Save the River: Paving the Marine Highway?
by Paul Lloyd Sargent, October 28th, 2009

Depending upon who you ask, the story varies a bit but the basic gist is this: a man named Barry Freed was fixing damage caused to his dock by ice on the St. Lawrence River in northern New York state when fellow Wellesley Island resident Steve Taylor came by in his boat and said "Don't bother. If the Seaway goes ahead with this winter navigation thing, your dock will get ripped out every year anyway." Taylor handed Freed a flier about an upcoming community rally against proposals to expand the shipping season on the St. Lawrence Seaway into a year-round operation and, in 1978, the environmental advocacy organization Save the River! was born. Though some details of that historic era in this community are still up for debate, these facts are certain: Freed and other members of the nascent grassroots organization testified before Congress about the potential environmental impact of winter navigation on the river; they confronted experts from the Army Corps of Engineers and the bi-national Seaway Corporation; and they defeated plans to run ships through the winter ice. Also of note is that Barry Freed just happened to be the underground Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman hiding out from the F.B.I. at his girlfriend's cottage on Wellesley Island.[1]

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I grew up near Hoffman/Freed's cottage, just down the road on Wellesley in the Thousand Islands region of northern New York and I understand what drove him and his compatriots to risk so much to protect this unique place, the largest freshwater archipelago on earth. Sitting on the dock at my family's house, like many of us up here, I have spent hours watching great blue herons glide across the water, listened for loon calls, looked for bass and pike hiding in the reeds—and pondered how 350,000 cubic feet of water could possibly flow past my feet each second.[2]

As massive as the river is here, it is a tiny segment of a colossal freshwater system extending close to 3000 miles from headwater to ocean. Beginning with rain and snow melt in Minnesota and southern Ontario, water feeds into the post-ice age Great Lakes starting with Lake Superior, then on to Lakes Huron and Michigan, through Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River, to Lake Erie, over Niagara Falls on the Niagara River, across Lake Ontario, and into the St. Lawrence. The river then cuts a six-mile wide path out of the eastern end of Lake Ontario, forming the border between Canada and northern New York, to flow northeast past Montreal, Quebec, and eventually emptying into the Atlantic Ocean through the largest estuary in the world at the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

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[1] Though I have heard this story told many times by different parties in the know, Howard Zinn, in his afterword to later editions of "The Autobiography of Abbie Hoffman," notes the work Hoffman and his "running mate" Johanna Lawrenson did with Save the River!, all while underground.

[2] 347, 849 cubic feet, to be exact. This and other hydrology facts about the St. Lawrence can be found here: http://www.savetheriver.org/index.cfm?page=app.riverFacts.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.), the whole Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River system constitutes the earth's largest reserve of surface freshwater, holding "about 21% of the world's supply; [o]nly the polar ice caps contain more."[3] As much of the world must dig, pump, or pray for potable water (the American Southwest included), this system, containing 84% of North America's surface freshwater, makes it a resource that we in the U.S. and Canada far too often take for granted—a kind of resource over which wars are fought.

If it seems a bit reproving to suggest that North Americans (especially those of us north of Mexico) do not appreciate the significance of all that fresh water, try this experiment: ask someone in Chicago, Detroit, or New York City what route a ship must take to travel from Belfast to Duluth. Their answer will likely (and incorrectly) involve the Mississippi River. But the St. Lawrence Seaway Corporation, the company that oversees shipping operations on the river and Great Lakes, illustrates this muddling of geography far worse when, in their public relations materials, they dub this resource "Hwy H2O," a "marine highway run[ing] between Canada and the United States."[4] In the minds of the Seaway engineers, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River are reduced to an asphalt analogy begging for images of heron and pike scattered like road kill in the wake of a passing ship. But despite all the traffic, the St. Lawrence is not a highway. As immense a waterway as it is, like all complex ecosystems, it is a fragile one.

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This summer marked the 50th anniversary of the Seaway and, even for someone with a critique of the environmental impact of the project, it is hard not to marvel that a ship from as far away as Bangladesh can navigate over multiple oceans to traverse this series of locks, lakes, canals, and rivers to reach safe harbor in Thunder Bay, deep in midwestern Canada. It is a testimony to human will—and stubbornness. I cannot help but think of Herzog's *Fitzcaraldo*, dragging his riverboat over a mountaintop in the Andes, when I watch a Dutch or German salty, painted electric blue and marked by Hazmat banners, grinding its way up the channel, snaking between islands and shoals on a journey toward ports in Detroit or Northwestern Indiana. It is uncanny that something as long as a city block and as tall as an office building, capable of carrying the loads of more than 800 tractor trailers, will float. Just as I did when I was younger, I still drive up alongside the ships when we pass, play in their wakes, and even pull to their sterns, shut off my engine, and let the wash of their propellers pull and shake my little boat. It is like taunting a sea monster.

And so, despite my critique of their policies and practices, I do understand the awe the Seaway expects for a project as monumental as this. Opened in 1959 at a cost of (U.S.) $470 million after a construction feat unrivaled until China's recent Three Gorges Dam, this bi-national venture required 22,000 workers to

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[3] For more data, see the E.P.A.'s Great Lakes atlas at http://www.epa.gov/glnpo/atlas/index.html.

[4] For more information, see: http://www.hwyh2o.com/.

dredge channels, blast out shoals and islands, flood towns, and to dig and expand canals, like the Welland, used to by-pass Niagara Falls.[5] A 740-foot long ship can now travel 2,400 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Superior, at an 885-foot vertical rise.

