

WEEDS DROWNING LAKE SIMCOE

More than floating trash, the annual water weed explosion provides evidence of the trouble Lake Simcoe faces

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Sitting down to talk about his new weed harvesting business, Glen Rye points his thumb at the lake beyond Phil Grimes' back windows.

Nearby, three hired men standing hip-deep in Lake Simcoe fork aquatic plants up on the breakwater — something they do here each week from 6 a.m. to dusk.

Rye points past the men to new islands of loose weeds drifting closer to shore on the ripples of Cook's Bay. By morning, these too will bunch up against Grimes' property. And soon the stench will return.

"If that rots in the water, it just releases the nutrients in the water and causes more growth," the contractor and Keswick native adds.

More than the floating trash from summer boaters and winter ice huts, more than the fact that most of its coldwater fishery is on life support, the annual water weed explosion provides tangible, sticky evidence of the trouble Lake Simcoe is in.

A summer resident, Grimes has watched the lake here for 50 years. He now battles the plants every summer, all summer, in a war he and his neighbours cannot win.

"We take out 6,000 to 8,000 kilos a month," he says, "right straight through to October."

He has partnered with Rye in a business they think answers a need: harvesting the plants with a motorized craft, mounted on pontoons, that can skim off weeds and later, with the proper permits, mow along shore with a cutting blade.

"I've got four pages of names of people who want it done now," says Rye, who was hoping to field test his custom-built equipment for provincial authorities this week. "We've had calls from here to Orillia."

The weeds grow because Lake Simcoe is loaded with phosphorus,

a chemical found in plants and fertilizer. Phosphorus is natural for a lake, but run-off from suburban growth and agricultural is adding far too much.

The plants rob the coldwater fish such as lake trout of the oxygen they need, rendering the species infertile. Zebra mussels, spread during the last decade, add to the problem by filtering the water and making it clearer.

Observers say you can see twice as far down in some spots, opening up new areas for plant growth.

Not far north of Grimes' cottage, on the other side of the Maskinonge River, is Indianola Beach, where some residents' Wednesday night routine is lifting waterlogged weeds and dead fish off the breakwater in their private park.

Sometimes the volunteers fill as many as 25 bags with dead plants.

"We work until we get done or until we're fed up," says Linda Gordon, president of the Indianola Beach Association.

The phosphorus problem could be fixed, if enough people cared.

The Lake Simcoe and Region Conservation Authority knows exactly where the worst spots are in the lake's southern watersheds.

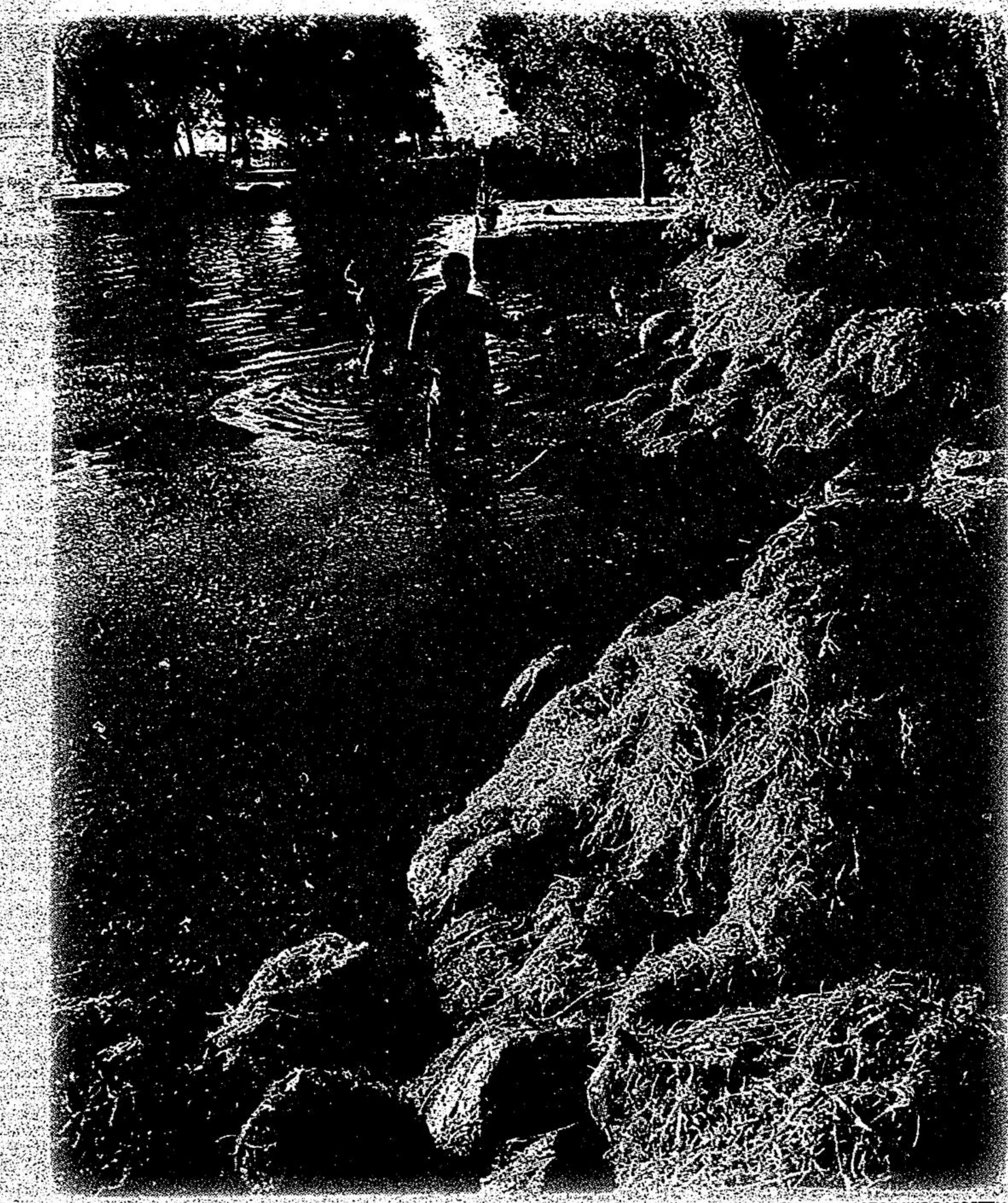
The Holland River, passing through urban Aurora and Newmarket and flowing black with washed-out soil through the Holland Marsh, releases one-third of Lake Simcoe's entire phosphorus load.

