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Local News

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Fish able to cope with Welland River's challenges

FISHY BUSINESS: NPCA studies fish population

Posted By ALLAN BENNER, TRIBUNE STAFF

Posted 2 days ago

It might look dirty, but the Welland River is a great place to raise a family -- if you're a fish.

After about eight years of studying the diversity of aquatic life in the Welland River, scientist Dr. Chris Bunt, from Biotactic Inc., said the variety of fish species caught by anglers in the river has shown that the fish are able to cope with the unique challenges they face in the river.

Some of the challenges faced by various fish species include the reverse water flow when a hydro siphon kicks in, as well as the siphon that diverts the flow of river water under the old Welland Canal.

Many species he was concerned about have been pulled from the river, healthy and happy in the muddy water.

Bunt's research firm was contracted by Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority to study the diversity and health of fish species in the river.

Over the past several years, Bunt said they've learned a lot about the health of the fish in the river.

Every summer the conservation authority has been host to a fishing derby, getting as many as 200 young anglers to cast their lines into the river and catch as many fish as they can, so those fish can be tagged and released back into the water. That event has helped Bunt and the conservation authority keep track of the river's species.

"What we really have is some interesting movement data," he said. "If we went back and looked at the size of the fish when they were tagged as opposed to when they were recaptured, we'd get some good information on how they are growing. It's a good reflection on their overall health and the amount of nutrients that are in the river."

Saturday morning, they were back again along with about 80 children who registered for the fishing event, despite the threatening weather. The weather also meant an early end for the derby when a thunderstorm started at about 10 a. m.

The fishing wasn't bad for many of the young anglers who participated.

Dakota Boyle, 8, caught a few too, including the only yellow perch brought in that morning, and the largest fish too -- 88mm long.

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Stephanie Choo-Wing, a research assistant at Biotactic, holds one of the fish pulled from the Welland River during a Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority fishing derby Saturday morning.

ALLAN BENNER Staff Photo

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In the 45 minutes or so that Dylan Koros, 13, got to fish before the storm arrived, he caught three nice-sized fish.

For Bunt, the exercise meant he had 15 fish to tag and release Saturday - "half as many as last year."

But it was still enough to help the conservation authority increase its understanding of how the fish species are coping in the river.

"I think we've learned a fair bit about how the fish respond to the bi-directional flow in the river," he said.

"One of the reasons people don't think this river is as robust biologically as it is because you can never see down through it.

The water's so muddy and with the poor water quality, people just assume that there's nothing there because they can't see it, but there are lots and lots of fish in there."

Jocelyn Baker, the conservation authority's watershed restoration co-ordinator, said the organization will be returning to the river, hoping to tag and release a few more fish this summer, although it won't be a public fishing derby like the one held Saturday.

"We're going to do some netting," she said.

The tags have a phone number for the conservation authority.

Anyone who catches one of the fish can call the office, with information such as the size of the fish and the location where it was caught, and be eligible for a reward.

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