

Ken W. Watson
RR1
Elgin, ON K0G 1E0

The Honourable Catherine McKenna
Minister of the Environment and Climate Change
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

May 27, 2018

Re: Let's Talk Parks Canada: Rideau Canal

Dear Minister McKenna,

I am writing to congratulate you on your recently released report on the *Let's Talk Parks Canada!* consultations and I look forward to seeing substantive changes in Parks Canada's administration of the Rideau Canal National Historic Site as a result of your directives.

In particular, your placing a priority for Parks Canada to have "an emphasis on commemorative integrity at national historic sites together with the need to dedicate additional resources to education and interpretive programs" is of critical importance. Commemorative integrity is a requirement of the Parks Canada Agency Act which Parks Canada has been ignoring on the Rideau Canal for several years now. Resources to support that were stripped in the re-organization of the heritage canals in 2012 and there is currently no capacity on the Rideau to even begin this type programming. A Rideau Canal heritage unit under the direction of an expert in the public presentation of heritage, such as a qualified public historian, is required to start the process.

As you may be aware the Rideau Canal is currently not in a state of commemorative integrity. Parks Canada has been focusing on a non-legislative agenda, primarily revenue generation, carried out at the expense of commemorative integrity. In particular Parks Canada has been ignoring the public education part of commemorative integrity and issues surrounding heritage landscapes. You've only to look at the "new" Parks Canada website for the Rideau Canal, which went up over a year ago, to see the problem. As of this writing, there remains essentially nothing on the website dealing with the rich heritage of the Rideau Canal and nothing regarding its designation as a National Historic Site of Canada and as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. No public education, no heritage presentation. I've been told "it's not a priority." This is just one highly visible example of Parks Canada ignoring its own mandate on the Rideau Canal.

A draft management plan is presently being prepared and I trust that your requirement for a change in focus will be reflected in this plan by the time it is put out for public review this summer. The draft scoping document was based on the old Parks Canada vision for the Rideau Canal which does not include heritage as a significant focus. I believe a very good effort was made by the Associate Director this past winter, bringing together focus groups to provide

input into the plan. The primary message from these groups was to return Parks Canada to its legislated mandate, pretty much exactly what you heard in the *Let's Talk Parks Canada!* consultations. To do this a new heritage focus, and the resources to support it, are needed.

In addition to having no resources to create a robust public education and interpretation program and to provide visitors with a dynamic heritage experience, the Rideau Canal is also severely undermanaged. Currently there are no senior managers located on the Rideau Canal. This has a large impact on both the policy direction of the canal (no one in the Rideau Canal Office providing direction) and public engagement. I believe it was a major mistake to have merged two very large heritage canal systems, the Rideau and the Trent-Severn in 2012 – a change done with no public consultation and which resulted in few real-world benefits and many negatives. Efficiencies that were supposed to have come have not been seen. The two systems have different cultures and very different histories – they cannot be treated the same way. The Rideau Canal deserves its own dedicated senior management – we've seen that the Rideau Canal cannot be effectively managed remotely from the Trent-Severn.

In terms of public engagement, something very important for a National Historic Site that is bounded by 13 municipalities and thousands of residents, I've been advocating for the restoration of the Rideau Canal Advisory Committee, which Parks Canada terminated in 2010, as one means of ensuring that the public voice is heard at a management level. Actually getting out to talk to various people and groups along the Rideau is also important, something that is not being done today. Those public voices, particularly those that are deeply engaged with various aspects of the canal, will be needed to properly effect the changes you've directed.

The heritage problem is not an academic issue, it affects the public perception of the Rideau Canal and government policy. Recently I saw a CBC report where the reporter characterized the Rideau as simply a waterway that caters to rich boaters. That same perception of the Rideau Canal is also held by many politicians and clearly influenced the changes that happened in 2012, which included stripping Parks Canada of much of its heritage and ecological expertise. There was also talk at the time by Parks Canada of restricting the season to simply July and August, since they didn't understand the importance to land visitors of seeing the locks in operation. Watching boats going through locks, if properly interpreted, is a living history experience. The reporter clearly had no idea of the heritage the Rideau Canal represents or of the canal's importance to the story of Canada. It is a failing of Parks Canada that this story, and of all its interesting facets, is not being communicated to the public.

I've been running a very large website (www.rideau-info.com) dealing with all aspects of the Rideau Canal, including heritage, for the past 22 years. I can safely say I do more public education about the heritage of the canal, on a hobby basis, than Parks Canada does as a mandated responsibility. I combine tourism and heritage, the two are not mutually exclusive, in fact they go hand in hand. An example is my Paddling Guide to the Rideau Canal, which I make available to the public for free as a PDF on my website. In that guide I provide the resources a paddler needs to have a safe and enjoyable journey on the Rideau Canal and I also provide a listing of Points of Interest that they can see along the route. People, when informed, are interested in the many stories of the Rideau. Every person I talk to finds it fascinating. It adds to their visitor experience of the site. Parks Canada, at a minimum, should be doing as much as I do.

An example of the successful blending of tourism and heritage done by Parks Canada was the Rideau Canal passport done in 2017, a Friends of the Rideau initiative, implemented by Parks Canada. It provided bite sized bits of heritage about each lockstation together with an incentive for visitors to this region to visit all the lockstations. Yet despite its success, and very modest cost, Parks Canada has said they didn't have the resources to continue that program in 2018. Similar to the significant problem with their website, even when it is easy and inexpensive to do, heritage simply isn't part of Parks Canada's present culture and management of the Rideau Canal.

I continue to document the many current problems with Parks Canada's administration of the Rideau Canal on my Save Our Rideau website (www.SaveOurRideau.ca), including a Heritage Report Card on how Parks Canada is doing, the current grade is a D. I look forward to the day when I can upgrade the report card to an A, take down that website, and simply concentrate on doing the best I can on promoting the rich heritage of the Rideau Canal and seeing Parks Canada doing the same.

Yours truly,



Ken W. Watson
rideauken@gmail.com

cc. Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada
Daniel Watson, CEO, Parks Canada Agency
Hunter McGill, Chair, Friends of the Rideau
Save Our Rideau