# Shifting the Imagination of a Region:
# The Power of a Niagara River Ramsar Designation

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*Imagination is, after all, an intensely practical activity*. (Le Guin)

The Niagara River Ramsar Designation calls out a discrete place on the face of the earth. It acknowledges this place's specialness, its ecology, its role in human settlements, and its connectivity to other systems. The Niagara River is a specific, grounded or shall we say, watered place. Likewise humans also inhabit discrete places on this earth and these places are not only a backdrop, but active players in our lives.

> . . . the particularism of distinctive *places* fashioned by human culture's peculiar and fascinating interpenetration with all the vagaries of topography, climate and evolving ecology that define landscapes – and the continuing existence of such *places* despite the homogenizing forces of the modern world ought to cause us to realize that one of the most insightful ways for us to think about the humans past (and its future) is in the form of what might be called *bioregional* histories. (Flores, p. 44)

Yet landscapes and physical places are not usually experienced in their material presence because they are mediated through culture -- meanings we derive from the stories we tell ourselves about the place that are at times biographically written, but most often socially constructed and variously represented. Through culture, humans live at the intersection of physical places and our imaginary of them. The imaginal is very powerful in part because it is seldom explicit. Yet it is intensely practical as Le Guin says because we take action from within the imaginal or as Ursula Le Guin says: "Home, imagined, comes to be." For example, consider how an idea or imaginaries such as the "American Dream" built suburbs across this nation; or the way that the term Silicon Valley has such power in our economic exchanges; or in our case, how the term, Rustbelt, when speaking of place imaginally communicates abandonment and age. Beliefs and imaginations set a boundary of what we believe is possible and therefore, what we actions we take in specific places. The meanings are derived from place and the place is lived in through the meaning.

In places such as neighborhoods, communities, and cities, the imagination is often grounded in the daily lives of people. However, regions, such as the Niagara region gathered by the Niagara River, must rely more on the stories and histories than daily practices because one has less personal experiences with the complex vastness of the physical and material world at this scale. Our ideas about the Niagara River and this region are built on the shared narratives and representations of the place – constructed by those who came before, by those who live in the region itself, and by outsiders.

The Niagara River, the wetland we honor today, is a place, a system, a drinking water supply, a diverse habitat, a border, a generator of power, a playground and many other things. But to its inhabitants, the imagination of the Niagara River, its meaning, the kinds of actions involving the river, and its contribution to the sense of place, has shifted over time. In my brief comments, I'd like to tell a few stories about this shifting imaginations and their consequences, and suggest how important the Ramsar

designation is at this moment in time. And given the complexity of any place, the stories selected tell the story I want to tell, but there are many others left unsaid.

STORY ONE: NIAGARA RIVER AS BOUNTY

From a geological perspective, the Niagara River is quite young. The entire Great Lakes system emerged at the end of the Last Ice Age about 12,000-10,000 years ago, leaving the large basins filled with glacial water and the watershed we know today. The Niagara River turns the flow of water north at the eastern end of Lake Erie to connect it to Lake Ontario. It runs over and cuts through the Niagara Escarpment creating the crashing falls. Over time, the water has eroded the escarpment so that the falls have "moved" upstream, leaving the Niagara Gorge, a unique habitat along the River.

There has been human habitation in this region since the ice retreated. The biodiversity of the area was extraordinary with the whole eastern edge of Lake Erie a deep and continuous wetland that bordered the Niagara River. The land and the water provided food and sustenance to many different indigenous people to include the Neutrals, who were living in this region when Father Hennepin arrived in 1678. He declared at viewing Niagara Falls: "the Waters which fall from this horrible Precipice, do foam and boyl after the most hideous manner imaginable, making an outrageous Noise, more terrible than that of Thunder . . . ". These words reflect a very different imagination from the native guides who brought him there and who considered place of the great falls as sacred, and the river itself, a source of life.

STORY TWO: NIAGARA AS POWERHOUSE OF EARLY INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE STRUGGLE TO 'FREE NIAGARA'

The beauty of the Niagara River was acknowledged by early leaders as demonstrated by the promotion of the falls in an 1818 tourist map. But the primary vision brought by Europeans settlers was a radical shift from native cultures and rooted in the utility of the region's resources including the Niagara River. It was only a little more than a decade after the war of 1812 that the Buffalo community and NYS imagined, designed and built the Erie Canal which opened in 1825, 'mixing the waters' or violating the watersheds depending on your perspective. The opening of the Erie Canal drastically changed the movement of goods and people between the opening Midwest and east coast and abroad. And although the age of canals was shortly replaced by rail transport, it has remained a powerful imagination in the nation's mind.

