Their story is that of the St. Lawrence, and their future is our future, too.
Foreword
30 Years with St. Lawrence Belugas 3

Dossier
Perrnal Mortalities in St. Lawrence Belugas: a New Challenge for this Population 4

Science in Action 6

Acknowledgements in Pictures 8

Science in Action 10

Adopt a Beluga Campaign News 12

Spotlight on Belugas
The Battle of Cascaou: A Battle Won Thanks to Science 15

WHAT IS THE ST. LAWRENCE BELUGA PROJECT?

Since the mid-1980s, our consortium of private and university research laboratories has been pursuing a research and monitoring program on belugas and the St. Lawrence ecosystem. Our aim is to better understand belugas and their habitat by scientifically studying their behaviour and monitoring their state of health, sharing this knowledge with the general public and coming to the aid of belugas that have gone astray or become stranded. These gestures are essential in order to define and implement concrete actions to ensure the recovery of the beluga population and the preservation of the St. Lawrence / Great Lakes ecosystem.

The St. Lawrence Beluga Project is coordinated by the GREMM. All of its projects are realized in close collaboration with researchers from the Maurice Lamontagne Institute (Fisheries and Oceans Canada), the St. Lawrence Centre (Environment Canada), and the biologists of the Saguenay-St Lawrence Marine Park (Parcs Canada and SPFAQ).

The St. Lawrence Beluga Project research program is divided into several sub-projects that you can follow in the semiannual bulletin With the Belugas.

Because the belugas’ story is that of the St. Lawrence, and their future is our future!

The belugas of the St. Lawrence live at the southern limit of the species’ range. Isolated from neighbouring populations in Northern Quebec and arctic waters, their population is estimated to number less than 900 individuals and is declining; these numbers represent barely 10% of estimates from just over a century ago. First listed as a species at risk in 1983, the beluga’s status was revised from “threatened” to “endangered” in 2014. Our mission is to understand why, despite the cessation of hunting in 1979, the population of belugas in the St. Lawrence did not recover and identify solutions to ensure their survival.

Without interruption since 1982, we have closely monitored beluga mortality. Every possible effort is made to identify and retrieve beluga carcasses adrift or stranded on the shores of the St. Lawrence. Each summer, we spend hundreds of hours at sea with the belugas of the St. Lawrence. We have learned to recognize individuals of this population. Our “family album” portrays nearly 350 belugas. Inevitably, the family album and the death registry overlap. By finding “known” individuals amongst the carcasses pulled out of the St. Lawrence waters, we are able to take our investigations one step further. Is there a correlation of the St. Lawrence did not recover and identify solutions to ensure their survival.

Over the years, we’ve assisted a number of live beached belugas, both solitary and sociable belugas. Each of our rescue attempts has provided critical knowledge about belugas and better tools to assist the next beluga in need.

Our work with St. Lawrence belugas is also the basis for countless programs and awareness initiatives: permanent and temporary exhibits, national and international documentaries, news stories, magazine articles, books, school visits, etc. Scientific knowledge gained through the program is key for all conservation initiatives implemented to date. Continued research and monitoring program is essential in order to answer a number of urgent questions, track the evolution of the beluga population, evaluate the success of actions implemented to reduce contamination in St. Lawrence belugas, restore key habitats… and simply to learn more about these fascinating animals.

We are proud to present this first edition of the bulletin With the Belugas. Twice a year, you will find news about our collaborators, partners and belugas. Because the belugas’ story is that of the St. Lawrence, and their future is our future!
DOSSIER

PERINATAL MORTALITIES IN ST. LAWRENCE BELUGAS: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR THIS POPULATION

Analyses conducted on beluga carcasses found stranded over the past 30 years have helped to identify various health issues that may potentially stand in the way of this population’s recovery. Exposure to various immunosuppressive (e.g. Polychlorinated Biphenyls) or carcinogenic (e.g. Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons) pollutants have been put forward as being one of the reasons for the precarious state of this population. The decline of these pollutants in the beluga’s environment once suggested a better future for this population.

