open door, a bridge that can be built. And you can then move forward. And so, working with developers, working with industry, working with the polluters in some industries and some services that are provided—you work with those people and you help them make their business better, and the environment becomes better. You help them make money, then the environment becomes number one on their list, or at least number two. The best way to make money for this organization is to help somebody else make money.

This collaborative model of building trust and collaboration was something the original RAP process was supposed to facilitate, and in Collingwood it has flourished. The community has built a model for doing further work that sees restoration work as an ongoing project of changing a community’s consciousness. When all stakeholders are seen as having part of the truth of things, restoration work can be accomplished across what are conventionally considered lines in the sand.

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Great Lakes restoration: one community at a time

GREAT LAKES RESTORATION: ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME
The answer would likely be something like the community of Collingwood, Ontario, the location of the first successful restoration of a government identified Great Lakes Area of Concern. It’s also a community that not only accepted restoration as a mandate, but used the process to begin changing its consciousness about the environment, and to catapult itself into the forefront of any list you might make of ecologically and socially responsible towns in North America.

What do you get when you mix a comprehensive government-led initiative to clean up a polluted harbor with engaged, creative, and long-term thinking citizens?

The Environment Network has experimented to create programs that address habitat restoration and protection while also adding economic opportunities and social support to the community. For example, several programs created by the Network provide work opportunities for at-risk kids while building trails and other kinds of access to water resources in Collingwood and surrounding communities.

"Originally it started out with just that link to the economy," Rich recalls. "The reason was because we had to meet people where they were at. And where people were, at that time, back in 1993-94-95, when we were really getting going, was that people were not interested in the environment. So, in order for us to get sound environmental changes, we had to make sure that it was a solid economic move. And so that’s how we really started making the link between those two pillars. And we very quickly realized that if you aren’t meeting people’s needs in terms of their hierarchy of needs, then we really aren’t achieving much either. We have to look at housing and social issues."

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By creating projects that connect money from sources (individuals, foundations, government, etc.) who want to pay for the materials to create trails or restore habitat with sources who want to help certain groups of people, such as children from low-income families, the Environment Network gets projects done for communities throughout the Collingwood region. Just as significant as the enhancement to the natural resources of the community is the impact these programs have had on the hundreds of people, especially young people, who have participated in the projects.

"Any given municipality will have a wish list of projects that they would like to have done," Rich says. "At the Environment Network, we have a big list on our wall of all the projects we would like to see come to fruition. And through creative fundraising we find little pots of money that will do this project and then do that project over there. With the youth projects we kind of pull it all together. And so we’ll have them working in one area for two weeks, and another area maybe for six weeks, and so on. People were using the trail and walking along, and then sitting in a nice quiet place, they thought, ‘Oh man! This is a beautiful spot. Why are we even considering development here? Why don’t we promote this as protected space? ’"
Here’s how they did it.

In 1977 when the Great Lakes International Joint Commission (IJC) designated Collingwood Harbour as one of 43 Areas of Concern, residents saw an opportunity to rethink the community’s relationship to the most important resource in its history—a large natural harbour. The harbour had been home in the past to a ship building facility. The shipyards were no longer operational in the 1980s, but a large brownfield site, a harbour with high levels of phosphorous and other contaminants, and problems throughout the watershed that emptied into the harbour had all combined to raise the place to the dubious honor of being an Area of Concern requiring the community to create a Remedial Action Plan (RAP) in order to restore “beneficial uses” to the harbour.

The initial meeting for the RAP process in the community was convened by Environment Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Environment. Dr. Gail Krantzberg, the government official appointed to oversee the process, found an inquisitive and connected local leader in the form of Ed Houghton, That was always one of our founding principles. We didn’t want to do the job just to get de-listed. We obviously wanted to repair or bring back beneficial uses, restore beneficial uses to Collingwood Harbour, but we wanted to also instill in people’s minds that the environment is important and that we needed to continue the process that we’d started.”

A key aspect of continuing the process that began with the harbour cleanup was the creation of a storefront office for the RAP process in downtown Collingwood. This office became a source of local information about the RAP process, and a meeting ground for national and provincial officials with local people. After the harbour was successfully cleaned up and became the first Area of Concern to be de-listed by the IJC, the storefront office also became the scene of continued engagement. Several members of the citizen’s committee, including Houghton and Doug Garbutt, did not want the work begun by the RAP process to stagnate or stop. They committed to creating an organization to continue the work of raising the community’s consciousness regarding the environment.

