

Water key to future?

TRCA, LSRCA look ahead to continued watershed protection

BY SERENA WILLOUGHBY
Staff Writer

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It is a tale of two watersheds.

This year, the Toronto Region Conservation Authority celebrated its 50th anniversary and Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) celebrated 55 years of serving their respective communities.

But, after more than half a century in operation, the question is what exactly do the two conservation authorities in York Region do?

While most people think they are primarily concerned with looking after birds and animals and parks, the main purpose of the TRCA is actually to look after your water sources.

HISTORY OF CONSERVATION

Both authorities were born out of the conservation movement of the 19th century.

At that time, the Germans were just beginning to explore the field of forestry in British India, managing forests using early climate change theories.

In 1898, Prussian-born Bernard Fernow founded the forestry school at University of Toronto, one of only two at that time in North America.

The two original schools of thoughts behind conservation still exist today — one side believes forest lands should be regulated for public activities and commercial

use, the other feels this will lead to commercial overuse and ruin the pristine wilderness.

THE PRESENT

According to Brian Kemp, acting director of conservation lands at LSRCA, over the years, they have refined their approach.

"The way we do business has changed," he said.

"The lesson of Walkerton is that we can't just treat the water, we have to look at a more holistic approach of protecting water at the source."

This means being conscious of the fact the water we use in our everyday lives doesn't just go down the drain and vanish, it goes back into a system.

"We hear horror stories about water quality from Third World countries and you think that could never happen here, but it can," he said.

At LSRCA, protecting Lake Simcoe means bringing it back to earlier levels of health by generating awareness about the impact of phosphates and encouraging people to conserve water.

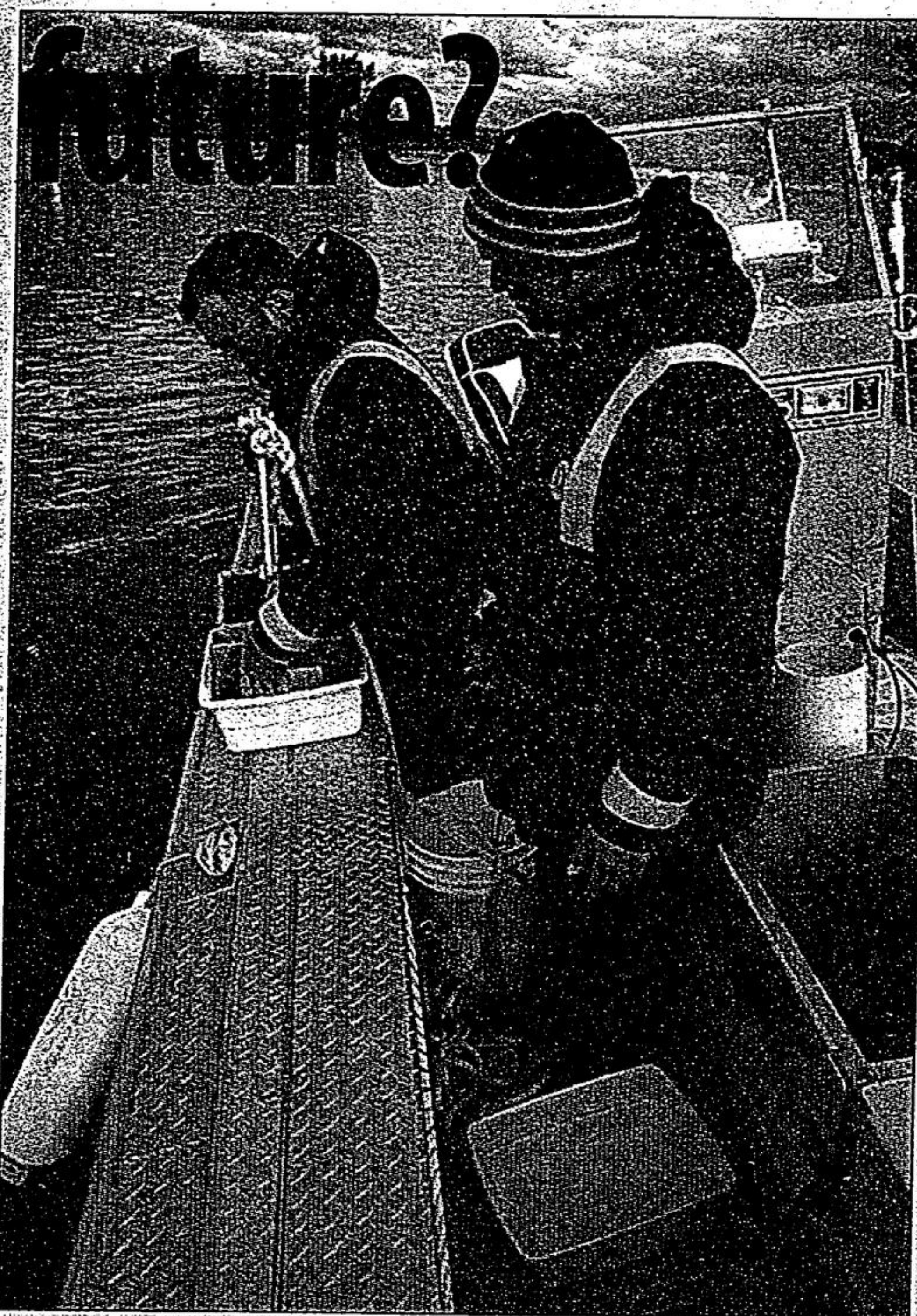
Community groups concerned with the health of Lake Simcoe are consulting with LSRCA to ensure the long-term health of Lake Simcoe.

