

# TIMES COLONIST

## **Comment: Everyone's help needed to save Elk, Beaver lakes**

Calvin Sandborn , and Erin Gray / Times Colonist

October 25, 2015 12:22 AM

Elk and Beaver lakes are of central importance to all Victorians. It's a rare family that doesn't enjoy their beaches, trails and picnic areas — every year more than one million visitors use the park.

Elk Lake is home to the national and University of Victoria rowing teams, and large rowing clubs. It is also the most heavily used fishing lake on Vancouver Island.

However, the lakes are in deep trouble, and they need help.

- Water quality is declining — excess phosphorus is increasingly causing blooms of potentially toxic blue-green algae. The Capital Regional District has posted signs for people and dogs to avoid the water during blooms. Indeed, for the past two years, authorities have moved the Polar Bear swim to Thetis Lake because of the algae risk at Elk Lake.
- Surplus phosphorus and other nutrients are also causing dense growth of aquatic weeds, which are problematic for rowers and anglers, and potentially dangerous for swimmers.

What's causing the excess levels of nutrients? Originally, septic fields and fertilizers, agricultural activity upstream and stormwater runoff contributed nutrients. Today, the accumulated nutrients in bottom sediments are a major source of the problem.

Weeds and algae are not the only problems. Fishing has declined in recent years, and invasive species such as bullfrogs and exotic fish are degrading water quality and fish populations.

The good news is that solutions are available — and on Thursday, the UVic Environmental Law Centre and the Victoria Golden Rods and Reels Society will host a public meeting to discuss what can be done. It is hoped that this meeting will act as a catalyst for developing a long-term strategy to restore the twin gems of Victoria — Elk and Beaver lakes.

Rowers, swimmers, fishing enthusiasts, conservation groups, scientists, law students, government officials and interested residents are all invited to come to this meeting and kick off a campaign to restore our beautiful lakes.

At the meeting, Rick Nordin of the B.C. Lake Stewardship Society will present his research about the current state of the lakes. The Ministry of Environment will report on its findings. The Environmental Law Centre will discuss laws, policies and community initiatives that have cleaned up similar lakes elsewhere.

Potential actions that might be considered include:

- Mechanical aeration of lake waters to reduce the release of phosphorus from bottom sediments and inhibit algae growth;
- Enhancing weed harvesting or other methods of weed control;

- Reducing nutrients from entering the lakes, by controlling septic runoff, agricultural runoff and stormwater runoff. For example, other lake areas have launched major programs to educate farmers and septic-tank owners, to regulate such activities or to create incentives to clean up;
- Dredging the lakes to remove phosphorus-laden sediments and improve water quality;
- Adding alum to the lake to inactivate phosphorus, as Seattle has done at Green Lake;
- Creating wetlands at key points to remove nutrients from the water.

But perhaps most important, the public will be invited to work with the Elk/Beaver Lake Stewardship Initiative to restore these lakes. It's important to note that such multi-stakeholder collaborations have been critically important in cleaning up lakes elsewhere.

Therefore, we invite all CRD residents to come and discuss how we can fix the problems. Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C., Habitat Acquisition Trust, Camosun College Environmental Technology Program, Peninsula Streams Society, Victoria Rowing Society, Gorge Waterway Initiative and others will have displays at the forum. All other citizens and groups are welcome to pitch in. We hope this forum will be a key first step toward restoration of Elk and Beaver lakes.

For more than 150 years, Victoria-area residents have gone swimming, fished and rowed on these sparkling waters. Let's work together to ensure that our grandchildren have the same precious opportunity.

Calvin Sandborn is legal director and Erin Gray is an articulated student at the University of Victoria Environmental Law Centre.

The forum on Elk/Beaver Lakes will be held Thursday, Oct. 29 at 7 p.m., Room 159, Fraser (Law) Building, University of Victoria.

© Copyright Times Colonist