

Lake Erie: alive and well 30 years later

The environmental quality of Lake Erie is being protected through collaboration between governments and the private sector in a long-term, international lakewide management plan, as well as individual remedial action plans.

Co-operative cleanup and prevention work by Ontario, partner governments and other interest groups has turned an environmentally damaged lake into one of the world's great success stories.

Thirty years ago, Lake Erie was characterized by depressed levels of dissolved oxygen and dying fish due to excessive nutrients and algae-choked waters.

Today, the Lake Erie basin has come so far back from the brink that it has become a symbol, not of environmental disaster, but of how much can be achieved when partners work together across borders and jurisdictions. The examples include:

Phosphorus

- A major cause of Lake Erie's most visible problems in the 1960s was phosphorus from fertilizers and household detergents which entered the lake in the runoff from farmlands and from municipal sewage plants. This triggered explosive growths of algae in the lake, stripping the waters of oxygen during their decay and causing large numbers of fish to die as well as beaches to close.
- Collaboration by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (MOE), Environment Canada, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state regulatory agencies has improved sewage and stormwater treatment on all shores of the lake. Combined with controls on the phosphorus content of detergents and better agricultural practices, these measures have pushed down the amounts of phosphorus entering Lake Erie from

28,000 tonnes a year in 1968 to 11,000 tonnes today.

- In the same period, algae growth in the lake has been reduced by 80 per cent, stimulating a recovery of fish in the lake and greatly improving water clarity.

Mercury

- The collaborating partners have taken action to reduce mercury contamination, a special cause of concern because of its long-lived survival in the environment and its tendency to build up in the food chain.
- Ontario is also working with partners to cap another significant source of mercury contamination: discarded medical and dental equipment including thermometers and disinfectants. To reduce pollution from these sources, MOE has been working with Environment Canada and the Ontario Dental Association to develop a code of practice that is scheduled for completion in May 2001.
- Meanwhile, a recent MOE study of a group of Ontario hospitals showed that most have sharply reduced or completely eliminated the use of mercury in their medical instruments and materials.

The future

- Since 1987, Ontario has worked with the government of Canada and with U.S. federal and state agencies on development of a lakewide management plan (LaMP) for Lake Erie and the other Great Lakes. Developed in consultation with citizens' groups and other sectors, LaMP brings

together a network of interest groups in support of a common goal – restoring and preserving Lake Erie’s ecosystems.

Note:

Further information is available in Environment Canada's *Third Report of Progress Under the Canada-Ontario Agreement Respecting the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem 1997-1999* at the Web site <http://www.cciw.ca/green-lane/coa/third-progress-report/intro.html>

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