

Friends of the (Penticton) Oxbows

Strategic Plan

March 2012

Introduction

Channelization of the Okanagan River in the Penticton area eliminated flooding in the lowlands between Okanagan and Skaha lakes, and allowed the development of a major part of modern Penticton. Wetlands still exist adjacent to the river channel, now in the form of oxbows or large ponds, but these are in poor shape in relation to what they used to look like before the river channel was built.

Wetland loss and water conservation is an issue world-wide, and is of particular concern in a dry area like the South Okanagan. While no-one is advocating a return of the river to its former channel, the Friends of the Oxbows believe the remaining wetlands should be better managed. What one sees now on entering Penticton along Highway 97 is a collection of rather degraded, remnant wetlands fragmented and enclosed by roads and other developments.

We think there is a significant opportunity to showcase these wetlands much more positively, with minor improvements. The end result would serve two major purposes: 1) a much more enlightened approach to wetland and water conservation by the City of Penticton would be immediately evident, consistent with the region-wide concern about the need to conserve and manage water well; and 2) the entrances to Penticton on Hwy 97 would be much more attractive, consistent with Penticton's contention that the city is a desirable community and a major tourist destination.

How the Friends of the Oxbows intend to assist with improvements to the Penticton oxbows over the next few years is set out in this document, our *Strategic Plan*. Fundamental to our approach is the belief that there is ample opportunity to partner with or gain support from a range of interests to improve the condition of the oxbows.

If you would like more information on how you can help the Friends of the Oxbows meet its objectives, contact Ted Makar, Chair, 250-490-0289, or Bob Anderson, Secretary, 250-492-2493.

Vision

Our vision is for the oxbows to be returned to a more natural state than they are in now, with healthy riparian vegetation, water flow and water quality restored to the extent possible, to enhance the quality of life for Penticton residents and visitors alike.

Mission

Our mission is to work cooperatively with others, encouraging partnerships to restore native species and their habitats to the Penticton oxbows.

Background

Oxbows form naturally when a horseshoe bend in a meandering river is cut off from the main river at the narrow end of the bend. Oxbows can also be formed artificially when a river is straightened to facilitate navigation or to control flooding. Oxbows have formed in several locations along the Okanagan River, most notably in the area between Okanagan and Skaha lakes, and in the Osoyoos Lake area, both from natural processes and as a result of the channelization of the Okanagan River.

The channelization of the river was the result of a federal/provincial initiative to manage floods in the Okanagan valley and to provide potential irrigation for the dry uplands. That initiative included numerous dams, weirs and sediment catchments in the valley bottom and on tributary streams throughout the basin. In addition to flood control, the initiative provided opportunities for upgrading irrigation for agriculture, provided more land and water for urban and industrial development, and provided opportunities for increasing water-oriented tourism.

Although it was not likely fully appreciated at the time, there were significant impacts to fish and migratory birds. Feeding, breeding and migration or staging habitats were altered and much reduced. Subsequent growth in agriculture, industry and urban development compounded those impacts.

Presently, the Penticton oxbows show the accumulated impacts of neglect and abuse. In addition to sedimentation caused by stormwater flows into some oxbows, ongoing impacts of stagnation from reduced water flows, the presence of introduced invasive plants and animals, the remnants of historic structures, the removal of vegetation, and a concentration of natural and human debris are apparent.

Actions to date

The over-arching goal of the Friends of the Oxbows is to see the oxbows become a source of pride for the citizens of the City of Penticton, by having the oxbows restored to a more natural and aesthetically pleasing state. We believe this will result in a healthier

local environment, will improve the quality of life of residents and visitors alike, and will provide an attractive entrance to the City by travellers coming from the north or the south.

The Friends of the Oxbows recognize that their approach must be practical, compatible with community needs as set out by senior and local governments, supported by local citizens, and founded on up-to-date scientific and technical information. We emphasize partnerships as the way to achieve our goal. To encourage partnerships, the Friends of the Oxbows will foster the sharing of knowledge, the responsibility for action, the credit for achievement and, in the process, facilitate a reduction in costs for any one interest, for the work needed.

To this end the Friends of the Oxbows have been promoting an understanding of oxbow values and building partnerships for several years. Discussions have taken place with City officials, with representatives of the Penticton Indian Band, local politicians, conservation organizations, and other concerned citizens. Every opportunity has been taken to explain our interests and to garner support through meetings, involvement in local events, and through outreach to local media.

Goals

1. Increase knowledge base.

Objectives

1.1 Determine landownership within or adjoining the oxbows by 2013.

Strategies

Consult with City and Penticton Indian Band officials to determine who owns parcels of land adjacent to the oxbows. While this would seem to be a straight forward problem to solve, ownership in some cases is far from clear. We need this information in order to garner support for the rejuvenation of the riparian areas, and to assist landowners to steward their land in a fashion that will protect and enhance riparian areas.

1.2 Prioritize the collection and collation of hydrological and biological information for use in developing protection, enhancement, and evaluation plans by 2015.

Strategies

There are relatively few data available that have been collected on these specific wetlands. As a result it is not possible to be very precise about what needs to happen to return the oxbows to a more productive state. Data are required on species presence and abundance, on limnological characteristics of the wetlands, and on how water flows, or might flow, through and between the oxbows. Through consultations with biologist, limnologists and hydrologists, we will assist in determining what data need to be collected, and over what time frame. We will then work to encourage partnerships to collect those data, and begin working on protection, enhancement and program evaluation plans, also through partnership with others.