Niagara Falls, originally known at New Manchester, was quick to capture mechanical power of the running waters to build mills and factories along the shoreline at the upper falls. This utilization was increased exponentially with the building of the Hydraulic Canal in 1847 that diverted water from the upper falls through the city to the High Banks below the falls. By 1887, the Schoellkopf Power Plant was producing and distributing direct current electricity and in 1895, alternating current, invented by Tesla at Niagara Falls, was being produced at the Adams Power Plant.

> At Niagara the great step was taken in the epoch-making century of local mechanism power to the new era of universal electrical power, assuring to the 20th century an advance over the nineteenth comparable to that which the steam engine gave the nineteenth century over the preceding centuries. It was at *Niagara. Niagara* – what other word conveys the same awe and sense of power! (Adams)

By 1906, there were five hydroelectric power plants at the edge of the Niagara River near the falls – two on the US side and three on the Canadian side, one of which was owned and financed by John J. Albright to power Lackawanna Steel plant in Buffalo. The exhilaration of this massive input of electricity into the region is best reflected in Lord Kelvin's comment that "I look forward to the time when the whole water from Lake Erie will find its way to the lower level of Lake Ontario through machinery. . .I do not hope that our children's children will ever see the Niagara cataract." This same enthrallment of electric power inspired many utopian proposals to include "Metropolis" by King Camp Gillette (razor baron), and novels by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

The Niagara River and the falls enabled the activities, investments, infrastructure and practices that emerged. Yet, Niagara Falls even with the development of mechanical power in the 1860s and 1870s inspired a very different vision of this place. Lord Kelvin's statement reflected a faith in progress and human ingenuity to improve the lives of people, assuming a right to use the river for energy production and waste. The other vision, articulated by men such as F.L. Olmsted, H.H. Richardson, and Frederick Church was rooted in awe for the beauty and power of the Niagara River and Falls. They believed humans had an obligation to protect natural, sacred places for posterity. This struggle between a homo-centric 'technological utopian vision' toward the world vs. an eco-centric respect and reverence for the natural world was enacted at Niagara Falls in the 19th and early 20th century. And we know, it is still being played out today.

The "Free Niagara Movement" as it was named, found the many mills and factories located along the shores of the Niagara River and on Goat Island offensive, their existence an assault on the sacred God-given natural beauty of the place. The "Free Niagara Movement" brought power and wealth to their vision starting around 1865 until they were successful to have the State of New York set aside the land and the river around Niagara Falls for the future. In 1875, the Niagara Reservation was declared a State Park, the first state park in the U.S. The Reservation was designed by Olmsted and Vaux as a natural, pastoral landscape. This may well have been the first time that industry was actually removed to make room for an ecological restoration. Because the same battle was being fought at the Canadian falls the two countries almost achieved a binational park at Niagara Falls. But this was not to happen and in 1887, The Queen Victoria Niagara Falls Park was established.

In a sense, the Free Niagara Movement had a second act in 1909 when the U.S. and Canada signed the Boundary Waters Treaty that created the International Joint Commission, addressed the problem of pollution and mandated the amount of water that could be diverted for hydroelectricity ensuring that that falls would continue. This treaty was updated in 1950 Niagara Diversion Treaty to stipulate how much water must go over the falls rather than how much can be diverted. These treaties recognize the responsibility of governments to protect natural resources even while providing economic support.

STORY THREE: THE WEALTH OF NIAGARA

The Niagara River, which had initially been a transportation impediment to progress in this region, now was the powerhouse that fueled enormous economic development and wealth. The economy was built on power, bread and steel, the basics of life. The available of inexpensive power attracted a wide diversity of industries to include petrochemicals, abrasive, metallurgical products, automobile manufacturing, machine building and even blue dye for your jeans. Companies such as Alcoa, Allied Chemical, Carborundum, Hooker Chemical, Ford, Bethlehem Steel, General Mills, and so on located

facilities along the Niagara River, the Lake Erie Shoreline, the Buffalo River that flows into the Niagara. The region was the Silicon Valley of the early 20th century with its innovations and technology. In spite of economic ups and downs, the Niagara region was able to ramp up production of all basic industries during both WWI and WWII, serving as a powerhouse for the war efforts.