Unfortunately, in the past several years this population has been facing a new problem that might prove even more devastating for the survival of this species in the St. Lawrence Estuary. Indeed, since the end of the 2000s, we have begun to see an abnormally high number of newborn mortalities. Up until 2007, the number of beluga calves found dead on the shores of the St. Lawrence varied between 0 and 3. From 2008 to 2015, an average of 6.6 calves have been found every year. The results of autopsies performed on these calves suggest that they are dying of exhaustion and dehydration, most likely due to separation from their mothers.

It is troubling to note that in the past several years we have also observed a significant increase in cases of fatal dystocia (calving difficulties leading to the death of the mother). In fact, of all wild cetacean populations, the St. Lawrence beluga presents the highest rate of calving problems. It can therefore be postulated that the rise in calf mortalities is a consequence of the increased occurrence of difficult calving in this population: prolonged calving will exhaust both the calf and mother, thereby increasing the risk of separation. These observations suggest a low rate of offspring survival in the aftermath of calving complications.

The loss of these numerous calves as well as several females of reproductive age might have a critical impact on recruitment in this population, and therefore its future. Different causes have been put forward to explain this situation including increased disturbance during the calving period, declining food resources toward the end of gestation, decreasing winter ice cover and increased levels of contamination by endocrine disruptors such as Polybrominated Diphenyl Ethers (PBDEs). PBDEs, which have been and are still to this day widely used as flame-retardant compounds in many common consumer products, are known to trigger a decrease in the activity of the thyroid gland. PBDE levels in beluga fat have rapidly increased in the past 20 years. These levels are 20 to 30 times higher than those found in beluga in the Canadian Arctic. As it is well known that the thyroid plays an important role in successful calving, we are questioning the possible impact of PBDEs on reproductive success in beluga.

Global changes presently affecting the St. Lawrence Estuary might be a possible cause for the increase in calf mortalities. Indeed, an epidemiological correlation exists between the number of calves found dead and certain ecosystemic parameters such as rising water temperatures, reduced winter ice cover and the decline of certain fish species in the Estuary. We hope to continue our research in order to be able to better identify the cause or causes associated with these perinatal mortalities in St. Lawrence beluga.
BELUGAS “ON THE RUN”

Three belugas were spotted on May 9, 2015 in Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. A few days later, photos and biopsies taken by the Mystic Aquarium and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) were sent to the GREMM as well as the laboratory of Timothy Frasier, Associate Professor in the Department of Biology of Saint Mary’s University. The photos helped confirm that one of the three individuals is a young beluga from the St. Lawrence. The “newcomer” reached New Jersey in late May, a journey that calls to mind that of Hills in 2005. This beluga left the St. Lawrence and reached the Delaware River in New Jersey, 200 km from the Atlantic coast. After that he was never seen again.

On August 11, one of the three belugas was re-spotted near Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. Maybe he is heading home! One week later, two other belugas are discovered near Ingonish, Cape Breton. Could they be the two other belugas seen earlier in the US? The mystery remains unsolved, as no photos were taken.

Two other large “vagrants” were observed this year off the respective southern coasts of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. A biopsy collected on the first one indicated that it was a male from the St. Lawrence population; as for the one in Newfoundland, it is speculated that it is from one of the populations in northern Quebec. These two individuals were quite sociable, which is worrying, notably in terms of the risks of ship strikes. Thanks to the work of Catherine Kinsman of the Whale Stewardship Project and continued by Pierre Béland of the St. Lawrence Beluga Project, the belugas of the St. Lawrence Estuary constitute one of the most contaminated cetacean populations in the world. Several of these compounds such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE) and hexabromocyclododecane (HBCDD) used to reduce the flammability of a wide range of common consumer products have the ability to bioaccumulate in a number of marine species. PBDES and HBCDD have been reported as being endocrine disruptors in certain mammals, though their toxic action mechanisms remain unknown. This discovery – which stems from the work of researcher Valeria Vergara of the Vancouver Aquarium, a biologist specializing in the study of beluga contact calls – raises an important question: can the noise from watercraft interfere with communication between mothers and their young? In late September, the scientist spent a week aboard the Bleuvet with Robert Michaud and his crew. Objective: to assess the possibility of studying the impacts of maritime noise pollution on communication between mothers and their newborns. Being that young animals emit “contact” calls at relatively low frequencies, they might be easily masked by boat-generated noise. The project is challenging but critical for this endangered population. Initial recordings made the fall by Valeria in the Saguenay Fjord are promising.

