



Hamilton Spectator File Photo

It's hard being in the swim

Birds, animals - even sand - pollute beaches

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Getting access to the water along Hamilton's harbourfront has never been easier. Getting out on the water is pretty simple, too. But actually getting in the water? That has become a real problem.

Poor water quality at the Bayfront Park and Pier 4 Park beaches was the topic of the Bay Area Restoration Council's 16th annual community workshop, titled We Want To Swim, held Saturday at the Parks Canada Discovery Centre.

From 2002 to 2006, Bayfront's beach was closed, on average, six days out of seven during the swimming season because of bacterial contamination.

Last year, results were even worse. Bayfront's beach was closed 93 per cent of the time, from Victoria Day through Labour Day. Basically, the only time the beach was open was the first week after Victoria Day.

"Put it this way, the No Swimming signs were bolted to the post, so that gives you an idea of how often they're taken down," said Jim Hudson, BARC's executive director.

With industrial water pollution reduced, thanks to steelmakers' efforts, and with less flow of untreated sewage into the harbour, why aren't the beaches open for swimming more?

A team led by Dr. Tom Edge of Environment Canada's National Water Research Institute in Burlington used sophisticated diagnostic techniques to look at the DNA fingerprint of the E. coli bacteria found in the water at the two harbour beaches.

When the team compared the beaches' bacterial profile against those from sewage outflow samples, bird droppings and the droppings from dogs and cats, Edge said they were a little surprised to discover that the bulk of the beach contamination was coming from our feathered friends -- namely, geese and gulls.

The scientists also discovered they can't overlook the sand at the beach as a significant source of bacterial contamination that ends up in the water.

Bacteria migrates from the grass to the beach to the water, but the bacteria that ends up in the sand is protected and stays warmer, making for an ideal breeding ground.

"The sand becomes a reservoir for bacteria," said Hudson. "Even if you could get rid of all the birds, the problem would still be there."

The next step is to figure out effective strategies to reduce the environmental impact of birds at the beaches.

Speakers invited from Chicago and Toronto said they face similar problems with birds and water quality.

"If anybody has any million-dollar ideas to control birds at beaches, there's a huge market out there," said Edge.

Some of the strategies include public education campaigns to convince people not to feed birds, overhead wires that discourage birds from landing, improved signage, reducing birds' access to garbage and even harassment measures to chase birds away.

A representative from Conservation Halton said a combination of those tactics was put into place at Kelso Conservation Area's beach and there has been only one beach closure in the past 15 years.

Lorna Johnston of Ancaster was one of the 40 people who attended the workshop, and she said she has had a lifelong interest in the harbour's water quality.

As a child back in the 1930s, her family had a cottage at Cherry Beach, near Fruitland Road on the Lake Ontario side, and she remembers her mother wouldn't allow her to swim in the harbour.

"We haven't really come a long way," said Johnston.

"People need to wake up. Water is the most important resource we have."

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