LSRCA's approach has been to involve the community groups in efforts to clean up the lake by forming community partnerships.

"We don't want to dictate to a community what they can and can't do, that doesn't make us any friends," Mr. Kemp said.

THE FUTURE

Finding innovative ways of working with the community is key for the TRCA as well and has made



Members of the TRCA coastal ecology team collect samples in Lake Ontario. Conservation authorities have gone above and beyond to ensure safe drinking sources, greenspaces and a wilderness legacy for the GTA.

great strides working with different sectors.

"The easiest way to protect the land is to own it," said Mr. Kemp.

He would like to see more acquisition of lands on the Oak Ridges Moraine and he stresses the need to provide linkages among protected lands.

Brian Denney, chief administrative officer for the TRCA, also feels

preserving greenspace is an important mandate for conservation authorities.

It is easy to take for granted the impact the conservation authorities, now more than half a century old, have on the environment.

Each year, they hold tree planting events such as the Sunoco Tree Plant April 29 at George R. Richardson Park in Newmarket.

Conservation authorities grew out of tragedy

In 1954, hurricane Hazel ripped through the Greater Toronto Area killing 81 and leaving 1,800 families homeless.

This tragedy served as a wake-up call for everyone and shared the need for a holistic plan for dealing with the GTA's waterways.

In his book on the origins of the TRCA entitled *Paths to the Living City*, Bill McLean, said the tragedy of hurricane Hazel was not only the loss of life and destruction of property, it was the fact that it could have been avoided.

The problem was most people

didn't understand the danger of working and living in a flood plane.

However, as Brian Denney, chief administrative officer of the TRCA said, Hazel was both a friend and a foe of the authority at the beginning.

Hazel prompted communities to get behind the idea of a conservation authority, originally called the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Foundation, however, it dominated the authority's mandate.

"At first, Hazel sort of hijacked the agenda," Mr. Denney

explained.

"Hazel was bad (because) it drove an agenda to try to manage nature rather than managing human impacts on nature."

For the first 30 years, TRCA dealt mainly with the ramifications of Hazel.

The acquisition of lands was only for the purpose of dam and reservoir sites and the prevailing attitude was not aimed at conservation but on trying to control nature through flood control.

In fact, the site of Kortright Centre for Conservation in Vaughan was originally acquired

as part of the lower east branch flood control reservoir.

Like many of the TRCA's greenspaces, it was originally preserved as a means of controlling flood impacts.

TRCA wasn't alone in dealing with the aftermath of Hazel, LSRCA which in 1954 was called the Upper Holland Valley Conservation Authority, faced loss of life, washed out roads and collapsed buildings.

For the Simcoe region, Hazel identified the need for flood alerts and warnings for the region.

—Serena Willoughby

CONSERVATION AREAS

► **KORTRIGHT CENTRE, WOODBRIDGE:** nature trail, refreshment facilities, picnic sites

► **LAKE ST. GEORGE FIELD CENTRE, RICHMOND HILL:** youth outdoor education programs, Kettle Lake exploration on a pontoon craft, learn to canoe

► **BOYD CONSERVATION AREA, WOODBRIDGE:** nature trails; refreshment facilities, group camping and picnic sites

► **BRUCE'S MILLS CONSERVATION AREA, 3291 STOUFFVILLE RD., STOUFFVILLE:** nature trails, refreshment facilities, group camping and picnic sites

For more information go to www.trca.on.ca

HELPING OUT

Newcomers volunteer at TRCA

There are many ways you can help your local conservation authority.

One example of community involvement is the Environmental Volunteer Network developed by TRCA's Chandra Sharma, in cooperation with the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.

Many of the volunteers who participate are new Canadians who have backgrounds in environmental sciences and are looking for Canadian experience, Ms Sharma said.

While they have the professional qualifications, they lack the experience and many find this program ideal for their needs.

As a result, Ms Sharma developed a database to connect volunteers with organizations that need help.

Her network works with groups such as the Green Party of Canada and the Royal Ontario Museum.

The TRCA administers the database and contacts with groups looking for volunteer aid.

For more information, contact your local conservation authority office.

—Serena Willoughby

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