

Water Worries Worsening

By Jocelyne Rankin

Two articles caught my eye in Wednesday's Chronicle Herald: "Good day to jump in the lake" (photo of beachgoers at Chocolate Lake) and "Liver toxins found in Lakes" which reported on findings from a scientific article on the presence of microcystins in water, generated through the breakdown of blue-green algae.

The presence of microcystins in lakes is a familiar occurrence to those living in South West Nova. In the Metaghan, Clare, Carleton and Sissiboo watersheds, blue-green algae (also known as cyanobacteria) outbreaks have been a regular occurrence since 2007. These outbreaks have paralleled the dramatic increase in Nova Scotia's mink industry. Over 1 million mink were raised in captivity last year alone for the export of their pelts.

We are all eager to spend time cooling off by jumping in a nearby lake or river. With the summer we have been having, it's an easy choice. But before you jump in the lake, you might want to consider these points.

A report released Tuesday by lead author Diane Orihel surveyed 246 Canadian lakes across Canada, including half a dozen in South-Western Nova Scotia. While the levels of a toxin known as microcystin in lakes in Nova Scotia weren't as elevated as those in Central Alberta and South-Western Manitoba, there is still a very real concern here at home. Microcystin toxin is a serious environmental and public health threat, having caused the death of domestic animals, wildlife and humans after exposure in the natural environment.

A notable factor that increases the production of blue-green algae, and ultimately microcystins, is high water temperatures and low water levels. Both have been observed this year, as ponds, streams and wells dry up around the province.

Who is (or isn't) looking out for water quality in our lakes?

The Federal government has cut water quality monitoring programs at Environment Canada and jobs continue to disappear at their Dartmouth office. The Experimental Lakes Area in Northern Ontario which conducts whole lake experiments such as studying microcystin growth has also been shut. Several rounds of cuts to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, especially their habitat protection branch, as well as sweeping changes to the Fisheries Act will only protect certain types of fish with little to no regard for their habitat, aka clean water.

Provincial surface water quality monitoring is relatively limited, with only 6 surface water quality monitoring stations for the whole province. Given that Nova Scotia has 46 primary watersheds, it is fair to say that we don't have a very good diagnosis of the health of waterways across the province.

In HRM, the municipality is retreating from monitoring lakes in the jurisdiction. In May, the Chief Administrative Officer decided without Council approval to cut funding to the monitoring of water quality in 72 HRM lakes. Public beaches and drinking water sources will be monitored, but that still leaves a gaping hole in our understanding of water quality in the municipality.

What is becoming glaringly obvious is that the province of Nova Scotia needs a Water Act. Such legislation should:

- Protect water quality by regulating nutrient contamination to freshwater lakes
- Create incentives for water conservation and water use efficiency to ensure adequate groundwater supplies and water levels in lakes and streams can support aquatic species
- Establish governance arrangements that are transparent, accountable and inclusive of the public and communities that live within a watershed.

A Water Act will also help establish higher water quality monitoring standards, such as those put in place in Ontario through the Clean Water Act after the Walkerton tragedy twelve years ago. The piece-meal approach to managing water resources needs to come to an end. All three levels of government need to move forward in a serious way to protect our most valuable resource, clean, freshwater. Then we will all be able to jump in a lake worry-free.

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Published in Saturday August 18, 2012 Chronicle Herald:

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/127705-water-worries-worsening>