Headwaters
The Ontario Headwaters Institute

Fact Sheet: What Can I Do?

Protecting Ontario's water is a multi-faceted task, touching on policies from all layers of government, poor beach & drinking water quality, actions that might impact habitat for species other than us, and wasting water at home. The list below offers just some of the ways people can help protect Ontario's water, from personal to global issues and actions.

Perspective

- Embrace an attitude that "Water is Life", that the earth's water is finite, that dirty water cannot be easily cleaned, and that water should be protected and conserved for future generations.

Context

- Identify the watershed in which you live and its general conditions, such as its percentage in natural, agricultural, or urban use, its water quality, and the health of fish.
- Know where you drinking water comes from and what is being done to keep it clean.
- Know where your sanitary sewage goes. Does its effluent meet discharge standards? Does it overflow and cause closing beach closures?
- Know where your lot, street, and community run-off goes. Is the volume of run-off causing erosion to local stream banks? Consider some of the alternative in Personal Action.
- Many of Ontario's cities have parks located in valley corridors with streams, and more than 20 of these have been designated Urban River Valleys as part of the Greenbelt. Take a walk there to familiarize yourself with conditions. Is the water clear or does it smell? Is the watercourse clean or does it have scattered plastic bags and other trash? Are the stream sides planted with thriving vegetation, denuded & eroding, or perhaps hardened in stone or concrete banks? Is it an inviting, living landscape?
- What about nearby lakes and wetlands? Do you know where to visit one of these? Are these inviting, living landscapes?
- Do local streams and lakes have fish? Would you eat a fish caught there?
- What about the headwaters of your nearest stream? Many headwater areas may be in urban development or consist of private land in rural areas, but l you can ook for regional forests and conservation areas on the internet.
- Alternately, take a peak at the OHI's Headwater Hikes. Visits there can restore a personal connection with nature and help show you what the watershed and its natural heritage looked like centuries ago, as per the photos below that show a trail through a Carolinian forest and a gorgeous marsh.

Personal Actions

- Conserve water in the home by using low-flow showerheads, faucets, and toilets. Keep water cool in the fridge or use ice rather than running the tap.
- Select and use only benign or non-toxic cleaners.
- Conserve water outside by adjusting the height of your grass and watering less frequently and/or replace your lawn with less-water-intense grass or replacing parts of the lawn with other plants or features.
- If your property releases a lot of run-off, consider containing it in a rain barrel, rain garden, swale, or infiltration trench, some of which can be used for watering.
- Slightly dirty cars can be washed at home, but use detergents without surfactants and paraben, as these are harmful to aquatic species. Take cars with oil, grease, or asphalt on them to a carwash that captures these pollutants in its wastewater system.
- Don't pour anything such as used engine oil, gas, or paint into the stormwater, which can carry pollutants to local waters. Take them to a garage or waste facility for proper disposal.
- Use lawn chemicals sparingly and follow instructions on their application and disposal.
- Use salt and even de-icing alternatives carefully, as these too can be transported to local waters.
- If you have lake or steam-side property, provide a plant buffer at least 5 meters depth from the shoreline.

Organizational Action

- Scale many of the Personal Actions described above to suit your organization, such as for large landscaped or paved areas where rain gardens, swales, and infiltration trenches could be beneficial.
- Have a spill plan. This plan would generally identify substances that can pollute water, storm sewer and other pathways that can transport the substances to water, training on the location and use of spill containment and absorbing material, and phone numbers for spill hotlines and clean up support. The spill plan should also contain information on health threats, protective equipment, and wash stations.

Support Integrated Watershed Management

- Read about how increased GHGs will alter the hydrologic cycle as a key aspect of climate change.
- Learn how your local agencies protect water for nature and water for human use.
- Consider where and how Integrated Watershed Management can increase inter-agency collaboration in watershed planning, permitting, monitoring, and stewardship.
- Go to www.waterscape.ca and sign the Declaration to Preserve Ontario Ecological Integrity.
- Make a donation to the Ontario Headwaters Institute via Canada Helps.

Watershed management, described at ontarioheadwaters.ca/education, consists of an inventory of the characteristics of a watershed, an assessment of the pressures upon those characteristics, and the design & implementation of a watershed plan.

In fact, driven by conservation authorities, watershed management has evolved in Ontario toward Integrated Watershed Management, as per the drawing from Conservation Ontario, which seeks to engage key government agencies, as well as the public and private sector, in a watershed framework to secure our environmental, economic, and social wellbeing.