

Columns/Letters

Protecting the two lakes a tricky task



**NORTHERN
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



Last week, I began to tell you about the visit to Rossport July 29-31 of the Superior-Baikal Connect—an international team of 16 kayakers who paddled around Lake Baikal in Siberia last summer. This summer, they're doing the same thing on Lake Superior. During the visit, I had rare opportunities to sit down and talk at length, through an interpreter, with members of the Russian delegation.

Baikal is an international treasure, perhaps more important to our understanding of the Earth than the Galapagos—the islands where Charles Darwin developed our understanding of evolution. The Russians call Baikal their “diamond.” It's the largest body of fresh water in the world. Lake Superior is bigger in surface area, together the two lakes contain one-third of the world's fresh water supply.

The volume of water in Baikal is hard for the human brain to comprehend. *National Geographic* magazine estimates that if all the rivers feeding Baikal were shut off, it would take 400 years to drain Baikal. But Baikal is not just vast in depth. Recent scientific expeditions have catalogued an unbelievably rich ecosystem in Baikal—estimated to be at least 25 million years old—a living museum with 1,500 species of plants, sea life and animals found no where else on earth.

Baikal is stressed

But like other parts of Mother Earth, Lake Baikal is stressed. Fingers tend to point at the Baikalsk Cellulose-Paper complex on Lake Baikal as the main pollution culprit, even though company managers boasted—both before and after the recent change in government—that the complex has “the best water treatment facilities in the world.” But air pollution is another matter. The complex's huge smoke stacks generate sulphur fumes that smell just as bad as any North American pulp mill. Evgeny Koplunenko, one of the members of the Russian delegation on Superior-Baikal Connect and an avid mountain climber, says he scaled the vast cliffs behind the complex, finding that “the forests there are all dead from the pollution.”

Baikal's unique biodiversity has long been recognized by world scientists as deserving of special protection, but the secretiveness of the former Soviet regime and the remoteness of Siberia block-ed independent visits by objective observers until quite recently. The former Soviet government garnered some international praise by issuing a comprehensive decree in April, 1987. Among other measures, the decree banned logging in a 200-kilometre band around the lake, and called for the upgrading of the pollution control facilities at the Baikalsk complex by 1993.

Some Russian members of *Superior-Baikal Connect* want protective measures which go far beyond the April, 1987 decree.

Konstantin Berezovsky, a biologist I met in Rossport, says the Russian parliament is now debating much tougher legislation, scheduled for passage by September.

Will ban new industry

“The legislation,” he explained through an interpreter, “will ban any new industry on Baikal—completely. It will also require the existing industries to undertake such an expensive clean-up they will likely have to close.”

But other members of the Russia delegation, as well as their American and Canadian counterparts, are more skeptical about the September legislation. Mike Jones from Thunder Bay, one of two Canadians in the expedition, says “others of us see the Baikal legislation as perhaps a paper tiger. We're not convinced the industries will really have to clean up, or close.”

Evgeny Koplunenko, who acted as an interpreter for my interview with Berezovsky the biologist, says “we will have to wait and see whether the legislation is as tough as the government says.”

Alexander Tenyakshev, the head of the Russian delegation, predicts that some kind of compromise will have to be found, balancing economics with the environment. “If Baikalsk were forced to close, 8,000 people would be put out of work.” Discussions are going on about building a new environmentally-friendly plant, one that would bottle the super-clean water from the depths of Baikal for

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A few facts and figures about the public school system in Ontario

As everyone's favourite time of year fast approaches—back to school, I mean—now's a good time to go over some facts about how our public school system works here in Ontario.

Who's responsible for education?

There are two basic levels of responsibility for elementary and secondary school education in Ontario. They are the Ministry of Education and the local school board.

The Ministry of Education—which is part of the provincial government—determines what students should be taught.

The ministry also sets out rules and regulations about such things as how long the school day should be; what students need to know to receive their diplomas; requirements for teacher certification; and the duties and responsibilities of teachers and school boards officials.

The Minister of Education is an elected MPP who is responsible for setting education policies. Your local school board is responsible for ensuring that teachers are taught.

So, the board hires teachers and other staff; makes sure there are enough schools and that they are adequately equipped; and determines an annual budget. The top administrative official on the board is the Director of Education. But, teachers and school principals are the people most familiar to parents and students.

Local taxpayers elect a board of trustees to represent their interests in the operation of local schools. Parents, guardians or students who have questions or concerns should feel free to contact their local trustee for help.

Your child's future is in school

Technology is changing the world in gigantic leaps and bounds. Just look at how difficult it is for many adults to read and understand the instructions for the VCR. Before you know it, there's a new and improved model with even more bells and whistles.

The same thing is happening in the places where we work. The difference is, in the workplace you can't keep up with the changes to your job if you don't have the fundamental skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Typewriters have been replaced by computers. Office phone systems are more complicated to operate. Without at least the basic skills you won't be able to keep yourself up to date and useful at work.

It's not going to change. Parents have to make sure their children know that they must get an education if they are to lead productive lives.

Throughout their working lives, they will have to go back to school in one way or another. Not necessarily in the sense of dropping everything and attending school full time.

Maybe it will be an apprentice program, or a six week course in computer training, or even a day long seminar sponsored by an employer. Whatever it is, you can be sure that it's going to happen. Without the basic skills to build on, your children are sure to be left behind.

Improving on the job, or even finding a job, depends on an employee's ability to continue to learn.

Make sure your kids keep their options open and stay in school.

Knowing how students do in school

Knowing how students are doing in school is important to everyone. That's why the Ministry of Education is stepping up efforts to better assess student's achievements.

The Minister of Education is accountable to the public because he sets his ministry out what elementary and secondary students must learn. Local school board officials and teachers are accountable because it's their job to see that students are taught what the ministry says they should be taught.

It's important that parents and guardians be given clear criteria for judging how well their children are doing in school.

The ministry has three programs aimed at helping schools become more accountable to parents. First there is the Provincial Reviews Program. The reviews are conducted on a regular basis to see how Ontario students are doing in selected subjects. The ministry is also developing a Provincial Benchmarks program, which will clearly indicate what students are expected to know and by what grade they are expected to know it. A draft of the benchmark program will be tested this fall.

The ministry is also participating in a Canada- continued on page 6