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Wired fish help in dam effect study

Randy Richmond
Sun Media

June 10, 2008

London's fish are wired for sound.

Carrying tiny transmitters and trailing tiny antennae, they're sending messages that will determine how humans use the Thames River and how the river looks in spring.

Already, the fish have delayed the shutting of the rebuilt Springbank Dam and have Londoners wondering why the river is so low this year.

"We are getting calls from people saying, 'Why does the river look so different?' " said Pat Donnelly, London's watershed manager.

The answer: a multi-year study on how fish are moving up and down the river over the reconstructed dam.

The dam was traditionally shut the May long weekend, allowing water to pool upstream and boaters to



Biologist Chris Bunt inserts a tiny radio tag into the belly of a sleeping bass, above, and stitches it up, below, so biologists can study whether the rebuilt Springbank Dam poses an

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start using the river.

But no one knew if that date allowed fish to finish heading upstream to spawn, Donnelly said.

"It was just a rule of thumb."

So a few years ago, when the city began reconstructing the dam, it decided to commission a study determining how long the fish spawn and how they would react to the rebuilt dam.

obstruction to the movement of fish. (MIKE HENSEN/Sun Media)



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"We have the opportunity to learn and understand the river a lot better," Donnelly said.

Enter biologist Chris Bunt, owner of Biotactic Fish and Wildlife Research in Kitchener.

He's in charge of selecting 60 fish each spring from three species -- smallmouth bass, white suckers and shorthead redhorse.

Each fish is caught upstream of the Springbank Dam before spawning and put into a cooler containing a solution that puts it to sleep.

Bunt and his assistant make a one-centimetre incision in the sleeping fish's belly and place a three-gram transmitter inside, with a 20-centimetre antenna trailing below.

Then the fish is taken about 200 metres south of Springbank and given a couple of hours to recover, before being placed in the river to go back upstream.

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The transmitters are constantly sending data, about 65,000 lines a week, telling Bunt if the dam is stopping or delaying the fish. Even a short delay can stop the fish from spawning.

The transmitters don't harm the fish, which build a pocket of tissue around the transmitter to keep it away from other organs, Bunt said. And some species are able to discard the antenna and transmitter through its digestive system.

Bunt conducted a baseline study in 2006, when the stop-logs of the old dam had been removed.

At that point, "there was nothing in the river to stop the fish," Bunt said. "We are attempting to prove the fish are swimming past the new dam as if nothing is there as well."

Bunt didn't gather fish last year, because the dam was being built. The results for this spring are not in yet.

"There do appear to be some differences from 2006 and there appears to be some delay," he said.

But Bunt suspects that has less to do with the new dam than the altering of the river channel by the construction work itself.

"The main channel from 2006 has been altered. I don't think there is a throughway for the fish yet."

The river will carve out a throughway, he added.

The results of the study, costing about \$40,000 each year, will determine when the city closes the dam in spring and allows the river upstream to rise, Donnelly said.

"June 15 is the new rule of the thumb, but the research will refine that date."

Randy Richmond is a Free Press reporter.

E-MAIL: Randy Richmond

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A River: Videos

The Thames, London and the tides that bind them

Toy Boat Tour

LFP VIDEOS: View all 22 episodes of the ride down the Thames River.

A River Podcast

P.J. Harston talks to Free Press reporter Randy Richmond about his research

Blogging Down A River

Share your thoughts with us about your experiences on and around the Thames River.

A River: Coves Erosion Slowed (Dec. 23, 2008)

Three rows of hedges are planted in a gully at the Coves to help stop the erosion of the Thames watershed.

A River: Friends of the Thames (Dec. 13, 2008)

Todd Sleeper of "Friends of the Thames" talks about his vision of the future of the river.

A River: What Next for the Thames? (Dec. 6, 2008)

Thames River experts express their wishes for the future of the river following a brainstorming session at the Free Press.

A River: Thames Public Meeting (Nov. 22, 2008)

The City of London is planning a public meeting to help decide the future of the Thames River and its relationship with London.

A River: Old Man River (Nov. 15, 2008)

Stew Simpson, who has spent his life on the Thames River, shares his perspective on the waterway.

A River: Thames Heritage River Tree (Nov. 15, 2008)

The Thames Heritage River Tree, which London artist Paul Cottle has been carving since March, nears completion and may be featured at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver.

A River: What Does the Thames Need? (Nov. 15, 2008)

Members of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority answer the question, "What does the Thames River need?"

A River: Shoreline Clean-up (Sep. 26, 2008)

Almost 200 people take part in the 15th Annual TD Great Canadian Shoreline Clean-up.

