



SHERYL NADLER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

The beaches at Bayfront Park and Pier 4 have been closed to swimmers much of the summer due to high *E. coli* levels in the water.

## Birds muddying the waters

STORIES BY ERIC McGUINNESS

Experts say Hamilton Harbour is getting a bad rap in a new report blaming Lake Ontario beach pollution on bacteria discharged from outdated sewage systems.

The Lake Ontario Waterkeeper report released yesterday says only three of 40 beaches it's watching were closed the whole month of July — Bayfront Park in Hamilton, Rotary Park in Ajax and Lakeshore West in Oshawa.

The Canadian Press took that information and circulated a news story saying "outdated sewage treatment systems are pumping *E. coli* into several beaches, which are falling far short" of provincial guidelines that call for public beaches to be open 95 per cent of the swimming season.

But Marilyn Baxter, executive director of the Bay Area Restoration Council, said that's wrong, that "we know outdated sewage treatment plants are not the problem at Bayfront Park," and that droppings from Canada geese and gulls are the source

of high *E. coli* bacteria counts that lead to beaches being posted.

"The public can help," she said, "by not feeding the geese and encouraging them to stick around. They have plenty of food already."

While it may be wrong to single out sewers, there is still a bacteria problem at the city's man-made beaches. They were part of the city's \$12-million harbour park development in the early 1990s that opened the waterfront to city residents for the first time in decades.

John Hall, co-ordinator of the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan (RAP), said the problem must be solved before the harbour is taken off an international list of Great Lakes pollution hot spots.

"The RAP is clear. One of the targets for delisting is having Bayfront and Pier 4 parks in swimmable condition. Unfortunately, I am not surprised by the (Waterkeeper) data on Bayfront, but we do have a good program in place with the City of Hamilton to pilot what needs to be done to improve those

beaches and implement controls (on birds)."

Many millions of dollars have been spent by industry and governments to clean up the harbour and improve its image, but the job won't be done until the beaches are safe.

Eric Mathews, environmental health manager for the city public health department, notes that Pier 4 was open more than Bayfront last month, most likely because of the experimental efforts to exclude geese and clean feces off the beach.

He said it's too soon to be sure bacteria counts are down because of the floating buoys and onshore fencing, but "on the surface, it looks like that could be the case."

Waterkeeper Mark Mattson conceded that "concluding Hamilton isn't doing enough may not be a conclusion we can reach yet," but insisted Hamilton should meet the provincial standard.

He also complained that neither Hamilton nor any other Ontario municipality has filed supposedly mandatory surveys on potential sources of pollu-

tion for each of its beaches. With that information, he said, his organization could comment specifically on each beach, but "right now, we have nothing to work on."

Mathews said he believes there's no need for the annual surveys, that studies done for the RAP by Environment Canada scientists and others provide enough information.

Murray Charlton, a scientist at Environment Canada's National Water Research Institute on the Burlington shore of Hamilton Harbour, explained that recent research suggests bird droppings are a bigger beach-pollution problem on the Great Lakes than previously recognized.

He said sampling sometimes shows lower bacteria counts near sewage plant discharge pipes than at shoreline beaches where there are birds.

Other research has ruled out such sources as treated sewage or overflows from combined storm and sanitary sewers.

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## Politicians answered dare to swim in Burlington Bay

Hamilton Harbour was so polluted by sewage, oil and other industrial waste that swimming was banned in 1924 by the Board of Hamilton Harbour Commissioners, forerunner to the present port authority.

Former Burlington Conservative MP George Kerr declared in 1970 that the bay would be clean enough for swimming again by 1975, and promised to take a dip that year to prove it.

When the time came, the water off LaSalle Park had a coliform bacteria count 20 times the safe swimming level but the then-environment minister lived up to his promise on Aug. 23, 1975, and lived to tell the tale. Ten years later, then-mayor Bob

Morrow was provoked into taking a swim when a Toronto Globe & Mail editorial called Hamilton Harbour "an example of all that is vile in water pollution."

But the coliform count was within safe limits by July 16, 1994, when Hamilton East MP Sheila Copps, then deputy prime minister, donned a wetsuit and plunged in "to mark the rebirth of the waterfront."

Federal scientists now say most of the bay is safe for swimming all summer, but bird droppings are blamed for polluting some shoreline areas, including the artificial beaches at Pier 4 and Bayfront parks, the only places designated for public swims.



HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

From top: Sheila Copps donned a wetsuit for a Bay swim in 1994, former Mayor Bob Morrow swam in '85, then-MP George Kerr swam in '75.