By the time of the 1901 Pan American Exposition, Buffalo had a population of 350,000 people, more than today, it was the 8th largest city in the United States, and a pinnacle of technological innovation with electric lights powered by alternative current generated in Niagara Falls. It was one of the busiest ports in the country, transporting grain and goods from the Midwest to NYC and immigrants back to the Midwest.

This economic development created great wealth in the region, shared with the public through the building of a culture and fabric of art and cultural. The demand for labor and the organizing of the labor movement provided good jobs and a comfortable life for people of the region. There were civic actions that recognized the importance of public health such as improved public water systems, and in the 1930s in Buffalo, the opening of a world class sewer treatment plant, and a special chemical treatment sewage plant in Niagara Falls.

In spite of the Great Depression and the two wars, life was thought to be good in Western New York by many of the residents. It could be said that "[T]he region has grown through active efforts to create, nurture and sustain an infrastructure that capitalized on natural advantages" (Herzberg).

Capitalizing on one's natural advantages -- like its location on the Great Lakes and abundance of fresh water, like the Niagara River and the falls, like the booming labor force -- did have an end. As the canals were replaced by trains to transport goods, the trains were replaced by trucks that were much more agile, the advantage of location falters. As the world expanded after WWII and the economy became global, a commitment to place dissolved and ongoing investments in local industry faltered. One by one the wealth producing industries withdrew from the region, finding cheap labor abroad, and developing nations willing to make a deal.

What had taken over an hundred and fifty years to build, fell apart in three decades. The mix of challenges was beyond the usual boom / bust cycle that the region had become accustomed to. It was a collapse of its entire economic foundation and the imagination of Niagara's place in the world.

## STORY 4: NIAGARA AS RUSTBELT

One of the death knells of the region was the opening of St. Lawrence Seaway 1959 that almost immediately ended the grain industry and Buffalo's transshipment location advantage. Within two decades, all of the steel mills had shut their doors, laying off thousands of workers and supply chains. The sense of betrayal was palpable; despair permeated many neighborhoods and folks decided to leave in search of work. Between 1960 and 1990, the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls that had been the powerhouse of industry and work, lost half of their populations to the suburbs and many people left the region in search of work. The people who lived along the Niagara River were in shock as they had come to expect the deference and investment that accompanies an economically successful region.

Among the many stories and histories that are told about the collapse, I will tell two: the blizzard of 77 and Love Canal. They are not unrelated.

Most people have heard of Love Canal but they might not know that this canal, this particular place, started out as a utopian dream. Colonel Love arrived in Niagara Falls with a scheme to divert water across the land and over the Niagara Escapement to produce hydroelectric power, and then to build a "Model City" on the Ontario plain north of the falls. By 1893 he has acquired 20,000 acres and had convinced many governmental and civic people about the scheme. He constructed the first mile of his canal when his scheme collapsed for various reasons – partly because of limitations of water diversion, partly because of the new technology of AC current. In any event, he left but his canal remained, his property moving into NYS ownership that later did create what we know as Model City, but with an entirely different agenda.

Love Canal, although directly adjacent to the Niagara River, was not connected when built but it did provide a swimming hole and picnic area for local people. During WWII, the canal was closed and used by the Army and Hooker Chemical as a waste depository for their brew of toxic chemicals generated during the war and subsequently covered. Post WWII, Niagara Falls expanded and built a suburban community around the canal called LaSalle and in 1953, Hooker Chemical sold the covered canal to the School District to meet the needs of the growing community. To be fair, Hooker Chemical initially refused to sell but was persuaded, and further, their dumping was not, during the 1940s, illegal as there were no laws for the disposal of toxic waste.

From the beginning of LaSalle, there was some sense by a few of the residents that things were amiss -- like when their children's shoes melted in the school yard, when rocks found on the ground were thrown and exploded, when there were noxious odors in people's basements and what seemed to be more than normal illnesses. But it wasn't until the blizzard of '77 that the true extent of contamination was revealed.