A River: Water Quality (Sep. 23, 2008)

Water quality specialists test the Thames and talk about the current state of the river.

A River: Toy Boat Tour Special (Aug. 30, 2008)

Mike Knoll and Randy Richmond talk about where the Toy Boat Tour has led them and where it is going.

River Photos

A River published
Monday, May 5

A River published
Sunday, May 4

A River published
Saturday, May 3

A River The Thames,
London and the tides that
bind them

Toy Boat Tour

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 1

Free Press reporter Randy Richmond launches a boat at the north source of the Thames River.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 2

Reporter Randy Richmond launches a toy boat on the south branch of the Thames. This week: Managing Editor Joe Ruscitti talks about why the paper is focusing a seasonal series on the river.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 3

The toy boat makes its way through Woodstock. This week: Matt Williamson, the teen who took it upon himself to clean-up a section of the Thames, talks about making a difference.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 4

The toy boat floats through Mitchell and St.Mary's. This week: St.Mary's Museum curator Mary Smith talks about what the river has meant to her community.

A River: Toy Boat

A River: Jennifer Robertson (Aug. 29, 2008)

London artist Jennifer Robertson talks about her work that appears in the artbook, "The River Project".

A River: Queen Snakes (Aug. 25, 2008)

Species-at-Risk Biologist Scott Gillingwater shows some of the Queen Snakes living on the Thames.

A River: Bike Trails (Aug. 25, 2008)

Free Press reporter Jenni Dunning explores the bike trails that border the Thames River.

A River: Softshell Turtle Release (Aug. 15, 2008)

Spiny Softshell Turtles incubated in captivity are released into the Thames watershed as part of an initiative to restore the species.

A River: Memorial Fountain Delayed (Aug. 12, 2008)

The Blackburn Memorial Fountain at the Forks of the Thames, originally scheduled to be completed by July 1, is now being delayed until Fall.

A River: Ray Jackson (Jul. 16, 2008)

London artist Ray Jackson talks about his sculpture "The Evolution of Castor". Jackson's work is featured in the art book, The River Project.

A River: Spiny Softshell Turtles (Jul. 13, 2008)

A team of biologists from the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority work to protect the Eastern Spiny Softshell Turtles living on the Thames.

A River: Fish Tagging (Jun. 10, 2008)

Biotactics' Dr. Chris Bunt uses radio tags to track fish movement through the new gates at Springbank Dam.

SEARCH all News: Special Reports: A River: Videos Articles**A River****POV: Defining the river that defines us (May 3, 2008)**

Because of its famous name, and because both the north and south branches meet here, the river is often associated with London.

Toy Boat Tour

View all 22 episodes of the ride down the Thames River.

Bridge backs up traffic (Jul. 11, 2009)

CHATHAM -- It took nearly two hours yesterday to correct an electrical problem on the Parry Bridge on Keil Dr., which failed to close after its two centre sections were raised to allow two pleasure boats to make it upstream on the Thames River.

SPECIAL REPORT: A river ran through it (Jul. 4, 2009)

Things aren't the same on the stretch of the Thames River from the forks in downtown London to Springbank Dam -- not since the dam became inoperable last summer. Where deep waters used to flow -- a haven for canoeists and kayakers - weeds grow from dry riverbed and deer migrate to new neighbourhoods. A good thing or a bad thing? There's plenty of opinion to go around, writes Free Press reporter Randy Richmond.

Dam troubles don't dampen canoe celebration

(Jun. 27, 2009)

London Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco-Best got a firsthand view of the troubles along the Thames River and its broken Springbank Dam yesterday.

Input on river plan sought (Jun. 15, 2009)

A wide-ranging report on the Thames River makes more than 75 recommendations and identifies hundreds of features to guide the future of the city's natural, historical

Tour, Part 5

The toy boat winds its way through Beachville and Ingersoll. This week: fly fisherman Jay Newell shares his perspective on the Thames River.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 6**

The toy boat finds itself in Fanshawe Lake. This week: Mike Morris from the Fanshawe Yacht Club.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 7**

The green toy boat enters London on the Thames' south branch. This week: naturalist Ann White.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 8**

The green boat drifts though St. Julien Park. This week: community activist Bernie Brooke.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 9**

The toy boat on the south branch of the Thames goes over Hunt Dam. This week: Cathy Reeves of the UTRCA talks about the more than 200 barriers found throughout the watershed.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 10**

The black toy boat challenges the Fanshawe Dam. This week: Water Resource Engineer Mark Helsten talks about Fanshawe Dam.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 11**

The green toy boat floats through London on the south branch of the Thames. This week: landscape architect Ron Koudys.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 12**

The black toy boat makes its way down the north branch of the Thames. This week: London poet and writer Penn Kemp talks about the literary implications of the river.

