

## UPDATE—THE VOYAGEUR RECREATIONAL WATERWAY PROPOSED FOR THE FRENCH RIVER

Jack Gregg

Phase Four of the proposed French River Voyageur Recreational Waterway Feasibility Study, by Toronto consultants Wyllie and Ufnal, was released in the fall of 1989. Phase Four is a slightly modified summary of the previous phases of the study. In my previous update on this boating canal project between Ontario's Lake Nipissing and Georgian Bay, published in the Fall 1988 issue of *Nastawgan*, I wrote that the Pickerel River Channel would be used as an entry to Georgian Bay. This is incorrect. The final proposal is to use the French River's Bad River Channel, the principal route now used by small craft. The Voyageur Waterway would, of course, allow far larger craft to ascend the French River. The proposal is for a channel 1.8 metres deep (6 feet), providing passage for watercraft up to 12.2 metres (40 feet) long, all the way from Georgian Bay to Lake Nipissing.

Using the lowest construction cost proposal, rapids would be by-passed by marine railways (in three cases) or travelifts/tote roads (in two cases), or completely destroyed by a lift lock (in one case). Marine railways would lift boats from the water and transport them by rail cars; travelifts would lift boats from the water and transport them in self-propelled wagons over roads. The highest construction cost proposal includes four lift locks and one marine railway.

The following is extracted from Phase IV of the Wyllie and Ufnal study:

### SELECTED ROUTE

The primary factors involved in the selection of an optimum route are environmental protection and economic considerations. There are numerous other factors which also play a role in the selection of an "optimum" scheme. The French River Provincial Park and Canadian Heritage River status are major factors in the route selection process. A key factor in the selection of an optimum route was the preservation of *a scenic canoe route separate from the sportsman/powerboater route*, to allow for both types of unhindered recreational use on the French River. With these factors in mind, a process of elimination was used to determine an "optimum" route.

The optimum route which evolved out of the study of alternatives is:

- 1) the Bad River/Western Outlet entrance into the French and Pickerel River system;
- 2) the Pickerel River to Little French Rapids to Deer Bay;
- 3) across Michaud Falls/Stony Rapids into the North Channel; along the North Channel bypassing
- 4) Ouelette Rapids and
- 5) Cedar Rapids; and finally across
- 6) the Portage/Chaudiere Dam into lower Upper French River/Lake Nipissing.

The study recommends that an operating authority be established under the guidance of, and chaired by, the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission, Marine Services Division. The purpose of this authority would be to secure the Voyageur Waterway route by land purchases and rights of way so that development at some time in the future would be relatively easy. Such negotiations would be critical for the Little French River Rapids, where French River Indian Reserve #13 is involved. At present, the economics do not work out well for development, even with the manipulated numbers used in the study (the cost/benefit ratio tends to estimates of *low* construction costs, *high* public use, and *mid-to-high* visitor expenditures).

The study proposes two routes down the French River, one the "optimum" route for boat users, and one the canoe route. The routes would cross three times, but generally be separate. The canoe route would follow the north channel around Okickendawt Island (the Dokis Indian Reserve), the south channel around Eighteen-Mile Island, the north channel around Fourteen-Mile Island, and the Main Channel to Georgian Bay. The boat route would follow the other channel in each case. The canoe route would not follow the route of the Voyageurs down the Main Channel of the French River between Chaudiere Falls and the head of Eighteen-Mile Island, nor down the Western Channel of the outlet.

There has been very little news of the project since last fall. The City of North Bay has stated that it is interested in the project but not willing to put any money into it. In view of the dismal economics presented in the Wyllie and Ufnal study, the city is being politically and financially prudent. There was some agitation by private boat owners in North Bay to proceed with the project. They were encouraged by the closing words of the study:

### *Open Waterway Year 2000*

Ontario could enter the Twenty-first Century with North America's first all recreational waterway. It would set new patterns in design and operation that would enhance the environment and complement the economy.

Thus Canada's first heritage river system would incorporate Canada's first recreational waterway . . . a sharing of waterways in keeping with the requirements of a Heritage River System Designation. A worthwhile challenge to be accepted by the citizens of all Ontario for enjoyment today as well as tomorrow.

The proponents choose to ignore the closing words of Phase III, the economic impact analysis. Phase II summarized that operating costs per year will average more than \$900,000 (1987 dollars) over the first ten years of operation of the Voyageur Waterway. "The benefits which can be identified and projected in advance are not comparable and fall short of justifying the waterway on economic grounds."

For the time being, the Voyageur Waterway proposal is dormant.

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Jack Gregg's first report on the Voyageur Waterway appeared in the Winter 1987 issue of *Nastawgan*.