In 1993, a year before the harbour was successfully de-listed, the committee set up a fledgling organization, The Environment Network of Collingwood, to continue in the storefront office set up for the RAP. This Network, which immediately joined the nation-wide Green Communities Initiative driven by the Environment Ministry, has been at the forefront of innovative projects in the community for more than thirteen years, and is going strong today.

Michele Rich, the project coordinator for the Network has been critical to building on the de-listing process. She and others at the Environment Network have helped the community develop creative ways to address not only environmental issues, but also economic opportunities and social problems. Rich says that the Environment Network began by focusing on economical solutions to environmental issues, but has steadily moved over Civic governance works well when there is a civic community marked by an active, public spirited citizenry, by egalitarian political relations, by a social fabric of trust and cooperation. It is the social fabric of the community that encourages cooperation. This point is crucial to understanding how management of public resources might be effectively carried out, and why Collingwood seems to be predisposed to emerge as a sustainable community.

who was then the Collingwood Public Works employee in charge of the water system of the community. Houghton asked lots of questions at the meeting, and Krantzberg invited him to become one of the community members on the Public Advisory Committee (PAC) that was expected to take the local lead in the process of restoring the harbour.

“They [government officials] were making comments, and some of the comments touched with me, because I’m third generation in Collingwood,” Houghton recalls. “Water—the Collingwood Harbour was very important, not only to Collingwood, but to my family. My grandfather worked in the shipyards. I spent a lot of time fishing in Collingwood Harbour in the winter time, and because I look after the utilities, the water side of the utility. I was asking questions and was very interested at that very first meeting.”

That initial interest and enthusiasm led community members to select Houghton as the first president of the citizen committee.

The committee included citizens from many different areas of community life, including industry, environmental groups, business interests and more. Krantzberg, as facilitator of the process handed over the real power and decision-making to local citizens, meanwhile she made sure that the government’s resources were available whenever the local community members had questions about various aspects of the process of restoration.

“We didn’t want people to think that they were a special interest group,” Houghton says. “This was the furthest thing from a special interest group.

Among other educational projects they created an innovative environmental playground, ENVIROPARK, on the waterfront of the harbour. The play structures of the park represent water use in the town in all of its manifestations—for industry, for residential needs, for agriculture—and teaches kids how everyday lives affect the environment.
This was a stakeholder group that had a huge stake in it, and it was an engaged group.”

The group entered into the spirit of work on cleaning up the harbour with an entrepreneurial spirit designed to experiment and be creative with a diverse range of activities. Restoration activities included technical projects such as enhancing sewage treatment with advanced computer technology to optimize phosphorous removal, and rehabilitating nearby Black Ash Creek with a bioengineered crib-wall made from logs and vegetation to stabilize the slope of the stream and enhance fish habitat. Native plants placed between the logs and soil became more rooted as the logs decayed, leading to a thick layer of plants to protect the slope.

Perhaps as significant as the technical projects, the citizens of Collingwood engaged in a process of education and outreach on environmental issues. Among other educational projects they created an innovative environmental playground, ENVIRO-PARK, on the waterfront of the harbour. The play structures of the park represent water use in the town in all of its manifestations—for industry, for residential needs, for agriculture—and teaches kids how everyday lives affect the environment.

The long-term impacts of the community’s work to restore the harbour continue to the present, just as the original members of the PAC hoped they would.

“We didn’t want to build this up to some big crescendo and become totally de-listed [as an Area of Concern] and then all of a sudden have everything fall apart and have nothing happen afterward,” Houghton says of the work by the original citizen’s committee. “We wanted to make sure the processes that we were working on, the projects we were working on were enduring kinds of things, that they would last for many many many years to come.
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time towards working with a full definition of sustainability, that is, addressing social, economic and environmental challenges as holistically as possible.

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**THE WORK IN COLLINGWOOD HAS PERPETUATED A COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT.**

“Typically environmental organizations will shy away from, and perhaps oppose developers,” Rich observes. “But we have a developer as our president. Working with developers actually teaches us how they think. Because everybody thinks differently. And it’s not just what they think, but it’s how they think that you need to understand. And so when you can put yourself in their position, and have a conversation with them and understand where they’re coming from, they begin to understand where you’re coming from. And so then there’s an
open door, a bridge that can be built. And you can then move forward. And so, working with developers, working with industry, working with the polluters in some industries and some services that are provided—you work with those people and you help them make their business better, and the environment becomes better. You help them make money, then the environment becomes number one on their list, or at least number two. The best way to make money for this organization is to help somebody else make money.”

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