“MOM, CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Belugas live in clans and family groups. Their complex communication system helps forge strong relationships between individuals. In order stay in touch, mothers and their offspring notably emit a very stereotyped call that uses a large frequency band. Newborns babble from the moment they are born, but must learn everything from their elders in order to develop their repertoire. It takes one to two years for young belugas to develop a perfect interpretation of these “contact calls”. For the first few weeks of a newborn’s life, its call contains only the low-frequency components of its mother’s contact call. During this period, its call resembles the sound of someone running their finger over a plastic comb.

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TOXINS IN BELUGAS PERSIST

The week of July 6, 2015, Antoine Simond joined the crew on board the Bleuvet with the goal of collecting tissue samples (biopsies) from St. Lawrence belugas. Antoine is conducting a research project as part of his PhD under the guidance of Jonathan Verreault of the Department of Biological Sciences at the Université du Québec à Montréal. The project consists of studying newly emerging contaminants and their impact on belugas.

As contaminants, halogen flame retardants are of particular interest to Antoine’s university team. The belugas of the St. Lawrence Estuary constitute one of the most contaminated cetacean populations in the world. Several of these compounds such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE) and hexabromocyclododecane (HBCDD) used to reduce the flammability of a wide range of common consumer products have the ability to bioaccumulate in a number of marine species. PBDES and HBCDD have been reported as being endocrine disruptors in certain mammals, though their toxic action mechanisms remain unknown. This project thus aims to study time trends which have been observed since 2010. Measures of the Maurice Lamontagne Institute (part of his PhD under the guidance of Jonathan Verreault of the Department of Biological Sciences at the Université du Québec à Montréal). The project consists of studying newly emerging contaminants and their impact on belugas.

MORTALITIES THAT SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

It was another busy year for the Quebec Marine Mammal Emergency Response Network. Of the 352 or so calls received, 60 concerned belugas, including 20 incidents involving an animal adrift or beached (weather dead or alive) on the shores of the St. Lawrence. Fourteen beluga carcasses were able to be recovered and/or sampled. This number is slightly below the average over the past 30 years, but the proportion of young is still quite high and is cause for concern: seven adults and seven young. Four of the young were confirmed as being newborns and two others may also have been newborns.

Only seven of the carcasses were in good condition and as such were transported to the Université de Montréal’s Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (FMV). Three were adult females, all of which died from complications during calving. The year 2015 is once again marked by an abnormally high rate of perinatal mortalities in belugas, a trend which has been observed since 2010.

This program, spearheaded by Pierre Béland of the St. Lawrence National Institute of Eco-toxicology and continued by Lena Lena Measures of the Maurice Lamontagne Institute (part of Fisheries and Oceans Canada) is one of the cornerstones of the St. Lawrence Beluga Project.
THANKS
TO OUR KEY PARTNERS
A 3RD HERMAPHRODITE BELUGA DISCOVERED

Of the 14 beluga carcasses found this year, there was one in particular that proved noteworthy for veterinarian André Dallaire of Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the Université de Montréal. The animal was artfully recovered in the far end of a cove near Cap de Bon-Désir in Les Bergeronnes. Before the carcass is shipped off to Saint-Hyacinthe, routine examination of the animal, its length of 4.45 m, the developed shape of its “shoulders” and the form of its genital slit, all allowed Carl to confirm that the individual brought in by André’s team is a large male.

When it arrives in Saint-Hyacinthe, testing and external sampling resume. The weight of the animal also supports the initial determination of its sex. It was the autopsy that would reveal the surprise. This beluga had the external reproductive organs of a male (testicles and penis), but also ovaries and a uterus in the pelvic region; this is what is known as a hermaphrodite.

Hermaphroditism is a very rare condition: to date, only six cases are believed to have been documented in marine mammals. Three of these cases occurred in belugas in the St. Lawrence. The cause of these anomalies remains unknown. However, the fact that three cases of hermaphroditism were observed in the small St. Lawrence population of belugas is unusual and suggests that potential factors predispose these belugas to this condition. Even if this remains hypothetical, the link between hermaphroditism and the documented exposure of belugas to endocrine disruptors warrants further investigation.

