

# Building Bridges Over Boundaries

*An Investigation of the  
Okanagan Collaborative  
Conservation Program*

CASE  
IN  
POINT  
2008

## Abstract

As sustainability and conservation planning increase in importance in contemporary planning practice, planners are challenged to look outside the constraints imposed by political boundaries and embrace ecological boundaries, such as *eco-regions* and *landscapes*.

Inspired by the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP), the Okanagan Collaborative Conservation Program (OCCP) is an effort by nearly thirty concerned parties – including governments, community groups and environmental organizations - towards creating effective regional conservation planning.

The goal of this organization is to safeguard the integrity of the critical ecosystems that run from the north to the south Okanagan. Instead of additional regulation, the OCCP seeks to provide facilitation, education and information to relevant parties in order to encourage more environmentally responsible decision making.

## Table of Contents

Abstract, [p. 1](#)

Introduction, [p. 2](#)

History, [p. 3](#)

Current Projects, [p. 4](#)

Challenges and Successes, [p. 5](#)

Key Lessons, [p. 6](#)

Manitoba Context, [p. 7](#)

References, [p. 8](#)

## INTRODUCTION

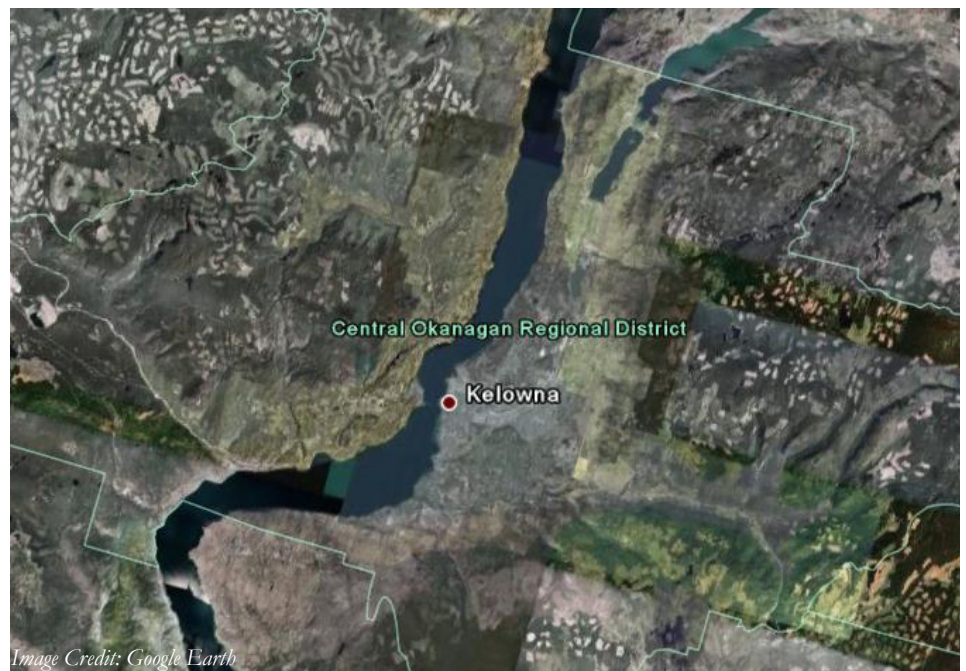


Situated in south central British Columbia, the Okanagan is a picturesque valley, anchored by Okanagan Lake and surrounded by rolling hills. One of the warmest regions of Canada, the valley is predominantly semi-arid and is in some places desert. Formerly known as an agricultural region, the valley's hot summers and mild winters have begun to attract people year round. More recently, the Okanagan has become well known as a tourism and vacation destination. As a result, the region's cities and towns are growing rapidly.

Currently, the Okanagan Valley is home to over 300,000 residents. Kelowna is the Central Okanagan's largest city and is located on the east side of Okanagan Lake (see Figure 1). To put in perspective the growth rate facing planners in the Okanagan, February 2008 saw 458 housing starts in the Kelowna area (a city with a population of approximately 106,000), while February brought only 162 housing starts in Winnipeg, a centre with a population well over six times that of Kelowna (CMHC, 2008). Kelowna is not alone, as other cities and towns in the valley are facing similar growth-related pressure.

