect the Gatineau Valley lakes and rivers, the citizens and stakeholders in this area have clearly expressed their will to democratically take control of the natural resources on their territory.

The importance of natural resources in outlying areas

Natural resources are a primary livelihood in outlying areas. The negative growth affecting outlying areas in Québec is largely attributable to the pillaging of their natural resources by multinationals and major private interests. The higher levels of government have virtually handed this collective heritage over to them on a platter without demanding that they be preserved adequately or that they be used to support the regional populations where they are located.

Such was the case for our forests, our mines, our bottomfish and even our local agriculture. This can be said today of our drinking water sources and our exceptional wind reserves that we are offering to foreign companies in return for paltry royalties, reminiscent of the days when Duplessis sold our iron on the North Shore for one cent a ton. Tomorrow, the same fate will befall our immense freshwater resources for other new sources of energy.

The lone exception, which we owe to a man who worked all his life to give back to Québeckers the democratic control of their country, is hydroelectricity, but the point must be made that Hydro-Québec, though it has contributed a great deal to the government, has not been too concerned until this point with regional participation in matters pertaining to the effects of its projects. Only the Aboriginal populations had the courage and intelligence to negotiate agreements and compensation to build large dams located on their territory.

Of course, the greater Outaouais region is one of the growing regions because of its situation near the large urban centers bounded by Montreal, Ottawa-Gatineau-Toronto, but the Gatineau Valley is in the throes of the same crisis affecting the outlying areas, whose economy is linked to forestry and family farming. Having been a long-standing realm of worksites and raftsmen, the Gatineau Valley is seeing its last woodcutting lots being transferred elsewhere and its forestry workers losing their jobs.

The importance of natural resources

All is not lost, however. Natural resources must continue to be the basis of the economy in outlying areas. With time, even if we know how to change our natural resources development model and provide more opportunities for true regional governments to participate in their management, we can rebuild our regional economies. Better still, new resources are appearing. Of the new resources that show increasing appeal and economic potential, there is what can be termed natural resources which have become the engine of a thriving industry: tourism, ecotourism, the outdoors, vacation living, hunting and fishing and the return of retirees to the region. More than 50% tourist activities are already taking place in the outlying areas. However this new niche is based essentially on our ability to preserve our natural sites and take a creative and enlightened approach to developing them.

The Gatineau Valley is recognized as a natural paradise of exceptional forests (11 example is the Forêt de l'Algle), which unfortunately has been seriously decimated; and lakes and rivers on which increasing demands are placed. It is therefore essential that this natural setting not be pillaged and devastated as other natural resources have been by the negligence and irresponsibility of our governments both local and national. It is also necessary to deftly manage the transition from a regional forest-based to a nature-based economy, with everything that entails from paradigm shifts to services. The region cannot afford to miss a

second opportunity and kill the goose that lays the golden eggs before the eggs are even laid.

The threats confronting natural resources

We have thought since time immemorial that our lakes and rivers were eternal and that they could be used any which way with little regard for their health - we believed that the fish in the St. Lawrence and in the sea were unlimited, the forest limitless and farming soil indestructible. But a serious alarm signal has just been sounded throughout Québec with the appearance of blue algae that reveal the presence of a high level of nitrates and phosphorous that is fatal to the life of our waterways, not to mention the presence of other toxic products.

The origin of these substances that are destroying the aquatic ecosystems is becoming clearer by the day: the overpopulation of lakes, the discharge of untreated or incompletely treated wastewater, fertilizers used on lawns and golf courses, erosion caused by the destruction of shorelines, road runoff, motor boats, deforestation, permanent cropping, chemical fertilizers and liquid manure spread extensively on farmland, the destruction of buffer strips which serve as natural filters, the wetlands and wooded areas, underground soil drainage, the **straightening** of waterways, etc. In short, the deterioration of entire watershed ecosystems where nothing is lost in a way, and everything ends up in the waterways.

Taking control locally and regionally

How can we ensure that our lakes and rivers will be able to become and remain a source of quality of life to the community and economic development lever for the future of our region?

In Québec, the government has grown to the point that people immediately look to Québec City to demand that regulations be implemented. However, it must be pointed out that although the government must provide the objectives and the collective tools, it will not protect the lake or the stream behind your home. Even though the local and regional powers-that-be do not have what they need or are often not enough on their own, the management of water, vacation living and

outdoor activities require that control be taken locally and regionally. The organizers of this Summit understood this and have shown that they are democratically responsible on this score.

The entire local and regional community must feel responsible for the development of this collective heritage and the management of how it is used on their territory. At a time when the ecosystems that are essential to our collective survival are becoming disorganized everywhere we look, the sacred dogma private property, private clubs and acquired rights must be harmonized with the notions of our collective resources and future.

The local communities are in the best position to protect their quality of life and their livelihoods because they are futures depend on it. Out of political interests, our politicians do give in more easily to major private interests and do not hesitate, even to be re-elected, to endanger the future of the resources that are vital to local and regional communities.

All the RCMs will have to establish effective integrated water management departments on their territories to support the decisions they make pertaining to development and how these resources and new development are managed.

Bravo to this citizens Summit

I therefore wish to offer my heartiest congratulations to the participants in the Summit and salute their democratic commitment. I know that similar Summits are being prepared elsewhere in Québec, particularly on the Richelieu River watershed in the heart of the greater Montérégie region. I am betting that these Summits will be more productive than the Summit staged by Ms. Line Beauchamp, because they will be implementing a structure whereby the local and regional communities will take control of water and the environment.

In the long term, these communities which have taken on these responsibilities will force the government to turn over to them the authorities and the means they need to protect and develop their natural and social capital.

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