

HOME *in the Highlands*

Boat wakes 'biggest threat to lake health'

By Mike Baker

A local resident and scientist from Queen's University is concerned about the enhanced wakes that can now be generated by high-powered watercraft, which he feels have the potential to be the biggest impact to lakes across Haliburton County since they were formed more than 11,000 years ago.

Dr. Timothy James was the guest speaker as Environment Haliburton! held its annual general meeting at the Haliburton Highlands Museum this summer. After spending much of his formative years cottaging in the County and 11 years as a full-time resident, James said he's noticed a lot of changes to local waterways and ecosystems.

"There are more weeds, more algae, and definitely way more people. These days, there are increasing pressures on our lakes, and this worries me... especially now that we have boats that are engineered to generate waves powerful enough to surf," James said. "Even the waves on the Great Lakes are rarely powerful enough to surf, but now, if a lake has a boat launch, you can surf there."

On his lake, which James said is approximately one kilometre long and half a kilometre wide, several of his neighbours have invested in these kinds of boats, which he says are starting to take a toll.

Wake boats are designed to generate waves that are six to 12 times more powerful than those from standard boats, James said. They can generate waves up to a metre high (3.2 feet), which he said can have many negative impacts on the shoreline, lake bottom and the safety of other lake users and infrastructure, even from hundreds of feet away.

"If used too close to shore, these wakes can cause significant shoreline erosion as well as damaging loon nests and other wildlife habitat," James said. "In water that's too shallow, they can stir up bottom sediment, destroy fish habitat and add nutrients to the water that can lead to algae blooms."

Many of the boats are fitted with ballast tanks for lake water to make them heavier. Because they're difficult to fully empty and clean, James said there's potential for spreading invasive species from one lake to the next.

Public safety remains a big consideration,



Boat wakes are changing waterways and ecosystems. *File.*

too, given the strength of the wakes that can be generated.

"I've heard complaints from paddlers who can only be out on their kayaks or canoes in the early morning or late evening, because once the wake boats come out, there's no more safe paddling," James noted.

To help address this emerging threat, he's joined Safe Quiet Lakes (SQL), a grassroots level non-profit that works with lake associations and municipal governments to help ensure waterways are safe, peaceful and environmentally sustainable. Last year, the organization released a survey that drew 7,000 responses. Of those, 68 per cent felt issues around boat wakes are getting worse.

In June, SQL launched a new education initiative to support responsible wake-enhanced activities on Ontario lakes and waterways. When operating a wake vessel, boaters are encouraged to stay at least 250 metres from shore, docks and boathouses; operate in water that is at least nine metres deep; and ensure there is adequate space for a safe, uninterrupted run.

"This is about helping people enjoy wake-enhanced activities in a way that works for everyone on the lake," said Colleen Kennedy, chair of the Safe Wakes Coalition (SWC). "Distance, depth and space all

matter. When they're respected, everyone benefits."

Kennedy said the practices are designed to help protect shorelines from erosion, reduce environmental impacts and improve safety for all lake users.

New restrictions

Although all legislation regarding waterways is overseen by Transport Canada, James said there are several tools available to municipalities to help ensure boats are used sustainably and in a way that is fair to other lake users.

In 2024, the federal government updated vessel operation restriction regulations (VORRs) under the Canada Shipping Act. This allows municipalities to apply to restrict wakesurfing to safe distances from shore or on lakes where their size, depth or environmental sensitivity is a concern. Restrictions can apply to whole lakes or certain sections.

It can take up to six months for a decision once an application has been submitted, with the province issuing around 300 VORRs over the past two years. James noted there are approximately 250,000 lakes

in Ontario.

This summer, James said SWC is launching its 'better wake zone' campaign that will include downloadable navigation maps showing boaters where its safest to wakesurf. James said Lake Kashagawigamog, Soyers and Canning lakes are included in the initial launch.

"Our aim is to supply these maps for anywhere they're needed... and help municipalities get VORR implemented where appropriate," he said. "We need people, especially boaters, to know the effect of these boats on the lake bottom and shorelines and why it's important they act responsibly."

Lance Payne from the Lake Kashagawigamog Organization (LKO) said his group and the Coalition of Haliburton Property Owners' Association (CHA) are actively working with SWC.

"The LKO feels these science-based recommendations for enhanced wakes are important to follow for smaller and/or narrower lakes like Lake Kash to mitigate safety, environmental and personal property damage now and for the future long-term health of our lake," Payne said.

For more information, visit safequiet.ca.

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