Juxtaposed against this rapid growth is the exceptional biodiversity found in the Okanagan Valley. Much

of the valley provides desert-like habitat, an extension of the north-western American deserts. The unique climate and landscape of the Okanagan makes it home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. Unfortunately, the very characteristic that makes the Okanagan an attractive environment also makes it extremely sensitive to development pressures. Indeed, the Okanagan Valley is acknowledged as one of the three most threatened ecosystems in Canada.



**FIGURE 1:** The Okanagan Valley, located in south central British Columbia, sits around Okanagan Lake. Kelowna, the largest city in the central Okanagan, is found on the east side of Okanagan Lake.

It is undeniable that the growth taking place in the Okanagan brings with it many benefits, but it also presents planners with the challenge of how to manage this growth in the context of extremely sensitive ecosystems. Environmental planning in most jurisdictions takes place within the political boundaries of municipalities or regional districts. But, these critical ecosystems and their delicate interrelations exist on a different scale than political boundaries, those of *eco-regions* and *landscapes* (Perlman & Milder, 2005). The Okanagan ecosystems, for example, do not exist neatly within established political boundaries. The grassland ecosystems of the Caribou / Chilcotin in South Central British Columbia are dependant upon the Okanagan grasslands as an ecological link to the grasslands and desert ecosystems farther south in northern Washington state. And it is at these scales that environmental planning must take place if it is to respond meaningfully to the challenge of rapid development. But, how does a planner exert authority on a region outside of his or her jurisdiction? This is the dilemma facing environmental planners in the Okanagan.

## HISTORY



Photo Credit: James Moore

In response to this jurisdictional dilemma, action was taken in the south Okanagan in 2001 with the formation of the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP). Bringing together diverse parties interested in conservation in the Okanagan, the SOSCP was one of the first partnerships of its kind, and it has been key to the development of the Okanagan Collaborative Conservation Program (OCCP).

Among these partners are First Nations, environmental organizations, community organizations, as well as provincial and federal government departments. These partners come together to work towards conserving the biodiversity of the region. Government agencies are brought together with conservation groups, and First Nations with local government. Using these partnerships to work together, the SOSCP sought to build bridges over the traditional political boundaries that so often constrained planning practice. This was an important step towards the creation of the Okanagan Collaborative Conservation Program (OCCP).

One of the original visions of the SOSCP was to maintain the ecological corridor between the grasslands of the north and the arid desert of the

south Okanagan. This was seen as an important strategy in achieving the larger goal of protecting the region's sensitive ecosystems over the long term. However, even this relatively large scale cooperation was not large enough to conserve effectively the diverse ecosystems in the valleys. As a result, the Allan Brooks Nature Centre and the Grasslands Conservation Council began looking into creating a similar-minded organization for the north and central Okanagan valley. OCCP was conceived in 2006 to bring the north and central Okanagan into practicing environmental conservation planning at the same scale as the south Okanagan and Similkameen.

*“Through effective communication, sharing expertise, mutual project support, and leveraged funding, we can achieve greater success.”*

*- OCCP Prospectus*

Like the SOSCP, the OCCP looks to “approach shared initiatives through facilitation, education and provision of information rather than advocacy or regulation” (OCCP Prospectus: n/a). Organizations such as the OCCP do not themselves have the authority to enact regulations pertaining to environmental conservation. But, they are making truly pioneering use of collaboration to maximize their impact.

The OCCP has approximately thirty partners. Six representatives from these partner organizations make up the organization's steering committee. Action teams are made up of several representatives from partner organizations and take on the day-to-day management of particular projects with the guidance of the steering committee. Once a project is complete, that working group dissolves and its members are moved onto another project. Due to the diversity of the partnering organizations, action teams have members with wide ranging backgrounds, enabling these teams to tap broader resources, both community-based and government-related.

The SOSCP and the OCCP have formed a cooperative relationship in which each supports the other in achieving the “shared biodiversity conservation objectives for the entire Okanagan ecological corridor” (Allen & White, 2007: 22). It is the ultimate vision of both organizations that an eventual merger occur, forming a conservation partnership encompassing the entire Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. However, important differences do exist. Most notably, where the SOSCP has struggled to bring local government on board, the OCCP has excelled. Apart from minor administrative differences, this is where the two organizations are most obviously different. In this way, the OCCP has taken the lessons learned from the SOSCP and has not repeated them. It is the next step in the evolution of this type of collaborative conservation program.