This blizzard of '77 that overtook the region with freezing temperatures, high winds, volumes of snow and drifts of 40 feet in some locations, was seen by the nation on TV. This event branded Buffalo as the city of snow, an imagination to outsiders that continues to this day. But there were other consequences. The volume of water generated by the storm caused Love Canal in 19777 to overflow into the surrounding neighborhood, into people's homes, and throughout the community. People could no longer ignore the odors and brew covering the ground that was revealed by the storm. This led first to the collection of health data by 'housewives' in the community such as Lois Gibbs and Luella Kenney, whose young son had died of a rare cancer. Later official health studies identified the brew of chemicals and officials were forced to agree that the Love Canal area was uninhabitable. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter declared a federal state of emergency and relocated residents. This tragedy devastated families and communities, and of course, the sense of safety and security of home in the region. Since that time we have seen such contamination experiences emerge in many locations. But Love Canal was the first and this event was a prime mover in the creation of the Superfund Legislation, the Community Right-to-Know laws and eventually, legislation to regulate hazardous waste and pollution as seen in NEPA, the Clean Water Act, and so on.

It was now obvious that "capitalizing on the region's natural advantages" to build wealth had consequences; the practice of using the waterways and land as a repository of waste haunted the region. Not only was Niagara distressed economically, but the environment itself, the land and the rivers, were seen as dangerous. When in 1987, the International Joint Commission identified the Niagara River as one of the 42 topic hot spots on the Great Lakes, no one was surprised. It was a part of our story, of the reality of our lives in this region, and had become embedded in the imagination of this

place. *The dying industrial culture still affected and determined the economic, political, cultural and social milieu (*Landry).

Although the region felt and actually acted depressed, there were significant stirrings that pushed against this imagination at both governmental and civic levels particularly related to the waterways. One example was the Four Party Agreement in 1987 where the U.S., New York, Ontario and Canada formed the bi-national Niagara River Toxics Management Plan to reduce pollution seeping the Niagara River. By 1996 most of the goals had meet met or surpassed.

At the civic level, organizations emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s to take on certain issues. The Friends of the Buffalo River was formed to address another of the 42 toxic hot spots, the Buffalo River at the head of the Niagara River. This non-profit, now the Buffalo Niagara River Waterkeeper, served as the coordinator of the Remedial Action Plan (RAP) for that river, and today also assumes advocacy, planning, policy and restoration for all the waterway in the region, including the Niagara River. Governmental agencies identified and 'cleaned' up the toxic legacy throughout the region. Civic concern gave rise to the Friends of Olmsted Parks, now the Olmsted Parks Conservancy that manages the historic parks in Buffalo. A vibrant historic preservation community emerged to protect the cultural patrimony of the region. And along the Niagara River, a portion of the Robert Moses Parkway that cut off access to Niagara Falls was removed in the 1970s and calls to remove the rest of the parkway blocking the gorge began and today, 50 years later, are in process. There were people who were paying attention to the material land and waters, there was oversight in the clean-up, and an unwillingness to accept an imagination of depression. The imaginal is a constructed meaning not a natural fact, and can be challenged and changed.

STORY FIVE: NIAGARA AS A BIOREGION: REIMAGINING

There was a magnificent benefit to the region from the demise of industry. The people, now actually able to see the Niagara River and other waterways, remembered that they lived along a beautiful river; they wanted it cleaned up and wanted access. This emerging imagination didn't just happen but was nurtured by a series of activities that began in the late 1990s that were led by municipalities, non-profits, the private sectors, and universities. The conversation between the material, discrete place of Niagara and the imagination of this place was transformed as new ideas and spatial practices emerged at the beginning of the 21$^{st}$ century.

Of all the actions that moved oppositionally to the Rustbelt imagination and initiated a more ecological perspective on the Niagara River, I will speak to a few although there are many more that could be mentioned.

*Rethinking the Niagara Frontier (1999-2002) and the Niagara Heritage Area Designation (2008)*
The Rethinking Niagara project began as a series of design/planning studios sponsored by the Urban Design Project (UDP) at the School of Architecture and Planning at UB that involved working with many local leaders, including the Canadian Consulate. The U.S. region was not alone in thinking along these lines and UDP was quickly working closely with the Waterfront Regeneration Trust out of Toronto to explore the question of border, collaboration, and regionalism. Thinking of this as a bi-national region bordering the Niagara River reflected the close economic, familial and cultural ties, but it took the drawings of maps with the Niagara River in the middle to overcome the imagination of border as separator.

Dozens of organizations joined UDP and the Waterfront Regeneration Trust for a conversation to rethink Niagara. Meetings of diverse audiences were held in 1990-2000 with a major binational forum in March 2000 and a major event in the fall of 2001.

