

Hamilton's pollution a surprise to visitors

Exchange students attend conference on water

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Andras Olah lives near a river in Hungary that's polluted with cyanide.

It's too dangerous to swim in, says Olah, 16.

He's one of 32 exchange students who were at a Rotary International conference in Hamilton on the weekend that was all about water -- its importance and how to protect it.

Because Hungary is in the middle the Carpathian Basin, run-off from factories in surrounding countries finds its way into the country's rivers.

"Most of the population of the (fish) are dead," says Olah, 17, about the Tisza River, the country's second-largest river.

He says the European Union is trying to help by stepping in to have certain polluting factories shut down but is having trouble because some of the countries are not part of the EU, such as Ukraine.

But Olah isn't overly worried. Hungary has more thermal water than any country in Europe, he says.

Other students told stories about clean water back home that faced other challenges, such as bringing it all the way from rain forests in Brazil's north to cities in its south.

But one thing some of them seemed to agree on is their surprise about Hamilton's pollution.

Miriam Landerl, 15, of Austria was "shocked" to hear from presenters at the conference that some of the contaminants in the harbour would never be fully removed.

Silva Lasser, 16, of Switzerland was surprised there were areas in the harbour where swimming is unsafe.

"In Switzerland you can swim in every lake," she said.

She says her country has a river watch program through the World Wildlife Fund aimed at nipping pollution in the bud. Throughout the country, interested residents adopt a portion of a nearby river and report monthly to WWF on any changes in water colour, fish and plants.

The students, with nearly 600 more Rotary delegates, heard from Jim Hudson of the Bay Area Restoration Council and Tys Theysmeyer, an aquatic ecologist with the Royal Botanical Gardens, who hosted workshops talking about successful water restoration efforts in the harbour.

The three-day conference at Hamilton Convention Centre was hosted by Rotary district 7090, which spans parts of southern Ontario and northern New York with Niagara Falls at its centre.

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