PREGNANCY TESTS FOR BELUGAS

This project was in its third year this season and ran from September 8 to 25. Weather conditions were favourable, which allowed the team to work on the water for several days this fall and thus easily reach its target of 50 biopsies. In fact, the team managed to perform 58 biopsies! The goal of these efforts is to determine whether the proportion of female belugas that are pregnant is comparable to the figure which might be expected in a healthy population, i.e. about one third of adult females.

Progesterone is a hormone produced by the ovaries, the level of which varies depending on whether or not the female is pregnant. By analyzing the blood, saliva, eye secretions, feces or subcutaneous blubber layer of females of certain cetacean species, it has been demonstrated that it is possible to determine their stage of maturity or period of reproductive cycle. Researchers can thus identify the age at which females reach sexual maturity or even conduct pregnancy tests on them by collecting a sample through a biopsy. The advantage of this method is that it only requires a small sample that can be collected relatively easily from living animals in their natural environment. It is a relatively new and highly promising technique. Orchestrated by Véronique Lesage of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, this project is being carried out in collaboration with the GREMM and Saint Mary’s University.

DRONES AS A PROMISING RESEARCH TOOL

Thousands of beluga mothers, accompanied by their young, spend their summers in Cunningham Inlet. They belong to the Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population. Researcher Valeria Vergara of the Vancouver Aquarium spent part of the summer studying communication between these females and their young in a pristine environment. Using drones has tremendously facilitated censusing individuals with an accuracy that would otherwise be impossible with the naked eye. A pilot project conducted in collaboration with the GREMM continued in the St. Lawrence Estuary to assess the impact of noise on communication between mothers and newborns. Thanks to the use of drones, group composition and the age of young animals have been estimated with high precision. Furthermore, natural behaviours rarely observed (e.g. nursing and reproduction) have been “caught on the Fly” by the remote-controlled aircraft.

Drones offer researchers new means of obtaining data on wild animal populations. They help enlarge the field of view of a marine area from a research vessel or from shore, reduce the time required to locate animals, facilitate surveys, and allow seldom documented behaviours to be observed in the field. Based on photos, methods have been developed to estimate an animal’s size, age, state of health and injuries, as well as to determine whether or not a female is pregnant. A revolutionary tool that warrants consideration for research and conservation.

BELUGAS ON THE MOVE

It is well known today that the St. Lawrence beluga population is concentrated in the Estuary and the Saguenay Fjord in the summer. Where do they congregate once they leave this sector in late fall and what are the determining factors for their choices? Aerial surveys to estimate their distribution outside the summer period have been conducted over the past three years. Despite considerable effort, only a small portion of the population was found. Where are the others?

In an effort to shed light on this question, the GREMM initiated the Belugas on the Move project. Carried out in collaboration with Véronique Lesage and Jean-François Gosselein of the Maurice Lamontagne Institute of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, this new project enjoys financial support from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF Canada) and the Donner Canadian Foundation. Beginning in early October, the crew aboard the Bleuvet headed out to sea again with the aim of placing LIMPET satellite tags on six males to track their movements over the coming months. After facing several technical challenges and adverse fall weather conditions, “mission accomplished” finally occurred on November 24. The sixth and final tag had been placed. However, the first three tags deployed in early November had already stopped transmitting signals. Then, on December 7, it was confirmed that all trace of the belugas had been lost, as none of the 6 installed tags was still transmitting data.

Back in the lab, the team is now working on re-examining the design of the attachments used to secure the tags as well as the method used to deploy them. The retention time of the tags is well below expectations. If we want to set out again to track belugas, we will have to find new solutions. Stay tuned!
ADOPT A BELUGA CAMPAIGN NEWS

