

Great Lakes research scientist sails into retirement

Fortunately, there are still some individuals out there with the same passion and interest, says ecologist

BY PETER VAN HARTEN

When Great Lakes research scientist Murray Charlton is enjoying his retirement on his sailboat, Hamilton Harbour cleanup advocates will probably be fretting.

This year's Bay Area Restoration Council (BARC) progress report has already red-flagged the headaches presented by the looming loss of key experts working to get the harbour off the list of 41 of Canada-U.S. pollution hot spots.

Limnologist Charlton is among the forefront of those experts and has spent decades of working and volunteering his time guiding and monitoring harbour and lake cleanup.

His 32-year career in the study of fresh water ecology was honoured last week with the Biennial Award for Great Lakes Science by the International Joint Commission.

And he presented the keynote address at the 2005 IJC Great Lakes Conference in Kingston.

He is the Environment Canada project chief for Lake Management Research at the National Water Research Institute.

In a year or two, he will be gone from his fifth-floor office, overlooking the harbour, at the Canada Centre for Inland Waters near the Skyway.

"Fortunately there are still some individuals out there with the same passion and interest," he said. "And I think they will take it up, especially if we can get them before I retire."

And no doubt, he says, he will



HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

Murray Charlton, who has monitored Hamilton Harbour for years, believes it can be removed from a list of 41 Canada-U.S. pollution hot spots.

be out on the 35-foot sailboat he keeps at LaSalle Marina and tossing his own Secchi disc into the harbour to check for water clarity.

"It's like a dinner plate on a string," he explains.

And being able to see it down to a depth of three metres consistently is one of the goals re-

quired to get the harbour delisted from those 41 "areas of concern" cited by the IJC.

The target for delisting is 2015 and it is possible, he says. But it's going to mean a lot more work and millions of dollars.

The Halton sewage treatment plant is one of the best in North America but Hamilton has to

upgrade its facilities to reach delisting targets and stem the flow of algae-feeding nutrients.

That level of treatment is probably about 10 years away.

Charlton's team of researchers has monitored harbour waters and found the ever-growing geese and gull population is likely to blame for the

high fecal bacteria counts closing harbour beaches.

This summer's experiments to drive the birds away may mean fewer "Beach Closed" postings. But a problem that hasn't received enough attention is the nutrient loading of the harbour and lakes from urban runoff.

It was shocking to find that

dog feces, fertilizer spills on sidewalks and driveways and other runoff was responsible for as much phosphorous loading of our waters as treated sewage.

Charlton, now 59, arrived at CCIW in 1973. He was skeptical that anything could be done to clean up the harbour. Like many, he viewed it as a dead loss.

But scientists, by learning how to share their expertise with the public and harbour advocates, were able to help devise meaningful strategies for successful cleanup.

"Once you get the community behind it, you get the political weight to go forward."

Charlton is part of a "retirement boom" among Canada's scientists and he highlighted the need to promote science and a national policy of preparing successors.

In its Hamilton Harbour report, BARC lamented that the loss of "corporate memory" and monitoring expertise jeopardizes hopes of being delisted.

Charlton came to CCIW after masters studies at the University of Toronto.

He got hooked on science during studies that involved a two-year stint with his wife at an Arctic research camp at Resolute Bay and work in Algonquin Park. While there, he flew to 60 lakes in one week to sample and test water quality.

It's not easy to retire, he says, but he will try to resist the temptation to hang in on the job.

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