

**Dissertation from the Association for the Protection  
of Thirty-one Mile Lake**

**Statement of Strategic Vision  
UNE VALLÉE POUR DEMAIN – HORIZON 2025  
Initiated by the  
MRC de la Vallée-de-la-Gatineau**

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The Association for the Protection of Thirty-one Mile Lake is a not-for-profit organization, which was founded in 1982 to protect the environment, fauna and flora of the lake. Our concerns fall into three main categories: understanding what needs to be done, communicating that to members and taking the appropriate actions either with residents and lake users or with the different levels of government. The Association has 125 members most of whom have cottages or houses on the lake.

To begin with, but without seeming to be fawning, our Association congratulates the MRC-Vallée-de-la-Gatineau for the quality of this strategic study paper, "Une Vallée pour demain – Horizon 2025." The paper presents a clear understanding of the different elements specific to this area and projects an exciting vision, which is both realistic and doable. We congratulate you on the excellent layout and editing of your study paper, which was a pleasure to read.

Even though not possessing specific expertise in all of the matters outlined, the Association can identify with the criteria used to establish the five basic topics in the report as well as with the issues, action plans and windows of opportunity mentioned. That being said, we feel free to comment in a general way on the sections of the different topics, which apply to protecting the environment and to citizen involvement both in general terms and as they apply to local residents.

### **Topic 1: Housing, Urban planning**

Generally, we agree with the analysis, the issues and the ideas outlined under Topic one. Limiting urban sprawl or at least reducing it is indeed an important issue when it comes to town planning in our municipalities. This issue is narrowly aligned with Topic 5, Governance and partnerships. The centralization of industrial parks and the pooling of the workforce seem to us to be difficult to achieve given the present governance models where each town or village works to attract new businesses to its own back yard. We will deal more with this subject under Topic 5. This way of planning directly effects sustainable development by reducing commuting distances for workers as well as improving their quality of life.

Under the section on regional parks, recreational projects and tourism, you mention the importance of ensuring a quality experience to users of these facilities be they day-trippers or holidaymakers. It seems to us just as important that this philosophy also takes into consideration residents and cottagers. Lake dwellers have often made large investments so that they may enjoy peace and quiet and the beauty of nature. It is not only desirable but also essential that land uses not disturb their quality of life. To use your words, development should not be considered if the positive experience for the tourist translates into a negative one for residents. This is particularly important to take into account when developing our waterways because of the lack of proper laws or the inability to enforce the present rules. We are referring to increased numbers of certain motorboats, which have unacceptable

engine noise levels and can cause large waves, which are eroding the shoreline and disturbing bottom sediments. The difficulty of efficiently regulating these watercraft should give us pause when planning new lakefront infrastructure, which might encourage an increase in this activity. We are not advocating a “not in my back yard” attitude to all development but rather are suggesting a reasonable development philosophy towards normal uses.

## **Topic 2: Development/vitality of the area Topic 3: Environment and Health Care**

We will address the above two topics with the same remarks.

One of the gains properly emphasized in the study paper is indeed the cottager’s contribution to the amount of property taxes paid to municipalities as well as the direct economic spin-off derived by businesses in the MRC. For many municipalities the amounts collected from cottagers represent more than sixty per cent of their total property tax revenues and for some towns it is more than seventy per cent. A large number of these property owners have invested a lifetime’s effort in order to have a quiet retirement. However, there is a direct link between property taxes and sales taxes to the well being of the environment in general and to our waterways in particular.

As for the state of the environment in general, our Association and its members have been concerned for some time about the allowable uses of lakefront properties designated (villégiature) “cottage” on certain lakes but specifically on 31 mile Lake. We strongly believe that property owners who have either built or purchased a lakefront house either as a primary or a secondary residence should have the assurance that the neighbouring lakefront lot will not be used for commercial purposes. According to our research, present rules would permit such uses as: a marina, an outdoor holiday camp or a boat and motor repair business. We will elaborate this list in the annex. We further believe that permitting secondary uses for cottage zoned lots on which there is already some type of dwelling does not respect the spirit of the zoning law. To our knowledge, there are no lakefront lots available on 31 Mile Lake. Ninety-nine per cent of actual buildings are either principal or secondary residences. We wonder about the need and the relevance of keeping a zoning designation, which permits uses other than residences on these lots. As each municipality already has an area where these multiple uses are in play, would it not be appropriate to limit these uses? It’s a matter of doing something to improve the quality of life often referred to in your strategic study paper.

The proliferation of toxic bacteria, which we have known about in Québec and in our own MRC for several years, is nature’s way of giving a wake-up call to all local residents, town and village councils, and to the MRC. On this subject, the MRC VG and the municipalities composing it have been pro-active in adopting measures such as: regular emptying of septic tanks; sewage treatment plants; RCI 2009-206.

