



PHOTOS BY BARRY GRAY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Trees on Hamilton Harbour's north shore show evidence of the beavers' work. The city may have to plant beaver favourites such as willow to preserve shade trees.

Beavers at work in harbour

Everybody's happy to see them back, but there's concern about saving trees

BY WADE HEMSWORTH

The beavers are back in Hamilton Harbour.

Their return has harbour advocates simultaneously cheering at the return of wildlife and worrying about the damage the animals may cause.

"It's kind of a fine line we walk," said Sherry Houston of the Bay Area Restoration Council (BARC). "We need to protect trees, but we also need to protect beavers."

In the past several weeks, beavers have taken up residence at Hamilton's Bayfront Park and across the bay at LaSalle Park in Burlington.

Improving water quality and the proliferation of woody plants along the water's edge have suddenly made the harbour a desirable habitat for beavers.

The Bayfront beaver — possibly more than one — moved in about six weeks ago, while the Burlington beaver apparently set up house late last year.

Sightings are rare, since beavers work at night and slow down during winter, but the evidence is plain to see.

All along the eastern edge of Bayfront Park, just below the paved pathway, the beaver has chewed down dozens of small shoreline trees and a number of mature willows with trunks more than 30 centimetres in diameter.



Improving water quality has beavers building dams at Bayfront Park.

In the shallows where Bayfront Park meets the Macassa Bay Yacht Club, there's a small lodge of sticks and mud, featuring a finishing touch available only to the urban beaver: a few old planks.

These may be the first beavers in modern memory for Hamilton Harbour, but this is not the first time

that Canada's most beloved rodent has presented itself in an urban Ontario setting.

At Confederation Park, for example, a colony of beavers that was felling tall poplars had to be trapped in 1998. This past autumn, the trapping of beavers at the University of Waterloo generated a community uproar.

For now, there are no plans to disturb the Hamilton Harbour beavers. Relocating them now that they have put away their winter food would be a death sentence.

The City of Hamilton and BARC are consulting experts to determine the best approach to take in the spring-time.

Hamilton's manager of parks and cemeteries, Al Dore, is happy to see the Bayfront beaver, but has mixed feelings about it staying.

"It's great that that kind of wildlife is now coming back to the harbour," he said. "I think it speaks to the remediation work that's been going on down there."

He's concerned, though, about how hungry the beaver or beavers will get later. January is mating season and by May, there could be a small colony.

Dore's main concern is for the shade trees in the grassy areas high above the waterline. If the beavers start taking those, the city might have to act, he said.

One option is planting the shoreline with beaver favourites such as poplar and willow as a compromise that would allow them to stay, but keep them away from the shade trees.

whemsworth@thespec.com
905-526-3254