2. Restore riparian vegetation

Objectives

2.1 Develop a beaver management plan by 2013.

Strategies

Although beaver are an important and integral part of most natural wetlands, they are highly destructive in the short term and in confined spaces like the Penticton oxbows. Consultations with management authorities, land owners adjacent to the wetlands, and

other concerned groups and citizens will be undertaken to determine how best to manage beaver.

2.2 Develop a carp management plan by 2014.

Strategies

European Carp are an invasive species now wide-spread throughout the Okanagan River system. They feed by sucking up small items from the bottom, such as seeds, insect larvae, and various plant material, and in the process decrease water quality by stirring up sediment. Carp will need to be controlled if the Penticton oxbows are to be useful to native fish and other desirable species again. As with beavers, consultations with management authorities, land owners adjacent to the wetlands, and other concerned groups and citizens will be undertaken to determine how best to manage carp.

2.3 Work with key Locatee and other partners to restore and protect aquatic and riparian vegetation by 2013.

Strategies

We will contact those owners of properties within the Penticton Indian Reserve individually to encourage protection and restoration of riparian vegetation on their land. We will encourage fencing of the riparian edges of the wetlands to limit livestock impacts, and/or the replanting of damaged riparian areas with native species, through the auspices of other partners engaged in this type of work.

For properties within the boundaries of the City of Penticton we will contact individual landowners and city representatives to encourage the protection of wetlands and riparian edges on private and public lands alike. Many written resources are available from the Stewardship Centre and the Naturescape British Columbia program that can be used to help develop individual plans for riparian area conservation. Where willing landowners are identified, we will work with other organizations engaged in similar work to help develop and implement private land stewardship projects.

2.4 Encourage and/or facilitate the fencing of riparian areas and surrounding oxbows that are impacted by cattle grazing, through partnerships involving Locatees, government organizations and conservation groups by 2015.

Strategies

There are opportunities for immediate enhancements on two oxbows adjacent to the Penticton Airport through fencing, and the resulting control of access to the wetlands by cattle. We will facilitate fencing those sites by contacting the landowners and leases, determining their interest in riparian area protection and rejuvenation, and then arranging

for fencing through the riparian area fencing program managed by The Nature Trust of BC. Fencing can be done in such a way that cattle can still have access to water, but not unrestricted access. Such an approach will improve water quality for both cattle and the wetland, and allow the regeneration of riparian vegetation.

3. Manage silt loads entering specific oxbows

Objectives

3.1 Support the installation of one storm water retention device in the Brandon Avenue area by 2013.

Strategies

The City of Penticton is in the process of completing a waste water management plan that includes the management of stormwater runoff. One problem currently identified, and hopefully to be addressed by the plan, is the transport of sediment and other contaminants into some of the oxbows from stormwater runoff. Stormwater interceptor devices are commercially available that we believe can be used to much reduce and contain contaminants swept from streets into the oxbows during storm events. We will work with the City to provide input to their stormwater management plan by advising them of our interests and concerns for oxbow water quality (both at the management level and through presentations to City Council), by assisting with water quality study designs, and by helping to find funding sources to assist with both data collection and the purchase of at least one stormwater interceptor, to be placed on Brandon Avenue. Siltation in the oxbow at the end of Brandon Avenue has reached critical levels, in our view, and requires early action to limit further changes to aquatic plants and water quality.

4. Increase public support for oxbow conservation

Objectives

4.1 Increase membership in the Friends of the Oxbows to at least 60 by 2014.

Strategies

There is much work to be done to return the oxbows to a semblance of their former natural state. At the moment there are only four people active in our group, although there are approximately 40 people on our mailing list. We believe we need more workers to assist with in our efforts. We propose to recruit more members by holding semi-annual meetings with themes and invited speakers, and by developing hands-on projects for riparian enhancement. We believe in both cases that if the activities we promote are fun, and results can be seen quickly, we will entice more members. We will look for members that want to assist directly with our planned actions. If we get enough new members that wish to become involved on our steering committee we will develop a management

structure with subcommittees for various actions. That will facilitate sharing of the work load.

4.2 Seek support from conservation funding bodies and conservation groups by 2014.

Strategies

There are many organizations already working elsewhere in BC on projects like the enhancements we propose. We will meet with as many of those as we can to develop common approaches, and where possible, enlist their support and resources to implement our plans. We will become signatories to the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program in 2012, which will result in much higher profile for our cause, and likely will facilitate making contacts with other conservation groups.

4.3 Inform, meet with, and, where possible, partner with local, regional, provincial and federal politicians or their representatives, in support of the goals and objectives of the Friends of the Oxbows by 2013.

Strategies

We met with the Member of Parliament for Okanagan-Skaha when he was a Penticton City Councilor, and he was favourably impressed with our plans. We intend to meet again with our MP, along with the MLA for South Okanagan, and with Mayor and Council of Penticton, to further promote the protection and enhancement of the Penticton oxbows.

We have also met several times with the Chief of the Penticton Indian Band, and with other Band members and Officials. We intend to continue to meet both informally and formally with Band Officials and members to continue our efforts to protect and enhance the Penticton oxbows.