It is a matter of establishing best practices on which we can continue to build. Certain avenues should be explored in this same vein. We are referring to boat washing and to the emptying of holding tanks of boats equipped with toilets. To our knowledge, with the exception of the village of Lac Cayamant, which mandates boat washing, there are no pump-out stations for boat's holding tanks. On this last matter, installing pump-out stations in several locations around the area or alternatively sealing the holding tanks of boats equipped with toilets would go a long way to solve the problem. The number of these boats is steadily increasing in our region.

The Association is absolutely convinced that regulations alone will not be enough to ensure an efficient and long-term protection of our waterways. The work of the various lake associations constitutes a valuable link when it comes to informing and empowering residents and visitors about best practices. This is why towns and villages should firmly embrace these associations. Even though our experience has been positive we would hope that this support from the municipalities not be allowed to wane. A policy, which applies to the whole MRC, would enable this support to coordinate properly the ability of the municipalities to pay with the needs of the associations.

### **Topic 3: Environment and Health Care**

As far as this topic is concerned, while recognizing the importance and intrinsic value of the subjects considered, it seems to us to be self-evident. This topic is certainly the least discussed in the study paper because municipalities have rather limited room to manoeuvre especially when it comes to Health Care. Nevertheless, all actions taken by the MRC and municipalities, which favour prevention measures, should have a positive knock-on effect on health and ease the pressures on the Health Care system and Social Services.

Any concerns with respect to particle emissions in the air and possible remedies seem to us quite compelling. Preoccupied with managing the protection of their watercourses, lake associations must rely on their member's contributions to achieve their goals. We acknowledge right away having received financial support from local municipalities for specific programs. On the other hand we would hope that the possibility of creating a fund, which would be available to associations for lake protection, will be considered. This fund could be partially capitalised by diverting fines collected from enforcing RCI 2009-206. Funding from fines would be self-regulating, as fewer infractions would lead to less money received and less money required. Fewer infractions would also be good news for our lakes. Such funding sources would emphasize the work being done by the municipalities and the MRC to protect our lakes and would, at the same time, engage the citizenry. It would provide excellent leverage for the partnership elaborated under Topic 5.

#### **Topic 4: Communications**

The Association agrees with the views outlined in this section as well as with the windows of opportunity mentioned mainly in regard to information technology.

#### **Topic 5: Governance and Partnering**

Our Association agrees with the six items deemed indispensable which were outlined in the study paper and which concern citizen involvement. However if citizen involvement is a necessity for successfully creating a stimulating standard of living, the corollary of this necessity is the effective dissemination of information by the municipalities and MRC. Speaking as citizens who are engaged in developing a proper standard of living, we have not always encountered municipal officials who were open to communicate the non-standard information needed to carry out our work. The Association/Municipality partnership depends essentially on a shared common vision, mutual respect and transparency. Access to information by citizens and associations should be trending towards better access rather than to a tightening of access.

In our MRC, we have inherited a government structure, which makes us over-governed with 120 elected officials for a population of only 20000. Even if we can console ourselves that other MRCs are in the same boat, remedying this situation is no less compelling. We count one elected official for every 166 residents and double that number if we include cottagers. We are a long way from typical urban ratios. Of course, the size of our area dictates a larger ratio than in a heavily populated city. At the very least, with this number of elected officials we can take solace that our system of governance is highly democratic. Unfortunately, as the study paper clearly states, our system imposes a considerable expense for taxpayers. As well, this situation can lead to different municipalities adopting different regulations and enforcing them differently. The fact that there are five townships, two regional authorities and two MRCs around 31 Mile Lake allows us to put on the record the displeasure of some of our property owners.

We believe that the initial thinking on this matter should concentrate on steps to reduce costs and reconcile the management process. Even if taxpayers in our MRC do not pay the highest taxes in Québec, the situation is worrying.

We have already suggested that the creation of a support fund for lake associations could be a useful tool to strengthen the essential partnerships between the associations and municipal authorities. We are absolutely convinced that the ultimate objective of protecting our lakes is in the hands of local citizens and the lake associations, which represent them. Being aware that there are among the general population certain residents who do not respect the environment nor obey the pertinent regulations does not lessen the fact that awareness and education can

be useful tools. Human nature being what it is, the saying, “patience and time are worth more than brute force and anger” really applies here.

We warmly applaud the efforts to foster a dialogue in our community in order to ensure equal opportunity for French, English and Indigenous peoples. It’s a question of taking a step in the right direction past our prejudices and towards the improvement of shared lifestyle and shared development.

Overcoming the main challenge in order that this idea can become a day-to-day reality will depend on the forcefulness of the approach and the choices made. To do this, even if not a common practice, we recommend that a reference document be kept to record discussions and decisions so that policy makers can be assured of staying on the right track in their search for the right solutions.

These are the main arguments tabled by the Association for the Protection of 31 Mile Lake in response to the MRC Vallée-de-la-Gatineau. We hope that the overall endorsement, which we have expressed towards “Horizon 2025”, as well as the suggestions we have proposed will help to advance the process so that in 2025 our MRC will be a place where one can enjoy life, learn and work in a pleasing environment and be safe and sound.