## CURRENT PROJECTS



Photo Credit: Brent Magnan

Conceived in 2006, the OCCP is a relatively young organization that looks to use the success of the SOSCP model to fulfill the common goal of achieving effective Okanagan-wide environmental conservation. The OCCP approaches environmental conservation in the north and central Okanagan using *information, education* and *facilitation* instead of the more traditional *regulation*. The programs and activities of the OCCP, therefore, flow from and build upon these three tactics. As a young organization, the provision of information has been the focus of its programs thus far. Building this base of information will allow for the implementation of the second and third strategies of the OCCP. The following is a selection of current OCCP projects.

*“...a strategy that promotes habitat and ecosystem management for private and public land, while balancing social and economic needs.”*

- OCCP Prospectus

*Environmentally Sensitive Areas Project:* The Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) project builds on the Sensitive Ecosystem Inventory (SEI) database commissioned by local governments. The ESA project aims to simplify the SEI data into more manageable, less complex dataset that can be more readily incorporated into local government land use planning processes. ESA project data takes the complex data sets laid out in the SEI and combines them with species at risk habitat data, resulting in a land classification system that indicates values of low, medium and high, conservation priority. Corridors are also provided for in order to link ecosystems together, ensuring their long-term survival. Intended mostly for local government planners, the ESA project data provides a clear system for the prioritization of land that allows planners to make more responsible land use decisions that appropriately account for environmental continuity throughout the landscape.

*Natural Areas Protection Project:* Using the ESA project data as a base, the Natural Areas Protection (NAP) project seeks to locate concentrations of high value conservation land located in large lot private

holdings surrounding the city of Vernon. High value land is identified using the ESA values established in the previous project. Properties are examined for the percentage and size of high conservation value lands they contain. Properties identified may be candidates for future regional, provincial or federal parks. The data can also be used by local government planners when assessing proposed developments on those lands.

*Foreshore Inventory Mapping Project:* The foreshore of Okanagan Lake provides valuable habitat for a wide variety of aquatic and riparian ecosystems. The Foreshore Inventory Mapping project (FIM) is an attempt to craft a detailed picture of the state of the foreshore on Okanagan Lake. Details include cataloguing land use, shore type, existing riparian condition, and any human alterations made to the land. This data will be provided to local governments to aid in their land use decision-making processes and future land-use planning initiatives. This inventory is already in place for the central Okanagan, but is being extended by the OCCP to include the northern and possibly, southern portions of Okanagan Lake.



Photo Credit: James Moore

*Development in the Okanagan is beginning to encroach upon sensitive hillside and foreshore habitat.*

## CHALLENGES & SUCCESSES



Photo Credit: Brent Magnan

*Working outside of traditional jurisdictions, breaking new ground for cooperative conservation planning brings with it some unique challenges. Some of these challenges are a result of the very nature of the OCCP, while others are the result of outside forces. These challenges, together with the successes realized by the OCCP, work to inform several critical lessons that can be garnered from this precedent-setting organization.*

One of the greatest challenges faced by the OCCP is to distinguish itself as an effective, active conservation organization. Moreover, this credibility must be established in a relatively short timeframe to different stakeholder groups: community members, NGO's, and government agencies. Two strategies were employed by the OCCP to address the issue of credibility. First, the OCCP successfully involved community organizations and government agencies and departments as partners in the process. Second, to promote their organization as active and effective, seed projects were selected to align with the current goals of potential funding agencies, thus allowing a timely insurgence of project successes. This showed that the OCCP

was 'getting things done', and also helped in alleviating the second challenge: funding.

Funding is a problem faced by nearly all non-profit organizations, and the OCCP is no exception. Cooperation among partner organizations, however, does relieve some of the funding pressure. Often, the government agencies that provide funding are at the table as part of the OCCP. They provide an inroad for OCCP members in communicating their funding needs effectively to government agencies and departments. In addition, completing projects early helps establish a base of credibility that makes the OCCP more attractive to funders for future endeavours. Nevertheless, funding remains a significant obstacle for the OCCP. For instance, finding core funding for the critical Coordinator position has been an ongoing issue that has only recently been resolved.