On November 10, 2014, the GREMM, together with its partners in the St. Lawrence Beluga Project, launched the second wave of the Adopt a Beluga campaign. One year later, 24 belugas have found new sponsors. Such sponsors include Mr. David Heurtel, Quebec Minister of Sustainable Development, Environment and the Fight against Climate Change, mayor Labèque of Codere, Mylène Paquette, Canada Steamship Lines and civic-minded citizens of all ages, aquariums and businesses in Quebec and throughout Canada. In this context, Bélizé, Kacoua, Cica, Nics, AL, Blanche, Marjo, Mylène Paquette, Canada Steamship Lines Environment and the Fight against Climate Minister of Sustainable Development, sponsors include Mr. David Heurtel, Quebec 24 belugas have found new sponsors. Such initiative of adopting the beluga AL. The founders of les Bières Bélugas Ltée launched a Golden Ale in June, followed by a maple-flavoured Scott Ale in the fall. A few months later, thanks to a contribution of $0.11 for every beer sold, nearly $2,000 was raised for the St. Lawrence Beluga Project. Student also rallied to take part in the movement, including a group from Cégep Édouard-Montpetit, who have raised half of their target through various initiatives. Other students have gotten involved on their own. Such was the case for 6-year-old Connor Smith-Hott, who during his August 10 visit to the Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre (CIMM) in Tadoussac, contributed a cheque for $50 – the entire content of his piggy bank – to take part in the collective adoption of Beluga Athéna. Jonah Gapes, a 10th grade student from Jonquière, raised $1,000 all by himself. As reciprocant of the Nature Inspiration award issued by the Canadian Museum of Nature, Quebec mariner Mylène Paquette chose to donate her grant to the St. Lawrence Beluga Project. Belugas Pure Laine and Blue have also been fortunate enough to find generous sponsors.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES

As soon as it was launched, the campaign enjoyed a strong show of support. A movement of solidarity has taken root around the larger cities of the province such as Montreal, Quebec City, and Lévis as well as other municipalities the likes of Tabusac, Chateauguay, Salaberry-de-Valleyfield and Bouchans. Following an invitation extended by mayor Labèque, some forty municipalities along the St. Lawrence teamed up to adopt a group of 10 belugas. Through the context entitled Our Beluga’s Name is... students from some one hundred elementary school classes across the province suggested names for these 10 belugas. A beer in the image of this endowed population was created and brewed with the objective of adopting the beluga AL. The founders of les Bières Bélugas Ltée launched a Golden Ale in June, followed by a maple-flavoured Scott Ale in the fall. A few months later, thanks to a contribution of $0.11 for every beer sold, nearly $2,000 was raised for the St. Lawrence Beluga Project.

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HOPE FOR AN EVEN LARGER FAMILY

During the first wave of the beluga adoption campaign initiated in 1988, nearly 130 belugas were able to find sponsors. Nearly 30 years later, a new family of adoptees has come into being, but GREMM President and Scientific Director Robert Michaud aspires to see this family continue to grow. To make this wish a reality, this winter the GREMM team will explore new opportunities to stimulate the generosity of citizens across Canada and perhaps even overseas. Meticulous analysis of data collected in the field will also be used to provide sponsors with fresh news about their belugas.

FALL-WINTER 2015 EDITION | VOLUME 1 | 13

The year 2015, the 31st season of the Bleuvet, was one of the longest and richest in terms of encounters. All in all, 84 days at sea, some 174 herds surveyed and already 122 tentative identifications. For the first time this summer, we made a sustained effort to compile the IDs and repeat IDs on a weekly basis. Much work remains to be done to complete the analysis of the 13,592 photos taken. The following is a loose summary of the highlights of the season and a few of our encounters with the adopted belugas. Other stories will be published over the next few months. You can also relive the season on board the Bleuvet by reading the Field Notes presented on Whales Online...

June 15, 2015 marked the kick-off of our season... always an exciting time! Who would we see again this summer? This first day held a pleasant surprise, as Miss Frontenac (Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, 2008) was seen with a second-year calf. Miss Frontenac is a very special beluga for our team. Born in 2004, she bore a major scar on her back from the time she was just a few weeks old. She became the first photo-ID’d and recognizable beluga from the time of her birth. She gave birth to her first calf in the summer of 2014 and we were eager for her to return.