It was during these ongoing conversations that the question of an international designation for the Niagara River gained momentum. The recognition by Audubon in 1996 of the Niagara River Corridor as a Globally Significant Important Bird Area (IBA) led the way, and ongoing binational discussion raised the question of other designations appropriate to this world-known waterway. Earlier, in 1991, Canadian Maurice Strong of the UN and World Bank suggested this region as a Transborder Park for Peace and Conservation, sponsored by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). This possibility was explored and vetted over the next decade without success in part because of the trauma of 9/11 that greatly tightened the border between the two countries.

One significant outcome of Rethinking was the articulation of the underlying stories of this region that have been developed, told and shared and were an impetus for the nomination of Niagara as a U.S. National Heritage Area, designated in 2008. The key interpretive themes that were used for the U.S. Congressional Heritage Area are:

1. Natural Phenomenon – the Great Lakes, the Niagara River, the geology, the falls and the unique biological systems
2. Tourism and Recreation – the celebration of the natural heritage as a place to visit and experience
3. Power and Industry – the human use of power and development of hydroelectricity at Niagara Falls that drew so many industries to the region is one of the themes as is the subsequent remediation efforts currently underway.
4. Borderland / Border Crossing – the history of conflict and collaboration as read along the Niagara River, the longest undefended international board in the world and also the story of the native people, the Haudenosaunee, who recognize no border today nor during 500 years of peace

*Relicensing of the Niagara Power Project (2004 – 2007) and the Greenway Commission*: (2007) Hydroelectricity is one of the most significant products and narratives of our region starting in the last decade of the 19th Century, through the discovery of alternative current and the building of seven hydropower plants along the Niagara River. The last power plant built was the Niagara Power Project led by New York's Robert Moses after the collapse of the Schoellkopf plant into the Niagara Gorge in 1956. In 1957, NYS initiated a public rather than private power generation structure and received congressional approval to build a new power plant 4.5 miles downstream from the Falls across from Ontario Hydro. It was a huge undertaking but by working around the clock for three years, in 1961 power production began at what was then the world's largest hydroelectricity facility. The two power generators, the Robert Moses Power Plant and the Lewiston Pump Generating Plant, still operate today and the Niagara Power Project generates 2.6 million kilowatts of energy and remains NYS's biggest electricity producer.

By federal legislation, energy plants must be relicensed every 50 years so beginning in 2004, the NY Power Authority began a relicensing process that lasted for 3 years and engaged hundreds of citizens to include all the municipalities along the Niagara River, energy users, environmental organizations, and tribes. For all the value of power generation, the existence of the power plant has had an environmental cost to the region. Ontario and New York remove between 50-75% of the Niagara River

above the falls and carry it underground through tunnels to the two power plant downstream, bypassing the falls and the Niagara Gorge. This causes tidal-like flows in the gorge, impacts fish spawning and terrestrial habitats, increases ice regimes, impacts the 'tourist water', effects tax burdens in local communities, results in inequity of power distribution and so on. One of the purposes of the relicensing process is to ameliorate the negative environmental and economic impacts of its operations. And during the three year process of negotiations, the community argued for a "lake-to-lake greenway" along the Niagara River, similar to the greenway on the Canadian side.

The final settlement gave $9 million/year for the restoration and recreational development of the Niagara River and shoreline, created the Greenway Commission (the body who will be assuming responsibility for the Ramsar designation), provided for a planning agency in Buffalo, the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation, and dedicated monies specifically for habitat restoration. This process has been going on for over 10 years and it has had a significant impact on opening up the Niagara River to public use through a lake-to-lake trail, made improvements in municipalities all along the river, and restored habitat in the Niagara River itself.

*Centennial of the Boundary Waters Treaty (2009) and One Region Forward(2012 – 2015)*

> "It is further agreed that the waters herein defined as boundary waters and waters flowing across the boundary shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or property on the other." 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty

The significance of the Niagara River and the Great Lakes was recognized in 1909 with the signing of the Boundary Waters Treaty. This was the first environmental agreement, and the first international treaty that outlined the principles of the development, diversion and pollution. One hundred years later, this significant international act was recognized with a binational celebration at Niagara Falls, held in the middle of the Rainbow Bridge! It was sponsored by the International Joint Commission and the Governments of Canada and the United States and the ten municipalities bordering the Niagara River on June 13, 2009. The event,promoted as "Our Shared Waters, " was attended by invited guests such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and hundreds of others.

