

Castles in the sand

A collection of community activists and politicians is determined to turn Petrie Island into a waterfront paradise —if they can come up with the cash



Still, Robertson, a paid-up member of the citizens' group known as Friends of Petrie Island, is not the only one with vision enough to see the spot's beauty and potential. Birders, hikers, anglers, and boaters have been stopping in for years, looking past the debris and focusing on the birds, trails, fishing holes, and Ottawa River access. Indeed, the island's only other commercial venture is the somewhat ramshackle Petrie Island Bait & Tackle Shop just at the edge of the causeway. Its lines of business include boat rentals in summer and ice-fishing-hut rentals in winter.

But why the sudden interest in beautifying Petrie Island?

JIM ROBERTSON STANDS AT THE FRONT of a tiny meeting room at the Hazeldean library. Grey-haired and bearded, he is pleasant and earnest—an environmentalist in faded denims and a Canadian wildlife sweatshirt. He is also an avid nature photographer, and tonight his skills are on display in a slide show reflecting his latest passion: Petrie Island.

The lights are switched off, and the presentation begins. *Petrie Island—Seasons in a Small Wilderness* flashes across the screen. What follows is a twenty-two-minute show: 200 slides set to music and a script—courtesy of Robertson's wife, Linda Jenkins—presenting a fresh view of an island that few have visited. The screen fills with picture-postcard imagery: turtles basking on logs, a great blue heron standing in the morning mist, multicoloured wildflowers, and families fishing on a warm summer day. It's a fitting tribute to a site that just may be on its way to becoming the east end's answer to Britannia Beach.

The natural beauty of the land and the abundant wildlife that Robertson has captured with his camera comes as a bit of a shock. This is not the Petrie Island many old-time east enders know. Located five minutes east of Place d'Orleans Shopping Centre, you reach the tiny island—just 2.7 kilometres long by 0.7 kilometres wide—by hanging a left at Trim Road and driving across a pitted gravel causeway. For years, local and not-so-local residents used it as an unofficial dump—an isolated place to ditch that old refrigerator or mattress without being seen. It was also a prime “bush bash” locale, a spot where teens could party away from the prying eyes of parents. And then there was, and is, Roger Grandmaitre Ltd., a commercial sandpits operation. Its dredging and sand-washing equipment and huge pyramids of sand have obscured the views and restricted access to much of the eastern portion of Petrie for almost fifty years.

Why the push for action after all these decades of letting things slide? The answer is multi-faceted.

First, a bit of background. Beach development would never even have been an option if the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton had not voted in 1983 to purchase Petrie Island from its owner, Roger Grandmaitre, a descendant of the Grandmaitre sandpits operators. The 400-acre island cost the region \$2.2 million. It was a hefty price tag, and debate on council was lively and heated. Cumberland residents and City of Cumberland staff had long voiced strong support for the development of a municipal park on the island's east end and action to preserve the wetlands in the bigger, western portion of Petrie. But there was so much work to be done (and money to be spent) that many on regional council felt the island was a lost cause. Still, the sale went ahead, with the region agreeing to allow Roger Grandmaitre Ltd. to continue its sand operations until September 1998.