



Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council

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Media Update – 2011-05

2011 EGBSC Lake Stewardship Workshop –

Environmental Report Card – How are our fisheries doing?



Georgian Bay Lake Sturgeon: A keystone species of Georgian Bay fish health and greatly impacted by dams throughout the Great Lakes that block spawning migration. Sturgeon is now classed as “Threatened” under the Endangered Species Act. (Photo courtesy of the Upper Great Lakes Management Unit of MNR)

The end of June is report card time for our primary and secondary school students ... but when is it report card time for the health of eastern Georgian Bay and its fisheries? This year’s Lake Stewardship Workshop put on by the Eastern Georgian Bay

Stewardship Council (EGBSC) in partnership with the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve (GBBR) was intended to help answer that question. The workshop took place June 27 at the Bobby Orr Community Centre.

David Bywater of the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve (GBBR) is leading the report card initiative, but supporting partners include: the Georgian Bay Association (GBA), Georgian Bay Forever (GBF), Georgian Bay Land Trust (GBLT), Muskoka Watershed Council (MWC) and the Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council (EGBSC).

In his opening presentation David cited several reasons for the report card including: public education and awareness of the state of the coastal ecosystem; reporting on and measuring changes over time; identifying gaps in knowledge; and having the report card influence future government policies and programs.

Bywater stated: "Success of the report card depends on public involvement and input. A primary purpose of today's workshop is to hear what the public think are key indicators for reporting on the state of our fisheries."

That introduction led to Arunas Liskauskas of the Upper Great Lakes Management Unit of the Ministry of Natural Resources reporting on the state of the Georgian Bay fishery. Arunas spoke on the many and dramatic changes in both the off-shore and near-shore fisheries in recent years. The introduction of invasive species such as lamprey, zebra and quagga mussels and spiny water flea have drastically reduced the forage base (both zooplankton and small prey fish) resulting in lower sport and commercial fish productivity.

Arunas alluded to numerous fish species and multiple areas on Georgian Bay where studies have taken place. Walleye, muskellunge, smallmouth bass, whitefish and lake trout are key species of interest to fish managers and the general public alike. However, they are a relatively small component of a highly complex and diversified fish community that include dozens of species – all interconnected in a vast food web that includes more than just fish. How to capture the over-all health of Georgian Bay fish populations in a report card will be a challenging task requiring a major synthesis of numerous studies.

Steve Scholten, Parry Sound OMNR District fisheries biologist reported on fisheries data available for inland lakes along the Georgian Bay coast. Steve noted: "The Ministry has moved away from individual lake management to a landscape model based on 20 Management Zones throughout the province."

A handful of lakes in the report card area are part of a provincial "Broad-scale Lake Monitoring Program" that operates on a five-year cycle of assessment. State of the fishery indicators include: species present, their abundance, size and age. Data relating to stress indicators on the fish community, their habitat and exploitation are also collected. Unfortunately for the report card initiative ... the broad-scale monitoring program is just getting started.

On behalf of the Ontario Rivers Alliance, Rob MacGregor spoke on the effects of waterpower facilities and dams on fish communities and Ontario's Green Energy and Economy Act (2009).

Rob noted that although the new energy production from hydro-electric sources is billed as “renewable” – it may come with an environmental cost, particularly if the effects are left unmitigated.

Rob’s presentation then focused on the decline of the American Eel throughout Ontario (St. Lawrence River, Ottawa River watershed and Lake Ontario), and the cumulative effects that fishing, environmental change, dams and hydro-electric facilities have had on eels. Commercial and sport fishing for eels were banned in 2004 and 2005.

Ontario has committed to conserve and protect its biodiversity through the province’s Biodiversity Strategy and new Endangered Species Act announced in 2005 and 2007 respectively. A key point of Rob’s address is the public must become educated and involved in the Environmental Assessment process as part of the authorization for new dams and generating facilities.

It would seem the report card will need to consider several emerging issues and controversial threats.

The EGBSC expressed its sincere thanks to the four speakers and the many representatives of cottage associations, environmental interest groups, NGOs, government staff and general public who participated in the workshop. Further information about the workshop and presentation material can be viewed on the website of the EGBSC at www.helpourfisheries.com.