Since the OCCP is made up of partnerships with an assortment of organizations, each with its own opinions, the OCCP faces a regular test in linking these diverse interests together to work towards one common goal. Although

this will remain a challenge for any such organization, setting out clearly defined goals for the organization itself, as well as for each project it undertakes, will help bridge divergent opinions. These goals should be articulated in well-understood terms of reference with particular attention paid to a common view of the scope of each project.

Further challenges come from the geographic area encompassed by the OCCP. Partner organizations come from across the Okanagan Valley, and the OCCP must stay relevant to all of them, or risk losing or alienating effective partners or members. Projects must, therefore, achieve some sort of balance, involving equally members from all over the Okanagan. Since the scope of the OCCP is unlikely to change, this issue will remain for the foreseeable future. Clearly, working at an eco-regional scale requires new ideas and new methods, and it will take time for organizations such as the OCCP to establish their presence.

*“sustainability, biodiversity conservation and species recovery objectives would not be attained unless there was cooperation at a larger scale.”*

*- Patrick Allen & Bryn White*

The OCCP is still a young organization working to establish itself as important player in environmental conservation in the Okanagan. As such, the demonstrable successes of the OCCP are limited and continue to evolve. The achievements outlined below are positive indications that the OCCP is moving in the right direction, but many of its true tests are still ahead.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the OCCP is that it has

successfully received the buy-in of critical partners. In particular, where others have struggled to involve local government, the OCCP has excelled. And, it is through working with and leveraging local government partnerships, that many of the OCCP initiatives will come into effect. That is not to say that *all* the OCCP's partners are not critical to its success. Indeed, the achievements of the OCCP are not attributable to any single partner, but to the effective collaboration of its multiple members. This is a tremendous success and will remain a great asset to the OCCP in the future.

The OCCP is making a difference. The ESA project data is set to be incorporated into the City of Vernon's Official Community Plan, and similar action is being considered by the District of Coldstream and the Regional District of the North Okanagan. Similar use is occurring with the results of the Natural Areas Protection program. These informative planning tools will become part of local government planning processes and will have a tangible impact on the preservation of critical ecosystems throughout the north Okanagan.



*Photo Credit: Brent Magnan*

*The conservation efforts of the OCCP aim to preserve the diminishing wildlife habitat in the Okanagan Valley.*

## KEY LESSONS



*Photo Credit: Brent Magnan*

**T**he OCCP is a remarkable organization. It has taken up the challenge of solving the dilemma presented by conducting effective environmental planning beyond the scope of individual jurisdictions. The OCCP has built bridges over these boundaries in a collaborative effort to preserve the sensitive ecosystems of the Okanagan Valley from the mounting pressures of development. Clearly, problems such as this can be overcome with creative solutions and honest collaboration.

The OCCP has built on the models of collaborative conservation embodied in organizations such as the SOSCP and attempted to involve key partners across the board. This action will play a large part in ensuring the effectiveness of OCCP directions in the future. Significant challenges will remain for the OCCP and new ones will emerge in the coming years, but if the OCCP can maintain its conscientious efforts to stay relevant to its partners, it has the capacity to cope with these future challenges.

In all of these trials and successes, one key lesson seems particularly salient: local context is paramount. As an organization of organizations, the

OCCP is dependent on the good will of its partners. In that way, the OCCP and organizations like it are very much sensitive to local political climates. Undeniably, the OCCP has benefited from the recent rise in concern over environmental issues. Partners have been willing to buy into the organization. However, it is likely that in local contexts where environmental issues are not a priority, organizations like the OCCP are far less likely to succeed.



*Photo Credit: James Moore*

*Collaborative eco-regional planning is applicable to other locations, such as the south basin of Lake Manitoba (photo), but the conditions must be right.*



Photo Credit: James Moore

Although the OCCP appears to be creating some positive change in the Okanagan, the question remains of its relevance to other locations, particularly to Manitoba. The analysis of the OCCP revealed that it is dependent upon three primary conditions: support of environmental initiatives, good will among partner organizations, and a delineated eco-region. All three of these conditions will have to exist in some measure to make fertile grounds for an organization similar to the OCCP to flourish in Manitoba. This section of the Case-in-Point has been built primarily on the insightful collaboration of Lloyd Talbot, the Manager of the Selkirk and District Planning Area.

