

number of coastal wetlands which have been officially identified by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in the past. Others include: Potato Bay, Quarry Bay, Tobie's Bay, Sandy Island, Bayfield Inlet and Shawanaga Bay.

The Georgian Bay Association is working with McMaster University this summer and over the summers of 2008 and 2009 to assess these and other coastal wetlands in the Georgian Bay area. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is providing funding to assist with the project.

The Georgian Bay Association was instrumental in drawing attention to the St. Clair River dredging in the 1960s as a possible contributing factor to the lower water levels in the upper Great Lakes. The Georgian Bay Association commissioned a \$200,000 hydrological study which was released last summer and indicated the river erosion is a major contributor. That suggestion has been taken up by the International Joint Commission which has made the matter the first part of its five-year study. Climate change, low precipitation, less freeze-up of waters, and more water evaporation will also be studied as contributing factors to the problem.

The Georgian Bay Association is concerned that if declining water levels are not stopped, some coastal wetlands could be lost forever. "Wetlands are needed by 80 to 90 per cent of Great Lakes fish," says Georgian Bay Association environment chair Mary Muter, a Toronto resident who works from her cottage on Georgian Bay. Ms Muter has assumed the role of Georgian Bay keeper, watching over water quality issues in company with other waterkeeper organizations across Canada and United States. She now has a seat on the International Joint Commission.

On Georgian Bay, "wetlands are developed on silt deposits on the bays and shores," she explains. In some places there are steep granite shorelines where plant life will not be able to grow down to the water's new edge, she suggests. In these cases, there is a likelihood the coastal wetlands will be lost, she fears. "So that's why it's key to get those assessed and protected."

The Association is hopeful that if it can be determined that erosion on the St. Clair River is causing declining water levels in the upper Great Lakes, then improvements can be made to stop the erosion.

Meanwhile, assessment of the coastal wetlands will provide an element of protected status.

The assessment work begins this summer. Dr. Pat Chow-Fraser of McMaster University, who is heading the assessment work, says five graduate students will be analyzing the sites for the presence of birds, fish, plants, animals, aquatic insects and worms. This work is aimed at determining whether there would be a physical impact to each of the individual wetland areas if they were exposed to long-term low water levels.

"The impact of low water levels will be very site dependent," she comments. Factors which could affect each of the sites' ability to cope include the slope of the bank, presence of seeds, rate of water decline, soil, water quality and light penetration, she explains. Dr. Chow-Fraser says that coastal wetlands toward Severn Sound have already dried up.

Ontario Minister of Natural Resources David Ramsay expressed concern regarding impacts of declining water levels on the Great Lakes.

"We're very concerned about the potential impact on our natural heritage systems on the Great Lakes and some of the other lakes relative to climate change," says Mr. Ramsay. "We want to study all these impacts, and how they affect the various landscapes."

He says the provincial government also wants to learn what can be done about the impacts of climate change.

Water diversion on the Great Lakes, Mr. Ramsay says, has also been a concern. He recalls that when he was first sworn in as Minister of Natural Resources, he worked to improve the Great Lakes Charter Annex agreement regarding water diversion agreements between Ontario, Quebec and eight Great Lakes states. The provincial government is "very pleased" with the improvements which were made in that agreement, he notes.

"It is a huge scale landscape that influences water levels on the Great Lakes," says Parry Sound MNR biologist Ron Black. "Water level fluctuations are going to cause changes on the wetland habitat. That will be favourable to some species, and unfavourable to others. But communities change and adjust.

There is no doubt the environment is in flux and is always changing."

He says ordinary people can counter adverse impacts of declining water levels on coastal wetlands.

"Naturalist groups can help provide information to appropriate levels of government." People can get involved with local planning uses, he adds. "We all can try to be good stewards of the land, and use it in a way that doesn't degrade it." ☼



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