

Accident waiting to happen

by Jake Good

The toxic blue-green algae bloom that has hit Three Mile Lake was more of a question of when, not if.

The bloom is so large that the entire lake has been turned green and the algae is beginning to spread into Lake Rosseau near Windermere.

Judi Brouse, director of water programs at the Muskoka Watershed Council, said the sensitivity of Three Mile Lake and high phosphorous levels meant that the lake was susceptible to a large algae bloom.

"It was a combination of factors," said Brouse. "High phosphorous levels, agriculture, run-offs, removal of plants from the shoreline, chemical run-offs from lawns, poor septic systems are all contributing factors in something like this. It was definitely not a natural phenomenon."

The Watershed Council has recently completed individual lake studies in Muskoka and Three Mile Lake's phosphorous levels were almost twice as high as they should be.

The Simcoe Muskoka Health Unit advised people to avoid the water at all costs, stating that if the toxins are swallowed they can cause vomiting, headaches, abdominal pain and nausea. If contaminated water is swallowed in large amounts, health problems can be more serious.

"I have been very impressed with the response of the residents," said Brouse. "There has been no instant finger pointing, but an understanding that everyone has to work together to improve the lake."

Some residents are looking for direct answers and are worried that without a huge effort the algae bloom could be a regular occurrence, leading to illness and decimating property values.

Pete McPhearson, who has a cottage on the lake, said he has never seen anything like it before and is worried about it returning in the future.

"The health service did a good job of informing people about the problem but what about the impact on animals, fish and waterfowl?" he said.

(See 'Toxic' on page A8)

Toxic algae an accident waiting to happen

(Continued from front)

"I see heron looking for food and a fox, that was obviously sick, drinking from the lake. It makes me weep that humans are responsible for something like this. It is obvious that this is a man-made problem and everyone with bad shorelines, old septic systems or with large cattle farms need to come together to make sure this does not happen again."

Patrick Daradick has been cottaging on the lake for more than 50 years and points to the draining of a waterfowl wetland that he believes altered the condition of the lake.

"A few weeks prior to the lake becoming a sin, a huge amount of water was released into the lake to enhance vegetation for wildfowl," said Daradick. "I

spoke to someone from the health unit who said a major cause of these blooms is from run-offs. What more of a poor quality run-off could you have than millions of gallons of stagnant untested water?"

"After it happened the water became cloudy, then brown, black and finally pea soup green. I truly believe this was the cause of the problem," he said.

Kathy Dermot of the Simcoe Muskoka Health Unit said it would be weeks before the lake is declared fit again, but residents will be informed when the water is safe.

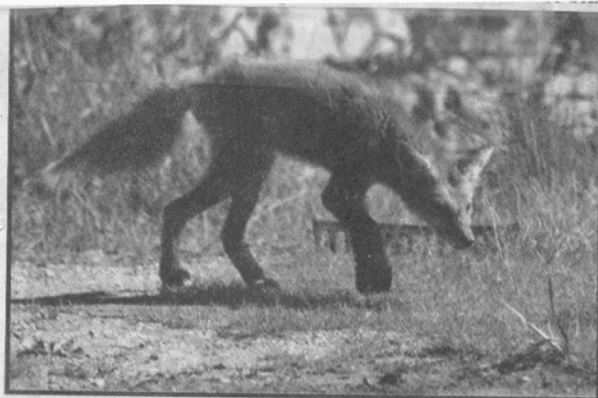
"It is the job of the Ministry of the Environment to test the water and then to let us know when the blue-green algae has dissipated so we can inform

the public," she said.

A meeting, on October 13 at 1 p.m. at the District office in Bracebridge, is being organized by the Township of Muskoka Lakes to discuss future options for improving the lake's water quality.

"This is not something the District can wade in and sort out with new laws," added Brouse. "Everyone needs to be involved, from resident associations to local agriculture and the Ministry of Environment, to help us out with the science of it all."

"In the report we gave to District about lake thresholds we wanted to have a plan set up to help deal with poor quality lakes. What a great place to start than with Three Mile Lake."



UNWELL WILDLIFE. The health unit may have been able to inform everyone around Three Mile Lake not to drink the water but wildlife has not been so lucky. This fox was seen drinking from the green lake and staggering around afterward for some time.

Photo by Jake Good