According to Mr. Talbot, all of these factors are present in Manitoba currently. The topic, one of regional collaborative planning, is an especially relevant one. An international regional planning conference, entitled *Regional Collaboration: Learning to Think & Act Like A Region*, was just held in Winnipeg. At this conference, two critical factors were present: the will to collaborate across jurisdictions, and the understanding that environmental issues are critical. In gen-

eral, notes Mr. Talbot, the atmosphere is now far more receptive to action on environmental issues than it was in the past. In addition, recent provincial green initiatives suggest that the province is concerned about environmental conservation in Manitoba. In short, the will to collaborate on environmental initiatives is present in the planning profession, government and the private sector.

Proof of thinking along these lines can be found in the establishment of Conservation Districts in Manitoba. These districts, based on watershed and sub-watershed boundaries, are examples of inter-municipal collaboration to manage land and water resources in an environmentally sustainable manner. Unfortunately, even the sub-watershed scale may not be enough to tackle large environmental issues. For instance, The Red River basin contains a number of conservation districts, and even includes international and inter-provincial considerations. Although conservation districts may not be the answer to broad scale environmental planning challenges, they are examples of action using a number of principles similar to those necessary to make the OCCP function well.

In other words, the infrastructure for an organization much like the OCCP is already in place, if at a smaller scale.

Unfortunately, environmental organizations and representatives from the federal government seem to be missing from the collaboration table. Mr. Talbot suggests that bringing environmental organizations to the same table as the province, local government and business might be a serious challenge. Here, the adversarial nature of the environmental organization – government relationship of several years past still seems to influence environmental organizations today. They still view government and business more as opponents than as potential collaborators. For an organization like the OCCP to function here, this mentality will have to change.

Finding an appropriate and delineated eco-region will not be a problem in Manitoba. As mentioned above, the Red River basin would be an ideal candidate to test this large-scale environmental collaboration. Other opportunities exist around the south basins of Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba. Although these two regional are considerably more contained than the Red River Basin, they nevertheless provide a scale large enough to require inter-jurisdictional collaboration among diverse partners.

The time for establishing an OCCP-like organization in Manitoba is ripe. Not only is the emerging atmosphere one in which collaboration is highly encouraged, but it is also one in which action on environmental issues is supported. There will, of course, be obstacles that will test the will of partner organizations to move ahead. The true challenges of collaborative eco-regional planning, however, will only be revealed once it is tried.



*A special thanks is due to Brent Magnan, Patrick Allen, Simone Runyan, and Lloyd Talbot for their valuable input and collaboration on this Case-in-Point project.*

## REFERENCES



*Photo Credit: Brent Magnan*

### Books and Articles

Allen, P., & White, B. (Fall 2007). "Okanagan Ecological Corridor". In *Kingfisher*, Issue 15, pg. 22.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2008). *Housing Now: Winnipeg, March, 2008*. Ottawa: CMHC.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2008). *Housing Now: Kelowna, March, 2008*. Ottawa: CMHC.

Okanagan Collaborative Conservation Program. (2008). *OCCP Prospectus*.

Perlman, D., & Milder, J. (2005). *Practical Ecology for Planners, Developers, and Citizens*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

### Other sources

Telephone interviews with Brent Magnan, OCCP Steering Committee member, on several occasions between February and April, 2008.

Telephone interview with Simone Runyan, OCCP Coordinator, on Tuesday, April 8, 2008.

Telephone interview with Patrick Allen, OCCP Steering Committee member, on Wednesday, March 12, 2008.

Personal interview with Lloyd Talbot, Manager of the Selkirk and District Planning Area, on Tuesday, April 15, 2008.

### About the Collaborators

*Collaborator:* Brent Magnan, R.P. Bio, is the Environmental Planner for the Regional District of the Central Okanagan, as well as a member of the OCCP Steering Committee.

*Collaborator:* Lloyd Talbot, M.C.P., M.C.I.P., is the current Manager for the Selkirk and District Planning Area, located in Selkirk, Manitoba.