

# Ecotourism Best Way to Extend Tourism Season for Niagara

The Niagara Tourism & Convention Corp. (NTCC) has recently revealed plans for attracting more "off season" business for hotels, for the "next two years." Suddenly, there seems to be the recognition that hotel occupancies are down in the off seasons, identified as the fall and winter months, with vacant rooms at a 47% rate. Hence, a "Mission 47" campaign has been created to promote off-season events to address the problem. Goals are modest. NTCC President John Percy is aiming to lower the vacancy rate to 38% "because that's the national average." A rise of 9% in hotel occupancy is not to be scoffed at, of course. That would translate into impressive dollar amounts.

But what does Mission 47 envision as accomplishing this? It appears there's to be a "select marketing mission in Florida," for one idea, and the "expanding Niagara Wine Trail and the soon-to-be-completed culinary arts center," as well as "some type of programming...some type of holiday event to take place downtown this year." Well, that ought to do it. Just because I can't imagine bus-loads of tourists arriving from Florida in late January to see the culinary arts center, doesn't mean it couldn't happen. Clever marketing can accomplish miracles. And we do have the waterfalls themselves as a backup.

Meanwhile, Wallenda's wire walking at the Falls will be June 15th. Why was this opportunity to "extend the season" set aside in favor of a date at the height of tourist influx? Significant financial impacts, other than those realized by the Wallenda team, will be more difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Someone should get a grip on this new direction for tourist attraction.

Here are two suggestions regarding these topics: 1) filling hotels in the off season should be a sustained, concentrated, targeted marketing initiative far beyond relying on "some type of holiday event" or a culinary arts center, and 2) if the region, including the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), has decided it's going cast the Olmsted vision aside to cultivate circus acts to attract tourists, one wire walker is scarcely enough; bring on the barrel-over-the-falls riders. If the purpose is to generate tourist dollars, let's do it--and no indignant talk about "wire walking is a skill and barrel daredevils rely on luck." You think there's no skill involved in designing a life-protecting barrel? Tell that to hundreds of engineering students who attempt to design protective containers for eggs dropped from tall buildings. Spring and fall for the barrel riders, though; let's fill those off-season hotels.

Ecotourism is a concept that John Percy of the NTCC seems determined to ignore, though literally hundreds, if not thousands, of other tourist destinations are enjoying significant economic growth because they are not only aware of it, but have actively pursued the populations who are attracted to the natural world. For us, it is linked with the total removal of the gorge parkway and the natural restoration of the gorge rim as the first step. The beautiful linear park that would result, with hiking and bicycling trails linked to the natural wonder of the Falls themselves, would be the initial focal point in a region whose natural parks have much to offer the mid-range ecotourist.

This, to put it directly, is a way to extend the season at Niagara, spring, fall, and winter. It's worth mentioning: over 30 species of warblers migrate through our area spring and fall (Goat island is one such area where they can be observed), some from as far away as Peru; the lower gorge river is host to winter concentrations of gulls whose number and variety is one of the

largest in the world. Colorful autumn foliage, combined with water and unique gorge wall backdrops provide outstanding opportunities for photographers; the ice bridge; the breakup of ice in the spring, enormous chunks of ice plummeting over the falls--may be routine for those of us who live here, but would be dramatic to others--if they knew about it. The American Bald Eagle has had a nesting presence at the Iroquois National Wildlife Reserve since 1986.

These are but a few highlights of what the Greater Niagara region has to offer the ecotourist with over 60 parks and wildlife habitat areas that cover over seven million acres. (More detailed information is available at [www.nfwhc.org](http://www.nfwhc.org)) It would, of course, require work, a concentrated effort, to package these treasures into direct marketing appeals to ecotourists. Is this why Percy has been ignoring this potential?