Almost two weeks would pass before we encountered one of the 24 new belugas of our family album. On July 3, Blanche (Vancouver Aquarium, 2014), this time at the mouth of the Saguenay. She was swimming in the company of three adults and two juveniles including a newborn and might be a sort of matriarch. That same week, September 17 and 18, we observed Miss (Cynthia Fish, 2015) in a herd of adults accompanied by young. The animals were agitated. Forceful splashing, tail-slapping, sudden changes of direction... and a pink spot on a white belly. As we approach them, we discover that these belugas are engaged in sexual activities. Although we are outside the breeding season, we occasionally witness sexual activities in summer.

The month of September was designated for carrying out the intensive biopsy program for belugas. Despite the complexities of approaching belugas and taking biopsies combined with the challenges of dealing with the autumn fog and wind, we were nevertheless able to recognize three of the belugas recently adopted by the Riverside municipalities of the St. Lawrence. Or blanc was seen on September 2, in a herd of large adult males numbering about fifty individuals slowly heading up the Saguenay Fjord. Then, on September 17 and 18, we observed Miss in the Saguenay. Lastly, off of l’Ile Verte, Nics was observed in a group of fifteen or so large white males that were joining up with a group of females and newborns. Nics was accompanied by other known males such as DL0218 (available for adoption) and DL0584 (targeted for adoption by the naturalists of the GREMM).
Our history with belugas is punctuated by alternating dark and bright periods. Ever since the journeys of Jacques Cartier and the arrival of the first colonists to the St. Lawrence, belugas have inspired several chapters of our history and that of the River. In the subsequent issues of the With the Belugas bulletin, this column will chronicle a few of these pages of our history with belugas.

Although St. Lawrence belugas have returned to the limelight in the past three years, their fate, which had Quebec holding its breath in the 1980s and 90s, had quietly been forgotten and perhaps met with indifference since then. It was a wave of mortalities of newborns in 2012 that suddenly brought belugas back to the eye and heart of the public.

While we believed that the St. Lawrence beluga population had stabilized after hunting was banned in 1979, the combined efforts of researchers from the St. Lawrence Beluga Project as well as our colleagues from the Maurice Lamontagne Institute and the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park to understand the causes of these unprecedented mortalities (see “Dossier” on page 4), revealed that the population was again declining. Barely a year later, TransCanada Pipelines announced its intention to construct an oil terminal in Cacouna in a densely inhabited area of critical beluga habitat. These white whales quickly became the symbol of a major citizen movement opposing the construction of a pipeline to transport oil from the tar sands of Alberta to the East Coast. This saga was regularly the subject of debate in the National Assembly, the House of Commons and even in the Superior Court of Quebec. After the ruling by Judge Claudine Roy to halt preliminary work undertaken by TransCanada, it was the decision of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in December 2014 to revise the conservation status of belugas from “threatened” to “endangered” that seems to have shut the door on this project that would have had devastating consequences on the already precarious future of St. Lawrence belugas.

The Cacouna region is now recognized as a beluga “nursery”. This page of our history with belugas also underscores the importance of having and being able to share scientific knowledge to inform our choices as a society. The construction issues related to an oil port in the St. Lawrence are multi-faceted and substantial. In this particular instance, we had a rich scientific expertise that seems to have played a significant role in the “Battle of Cacouna”

For the latest news on adopted belugas, check out their individual portraits on adoptabeluga.org and follow their adventures on Facebook (in French).
In 2015, 24 BELUGAS found sponsors

AL, Les Bières Bélugas Ltée • Annakpok, Canada Steamship Lines • Aquarelle, City of Lévis
Aquabelle, Aquarium du Québec • Athéna, Collective adoption • Bélibec, Québec city
Blanche, Municipality of Tadoussac • Bleuoutremes, Bleuoutremes • Blue, Ella Issac
Écho, The Minister of MSDECC, David Heurtel • DL1214*, John G. Shedd Aquarium
DL0370*, Vancouver Aquarium • DL1670*, Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative
DL1935*, Mylène Paquette • Marjo, 10e Congrès sur la médecine d'urgence en région du CSSS-HCN–Manicouagan
Neige, Nics, Solidaire, Bilou et Cica, The riverside municipalities of the St. Lawrence
Or Blanc, The municipalities of Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, Beauharnois and Châteauguay
Pure Laine, Cynthia Fish • Splash, City of Montréal • DL9031*, Adelaide Gomer

* Names to be determined

THANK YOU!