This event recognized the historic significance of the treaty, the biological importance of critical habitat and wetlands of the Great Lakes waters, and the need to address the historic and current harm to our shared waters. It was a celebration of the success of governance at the international level.

Governance is an ongoing theme that structures human / environment relationship and can be formal, governmental structures such as the Boundary Waters Treaty, the Clean Water Act, the Environmental Protection Act and layers of federal, state and municipal laws. It can also be a more informal form of governance, based on agreements to collaboratively take action around joint endeavors. The Niagara Heritage Area, although a formal governmental structure, is actually a type of informal governance, designed to promote the stories of the Niagara Region through the work of many parties.

The 2012 – 2015 Erie and Niagara County Planning effort, One Region Forward, is another form of governance where many groups come together to set an agenda for the region but without a single body having the power and authority to implement. This project was brought forward by the GBNRTC, NFTA, Buffalo Niagara Partnership and the Regional Institute of the UB School of Architecture and Planning.

The goal of this three year process was to help the region coordinate its federal, state and local investments by identifying the matters most important to the citizens of the region intersecting with agency/governmental missions. It started with an analysis of the 160 plans that originated across 64 county municipalities; it involved more than 700 local organizations and 5000 citizens who worked through meetings and interactive formats to assess the existing conditions of the region, to identify scenarios of the future, and to be as clear as possible about the implications of each future.

Many understood that the Western New York has sprawled but the extent was staggering: the overall region's population has shrank 16% since 1970 while urbanized land grew by 78% - sprawl without growth. Over thirty years, the region built roads, emptied out our cities creating thousands of units of vacant house and removed habitat and land that historically has filtered the waters. What the implications of this sprawl without growth and how do we want to go forward? Four scenarios emerged during the initial discussions: business as usual; sprawling smarter; focus development to create a region of villages; or return to the cities. This conversation matters: the trajectory chosen determines what Niagara, and the Niagara River, will be 40 years in the future.

The release of "One Region Forward: A New Way to Plan for Buffalo Niagara" reported on of all these efforts, suggested a path to halt sprawl, but it was not a plan. Rather it is a blueprint that is used by an Implementation Council of local governments and agencies to help guide the future of the region. This is an experiment in governance that involves both formal powers and authorities, civic and non-profit groups, and the private sector. As a result of this regional conversation and preceding activities, the imagination of the region now is more interconnected, more cognizant of the impacts and consequences of actions, and more interested in restoration and healing of communities and environments.

What we do each day makes a difference in the construction of our imagination of place and therefore what actions we take as a people. Without doubt, the old struggle between the technological / economic vision of life in the region vs. the ecological imagination of co-existing in this bioregion still exists and is played out every day in zoning board and councils and on the streets. And it is not yet clear which path we will take because these two ways to inhabit the earth may not be able to exist in the same space.

CONCLUSIONS

I argued at the beginning of the paper that the imagination of a place is critical to our attitudes and importantly, to actions we take. We enact beliefs and ideas on the land, the waters and the atmosphere while reciprocally our actions and these places frame the way we think about our homespace. As told in the stories above, this region's relationship to the Niagara River has shifted over time and depending on our imagination at different periods of history has enabled its appropriation or protection.

Today we sit at one of the most critical moments in human history, if not the most critical, at the intersection of the climate crisis and the extinction crisis. And we will either address this crisis halting the burning of fossil fuels to bring down the carbon in the atmosphere, or we will not. And we will either protect and nurture lands and waters with all our being as individuals, cultures and nations, to give space to other forms of life, or we will not.

Much of our way forward depends on our imagination of who we are as a species, and the relationship we imagine we have with our homes and the region here in this place and with the earth. The Ramsar Designation honors and respects a river, the Niagara River, and its home as a part of Great Lakes

bioregion and migrationally with the total hemisphere. This place is also our home. The Ramsar designation reminds us of the importance of the Niagara River by naming and listing the beings with whom we share the water, land and air, reminding us of how special our home is the catalog of earthly places. Each act that facilitates an eco-centric or ecological imagination of our place as a species moves us closer to responsible action toward the complexity of life on earth. We therefore thank the work of people here in the region, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Commission on the Ramsar Conventions for this declaration as a reminder of our obligations to life.

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