

# Defending heritage

## The Rideau Waterway Land Trust is devoted to conservation

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**Y**ears before Bob Rae ever dreamed of running for political office, he spent his summers as a boisterous young lad fishing and boating on Big Rideau Lake.

He remembers his first visit to the area when he was six years old. It was 1954 and the Rae family had gone to the pristine lake to visit friends. Impressed by the beauty of the place, the Raes bought their own cottage on the lake two years later and have been vacationing there for more than half a century.

As a child, Rae was fascinated with the wooden boats that went up and down the Rideau carrying tour guides and fishermen eager to snag their next big catch.

Those old wooden fishing boats are gone now, but Rae has put his name behind the Rideau Waterway Land Trust to see as much of the area preserved as possible so that future generations can enjoy it as he has.

"I think it's only when you get out on the lakes and canal that you understand how precious it is," said Rae, a former Ontario premier and recent federal Liberal leadership candidate.

"As I've gotten older...it's very much become home to me."

The Rideau Waterway Land Trust, a non-profit organization, was started in 1996 to preserve environmentally significant land for public use. Since then, it has acquired roughly 600 acres spread over 11 pieces of property. Nine were donated and two were bought.

The land trust also has conservation easements on two properties for which the owners have retained their land while agreeing not to develop it.

The land trust's flagship property is Rock Dunder, which it bought last year. The 250-acre piece of property along Whitefish Lake was once owned by the Boy Scouts of Canada. Open to the public year-round, the property features a lookout point above high cliffs that offers a spectacular view of the Rideau system.

Rae said saving pieces of land such as Rock Dunder from development is a key to improving the overall environmental health of the Rideau system.

Preserving the land is becoming increasingly important as the area continues to evolve. Larger cottages are being built, people are living there year-round and more tourists are coming, all of which put increased pressure on the ecosystem.



Ian MacAlpine/The Whig-Standard

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— Dave Walker, the Rideau Waterway Land Trust's treasurer

Despite development so far, Rae said, the natural flavour of the landscape has basically remained the same.

To help ensure it doesn't change, he became the honorary chairman of the land trust about a decade ago.

"Each town [along the canal] is vying for the tourist dollar and the canal itself has become much more of a place for tourist activity," he said. "But there's a certain timeless quality to it and it's actually developed at a slower pace than many other parts of the province, if you compare it to Muskoka. It's maintained its character a lot."

The Rideau Waterway Land Trust wants to keep it that way.

"We work with landowners who want their land preserved," said Dave Walker, the land trust's treasurer. Support for saving the land is

definitely there, he said.

Roughly 70 per cent of the organization's funding comes from community donations, the rest from the Kingston Community Foundation and government.

Indeed, it was the community that first came to the land trust to explore the possibility of buying Rock Dunder.

"The community learned that the Boy Scouts were in the position where they would have to sell Rock Dunder," said Walker.

The land trust started negotiations with the Boy Scouts and volunteers began fundraising to pay for it.

"We thought we'd get 70 donors, but by the end we had over 300," said Walker. "We had people who can't even walk the trails at Rock Dunder donate to us."

Volunteers raised \$170,000, which was more than enough to pay for the \$120,000 property. The land trust used some of the leftover money to do a survey of the property and banked about \$30,000 to use the interest for upkeep of the land.

"If the land trust hadn't taken that land, it would have fallen into private hands and it would have been developed," said Walker. "The public wouldn't have access to it."

Instead, people use the beautiful

property year-round for free. Six kilometres of trails were upgraded by the Rideau Trail Association through a partnership with the land trust. There are areas for canoeists to pitch tents and there are cottages for hikers to rest in along their way. The two small log cabins at the site were old homesteader places transported to the area from the Ottawa Valley by the Boy Scouts.

School groups use Rock Dunder as part of their outdoor programs. Students have camped on the land and used the large cabin once owned by the Boy Scouts.

The land trust is looking at acquiring neighbouring property to expand the Rock Dunder conservation area.

"Donors have already come forward and said they would help pay for any land adjacent to Dunder," said Walker, who works full-time as the executive director of the Canadian Land Trust Alliance, which is affiliated with land trusts across the country. This year, the land trust is hoping to acquire two new properties, he said.

"Without the community support for the land trust, we wouldn't be here."

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# Cottagers offer support

## 'If we can preserve the wetlands, we can help the quality of water'

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Sitting in his office just steps from the old Lockmaster's House in Smiths Falls, Walker speaks passionately about land trusts working with non-governmental organizations.

"Together, we can protect more land," he said.

The priorities for land trusts are typically wetlands (because they provide habitat and cleanse the groundwater); areas of natural and scientific interest; and habitat for species at risk.

"If we can preserve the wetlands, we can help the quality of water in the Rideau [system]," he said. "When the land trust accepts a piece of land, it's in perpetuity and that's forever. It will be protected and it won't be developed."

The land trust has volunteers responsible for maintaining the land to keep it safe for public use. "If a wind storm blows through and a tree comes down, we have to clean that up," he said.

Walker said the land trust volunteers take their work seriously because they want to make sure there are going to be people in place to manage the property in the future.

The land trust has every piece of property it acquires surveyed. Then a report is written on the environmental significance of the land, as well as what's on it.

"We don't just go out and say, 'yeah, it looks good, we'll take it.' We have a whole process."