But lost in so many articles published this summer celebrating the Seaway's engineering grandeur were some important facts: much like the Three Gorges Dam project, the Seaway has forever altered a vital ecosystem spanning half a continent. Regulating natural water fluctuations through dams and locks has devastated native fisheries and damaged shoreline habitats of countless flora and fauna. Damming and blasting has displaced thousands of people and irreversibly changed the natural environment while persistent dredging continues to stir up buried contaminants in the water. Not included in the Seaway's PR material, eager to tout Hwy H2O as an "environmentally friendly transportation" alternative to trucking and trains, are the billions of dollars spent each year in North America to grapple with non-native species invading fragile watersheds via the ballast water of in-coming saltwater vessels.[6] Missing from their website's historical timeline are dates like "June 23rd, 1976," when the NEPCO 140 barge hit a shoal and 300,000 gallons of crude oil spilled into the St. Lawrence costing (U.S.) $30 million in today's dollars to clean up.[7]

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Despite the anticipation of its 50th anniversary this summer, the Seaway opened late this season—and when it did, traffic was initially down. This was not due to ice blocking river passage, as warmer temperatures in recent winters have left moot the debate over icebreakers of Abbie Hoffman's era. Instead, the ships were not sailing because there was little to ship after last fall's economic collapse. Though traffic eventually picked up a bit by mid-summer, in March, the lack of ships proved a visual indicator that the global economy had faltered in ways no one had foreseen.

Just as our economic models clearly need reexamining so, too, do our environmental projections when weighing the cost-benefit of a project like the Seaway. Obfuscated by the tiresome debate in the U.S. over the causes of global warming are complex scenarios along the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River that must be addressed. According to studies into the effects of climate change on the region, water levels are changing: unlike ocean levels, though, lake and river levels are dropping.[8] There are numerous factors involved,

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[5] Though much of this information is available on the Seaway Corporation's website at http://www.greatlakes-seaway.com/, it has also been recounted here: http://www.greatcanadianrivers.com/rivers/stlawer/economy-home.html.

[6] For more information regarding non-native, invasive species in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, go to: http://www.glu.org/en/campaigns/invasives.

[7] For more information on shipping accidents along the St. Lawrence River, see: http://www.savetheriver.org/index.cfm?page=app.programsAccidents.

[8] For more information regarding climate change effects on the Great Lakes, see the E.P.A.'s website at: http://www.epa.gov/glnpo/atlas/glat-ch2.html#Climate%20Change.

including warmer winter temperatures as southern weather systems travel further north, less ice cover, and less precipitation. On their website, the E.P.A. explains it this way: "warmer climates mean increased evaporation from the lake surfaces" and that, depending upon the climate model used, "average lake levels will [decline] from half a metre to two metres." If water on the lakes were to permanently drop two to six feet, flow into the St. Lawrence would also significantly drop. To illustrate, the bay where my family's dock now sits, with 2-6 feet less water would far more resemble a marsh—or a meadow—especially as losing that much depth in the shipping lanes would lead to more blasting and dredging of navigation channels, exacerbating the problem by further draining water from marshes and harbors.

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As I sat on my family's dock this past July picturing what such changes to this landscape might look like, it was hard not to think again of the Seaway's sister project at the Three Gorges Dam. Much like those opposed to Three Gorges, those of us affected by the Seaway (which, by way of our interconnected environment, includes us all) can fairly demand to know "what price, all this progress?"

Down river at the Eisenhower locks complex in Massena, NY, the Seaway was throwing itself a 50th birthday party. Though there were fanfares, 21-gun salutes, and appearances by U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and U.S. Representative from Ohio Marcy Kaptur, it was not quite the affair of 50 years ago, when President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, and Queen Elizabeth II topped the list of notable guests. In fact, it was an awkward event, with guests backing out at the last minute and celebratory speeches punctuating controversy over the Seaway.[9] Rep. Kaptur, from the port city of Toledo, had weeks before piqued environmentalists and voters alike by tacking a last-minute $3.5 billion dollar backroom-deal amendment onto the House of Representatives climate change bill, hoping to form a Great Lakes region "federal power authority"— and unsuccessfully attempting to name the Seaway Corporation as the overseeing agency for such an authority. Her speech that day in July championed upgrades, improvements, and expansions to the aging Seaway—but it did not go unnoticed within the activist community up here that, a day later, the full text of her address was removed from her website after press outlets in Toledo and elsewhere questioned the logic of using money for new, "green," and "energy independent" alternatives to expand this outdated, Cold War-era industrial project.

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[9] Reports this summer of the Seaway's birthday ranged from the critical, like this Associated Press article posted on ABC News' website (http://abcnews.go.com/US/WireStory?id=8048140), to mere reprinting of Seaway press releases. This article (http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090712/NEWS14/907120313) in the Toledo Blade demonstrates the disconnect between Seaway expansion proponents like Kaptur and the controversy the issue continually raises.

The debate over Kaptur's amendment is not over (though the current bill drafted by the Senate does not include her proposal[10]) and the argument over whether to expand, maintain, or abandon the Seaway will likely persist for decades. As climate change for most of the world means less access to clean, potable freshwater, we here in North America seem oddly content to turn our greatest resource into a "highway" in support of a fumbling global commerce. Again, the question all involved ought to ask is "At what price?"

[10] For more information on the status of this debate currently before Congress, see this article in the Watertown Daily Times:
http://www.watertowndailytimes.com/article/20091001/NEWS02/310019961.