In the meantime OPRHP has been handed 25 million, in part to respond to the comment in the NY Times article that called the park at Niagara "shabby." To address this "insult," OPRHP will put a restroom facility on the Three Sister Islands (there is already a permanent and serviceable restroom facility 250 feet away from the parking lot at the Three Sisters) and will widen asphalt paths. These are preposterous and absurd reactions to one word that appeared in a newspaper article, the definition of which is at best undefined. The shabbiness noted may well have to do with trash, such as paper napkins and empty drink containers, strewn around the Top of the Falls restaurant on Goat Island all summer, or the flimsy raincoats discarded by Maid of the Mist patrons, that end up entangled in shrubbery at gorge edge and hanging in tree branches. OPRHP, including Commissioner Rose Harvey, joined in chorus by Senator Maziarz and former park's employee, now Assemblyman Ceretto, have learned the word "Olmsted" and the phrase "native plantings," though the concept of genuine stewardship seems to escape them. The squalid OPRHP maintenance garage continues to exist on the gorge rim and tulips (native to Holland?) continue to bloom at Devil's Hole State Park and elsewhere in the system.

Note--here's the sentence, written by Barbara Ireland, which appears to have twisted everyone's shorts into a knot: "Meanwhile, in Niagara Falls, New York, the visitor who ventures inside the shabby, underfinanced state park is surprised to discover vestiges of something like a natural landscape." Perhaps it's too subtly expressed for some, but it's clearly critical of the vanishing natural landscape more than anything else. But not to worry. Soon visitors will be able to relieve themselves in a Three Sister's Restroom. (Incidentally, the Three Sisters is the location where flora of the most "complexity" and "diversity" is found according to esteemed botanist Patricia M. Eckel in her "Botanical Evaluation of Goat Island Complex, Niagara Falls, New York." Here, she says, "The plant communities in these islands appear to be the most intact of any on the reservation...these three islands may be the least damaged of the ecosystems in the complex." Questions arise here: Will the addition of a restroom facility have the potential to harm or help this botanical treasure? Will it be a Porta-Potty? Will this make the area more "shabby" or less? What do Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Ceretto think about this?

Common sense has told thousands of people the gorge parkway should be totally removed. OPRHP should be leading the charge to have it removed and natural landscapes restored. If common sense isn't enough, the EDR study (the only genuine study ever done) should provide what's needed. It concluded: 3.8 million for total removal; there will be no traffic overloads on alternative routes; it should be removed because it would save tens of millions in eventual replacement costs and has the potential to spur economic growth (ecotourism & other); the first section to go should be that between Findlay Drive and Devil's Hole State Park, the City Line.

OPRHP has five times the necessary money for total removal right now. The New York State Power Authority should be alongside them in strong support of removal; they should be joined by The National Heritage Area Commission with equally strong support for total removal in its mission to "provide special reasons for people to visit the Niagara Frontier and to preserve the region's cultural and natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations." The City of Niagara Falls is, via the City Council and Tourism Advisory Board, already in support of total removal--along with nearly 80 other groups and organizations. This is essentially a shovel-ready project. What's the holdup?

Apparently, we can't get our ducks in a row. When Senator Schumer visited here a few months ago, to announce millions in funding for upper parkway work, he said, and I paraphrase, but it was very clear: "Get your ducks in a row and I'll help you with the gorge rim parkway." So now our ducks are quacking about widening asphalt paths and new railings and restrooms and other "non-shabby" things.

The Niagara Heritage Partnership ([www.niagaraheritage.org](http://www.niagaraheritage.org)) is in 100% support of all OPRHP intentions to restore natural landscapes, to reduce "lawns," and other movement toward Olmsted principles; we speak in opposition to additional blacktop, the aforementioned restroom, replacing the pedestrian bridge to Goat Island rather than restoring it, charging money to witness wire walking or other acts (which takes us back to 1800 practices pre the Free Niagara Movement); we encourage significant reduction of parking lots on Goat Island and the restoration of natural environments, that OPRHP choose the total gorge parkway removal option of the six so-called "plans" they have concocted and have currently filed away, that they stop new repaving at the south end of the gorge parkway, which suggests the million dollars (rounded off) they spent on the six plans was a sham--and that, if they genuinely believe in stewardship as it relates to Olmsted, they coax their little ducks into a row and work at getting others to do the same in the mission to totally remove the gorge parkway and to restore our legacy of natural landscapes along the rim.

Sincerely,  
Bob Baxter  
NHP Conservation Chair