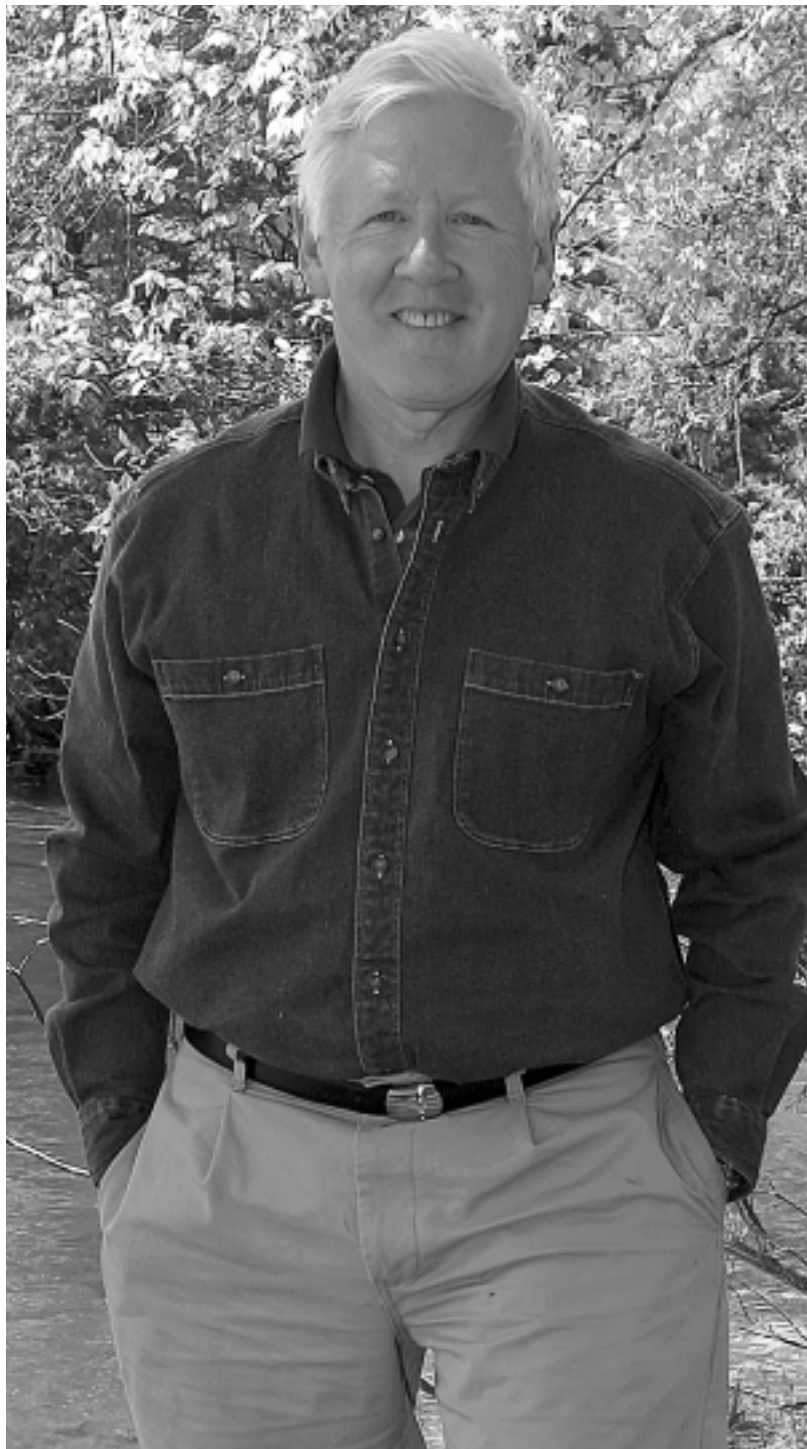
The Rideau Waterway Land Trust has attracted the support of Americans with cottages in the area. The organization has made it possible for them to donate land here in Canada and receive tax credits for the gift in the United States.

One such landowner is Robert Van Niel, who donated 25 acres of his family's property about seven years ago.

A resident of Rochester, N.Y., Van Niel has been vacationing at his family's cottage on Cranberry Lake for more than 50 years. The peacefulness of the area draws him back year after year.

"That particular lake is still as quiet as it was 35 or 40 years ago," he said. "It's a very restful area. There's lots of wild flowers and flora and fauna. There's good bass there if you put your mind to it."

Van Niel's father, Cornelius, came to the area for the first time in 1912 when he arrived in Kingston, rented a skiff and went out on the



Photos by Mark Bergin/The Whig-Standard

**Bob Rae owns a cottage on an island in Big Rideau Lake. Rae, who grew up on the Rideau system, has put his name behind the Rideau Waterway Land Trust.**

Rideau Canal with some friends to do some fishing.

He instantly fell in love with the place and, in 1949, bought 30 acres. Over the next 13 years, he built three cottages on it. The family spent many holidays there while the children were growing up.

The younger Van Niel has continued visiting and has always appreciated its natural beauty. So when David Walker from the Rideau Waterway Land Trust came to see him years ago to broach the idea of donating land, it wasn't a tough sell.

Van Niel and his siblings felt it

was a worthy cause and decided to donate a portion of their land.

It's mostly wooded area with about 4,000 feet of waterfront on a peninsula between Dog and Cranberry lakes.

"We're very interested in seeing that land stay in its natural state," said Van Niel. "There are too many lakes, especially here in the Rochester area, where there's wall-to-wall cottages."

He wholeheartedly supports what the land trust is doing and he tells many of his friends about it so that they, too, will donate their land to the



Dave Walker is Treasurer of the Rideau Waterway Land Trust.



**Robert VanNiel donated 25 acres of property to the land trust.**

organization and have it preserved.

For Bob Rae, who has his own cottage near Portland, it's also about preserving a special place.

"Somebody once said to me that an environmentalist is somebody who bought his cottage last year," he said.

"On the one hand you say, 'this is putting a lot of pressure on [the environment],' but at the same time, you say, 'having benefited from it so much myself, how can I say anything about somebody else gaining pleasure out of the same environment?'"