The LSRCA, soon to release a report card on the Holland River, puts the total clean-up cost at \$12 million. "As you traverse toward Lake Simcoe, water quality continues to get worse," says Mike Walters, the authority's environmental services manager.

In the early 1990s, the LSRCA was able to spend as much as \$600,000 on projects to stem erosion, control manure and replant trees along its rivers but, in 1995, its budget was slashed.

Walters says real progress, actually reducing the phosphorus load, would cost close to \$1 million a year.

In recent years, the authority has only been able to spend from \$75,000 to \$200,000 annually on the projects. Farmers who want improvements, even those willing



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

One lakefront owner has resorted to hiring professionals to clean out the mass of seaweed that besieges his property each week.

to pay two-thirds of the cost, are left on waiting lists for years.

"This isn't enough to make a difference," Walters admits.

Ernie McMeekan, a permanent Indianola Beach resident since 1983, is disgusted, not just by the smell of rotting weeds, but by the lack of action by politicians.

"They seem to know what's going on but nothing ever seems to happen," he said last week. "I think they're going to kill this lake. I really do."

Cook's Bay blooms with weeds because it is shallow. The same problem afflicts Lagoon City, a community with a network of canals on Lake Simcoe's northeast shore.

The Ramara Township community sprays its canals with a herbicide, Ragalon A, and pays for a mechanical harvester to cut the varieties Ragalon does not kill. "It's

an effective measure for us," said Les Hishon, chairperson of Lagoon City's parks and waterways commission.

The Town of Georgina, which has a user-pay trash system, can be called to pick up aquatic weeds for free if they are bagged separately in clear plastic.

"It really is a cost of living on the lake," says Georgina's waste coordinator Caroline Kirkpatrick, whose department picks up as many as 30 bags from a single residence.

Kirkpatrick suggests the key to reducing pollution is to educate lake-users that what they put into Simcoe has long-term effects. "A lot of people don't, or won't see that."

There are some who say the long, slow process of a lake clogging with vegetation until it becomes part of the land —

eutrophication — is a natural one for parts of Lake Simcoe. Cook's Bay, they say, was once a marsh and may be one again.

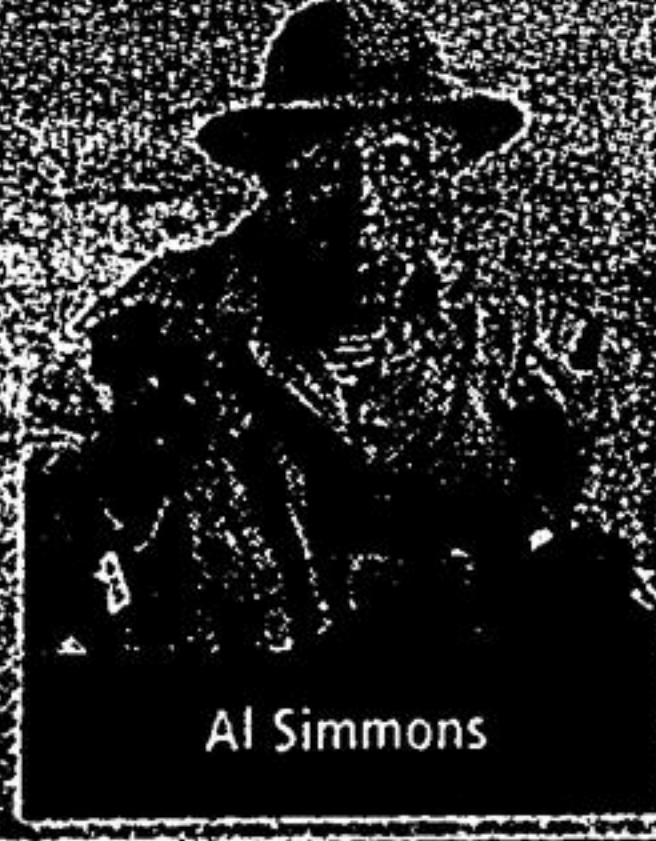
Vegetation is also an important fish habitat, providing spawning and cover, says Robert Fancy, a local Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources official who sees no return for Lake Simcoe to the conditions of the 1950s, or of the 1800s, for that matter. "The lake is now evolving and we sort of have to roll with the punches."

But Michael Vesselago, a leader of the Jackson's Point West Ratepayers Association, said people have been too passive about the lake's health.

That is changing as residents question how local decisions on development — such as the 400-unit retirement complex proposed for the mouth of the Black River in Georgina — could affect us all.

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