A River: Toy Boat**Tour, Part 13**

The black toy boat approaches the Forks on the north branch of the Thames. This week: engineer Slobodan Simonovic talks about the potential for another massive flood in London.

and cultural spine.

COMMENT: Thames River remains a jewel, albeit somewhat flawed (May. 9, 2009)

It's impossible to conceive when looking at our river now, so narrow and shallow, that such a calamity that paralysed our city with grief could happen.

Canoe Club falls victim to dam failure (May. 6, 2009)

The London Canoe Club may become the first casualty of city hall's \$5-million lawsuit against the designers and builders of the flawed Springbank Dam.

Dam repairs may be years away (May. 5, 2009)

Londoners will forego a working Springbank dam for at least two more years - and potentially far longer - unless the city settles its \$5-million lawsuit against firms who designed and built it.

SPECIAL REPORT: Fix it or deep-six it? (Apr. 18, 2009)

With costs of repairing a new but defective Springbank Dam in the millions of dollars and rising, the debate over whether the structure should even exist has resurfaced. Free Press reporter Randy Richmond lays out the positions of the dam's proponents and opponents.

City keeps report secret (Apr. 17, 2009)

City hall won't disclose to taxpayers a report that details what officials think went wrong at Springbank Dam, even though those findings will be shared with engineering firms sued by the city.

Cost to fix dam totals \$4.5M (Apr. 16, 2009)

London city hall says \$4.5 million needs to be spent to correct defects that disabled one gate at Springbank Dam and also threaten the other three gates.

POV: Step in right direction on Springbank Dam (Apr. 16, 2009)

Given the long, arduous, and recently tortuous history of the Springbank Dam, it's difficult to ignore the possibility nature might be trying to send us all a message, and a not particularly new one at that.

City files \$5.5M lawsuit (Apr. 15, 2009)

London is suing the consulting engineers, designers and builders of the broken Springbank Dam for \$5.5 million.

Springbank Dam repair stalls as costs overflow (Apr. 14, 2009)

Ten months after the Springbank Dam was supposed to begin operating again, its future remains as muddy as the river flowing through its broken gates.

Canoe club seeks fast fix to stay alive (Apr. 6, 2009)

Worried about another summer without paddling, the London Canoe Club is pitching a novel way to dam the Thames River -- a giant wormlike tube filled with water.

Raw sewage in Thames enough to fill 700 pools (Feb. 20, 2009)

Enough raw sewage to fill about 700 backyard swimming pools flowed untreated into the Thames River from London during last week's heavy rainfall and flooding.

New army fighting erosion (Dec. 31, 2008)

They look like an end, not a beginning.

A RIVER: Saturday Special (Dec. 13, 2008)

The man who launched the annual cleanup of the Thames River 10 years ago has a new, more ambitious plan to help the waterway.

COLUMN: River roundup (Dec. 13, 2008)

A few patches of ice and snow clung to the trails when I took my first walk in the woods along the Thames River in early March.

POINT OF VIEW: Thames River vision should

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 14

The two toy boats meet at the Forks of the Thames. This week: Kevin Bice the London artist who conceived and organized the artbook "The River Project."

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 15

The toy boats float by Greenway Pollution Plant. This week: John Fitzgerald, Division Manager for the City of London's pollution control operations, talks about keeping the Thames clean.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 16

The toy boats approach faulty Springbank Dam. This week: London Rowing Club President Meredith Smith talks about the problems the dam has created for rowers.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 17

The toy boats leave London and float through Komoka Provincial Park. This week: Anita Caveney of the McIlwraith Naturalists talks about her efforts to protect the species of Komoka Park.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 18

The toy boats float through Delaware and the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation. This week: Jode Kechego talks about what the Thames means to his people.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 19

The toy boats float around Big Bend. This week: Mary Simpson talks about the Thames as a social boundary.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 20

The toy boats float through Thamesville. This week: historian Arthur Pegg talks about the 1813 Battle of the Thames.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Part 21

The toy boats float through Chatham. This week: historian John Rhodes talks about the role the Thames played in Chatham as a harbour.

connect us all (Dec. 13, 2008)

Almost every journey runs into a few unexpected bends and rough patches.

Watershed moment (Dec. 6, 2008)

It has defined Southwestern Ontario from the start, yet the Thames River is remote to the lives of many who live in the region.

Rare mussel found in Thames (Nov. 30, 2008)

It's no longer a has-bean.

A River: Toy Boat Tour, Final

The toy boast arrive at Lighthouse Cove. This week: Jim Cooke, owner of the Lighthouse Inn, talks about living where the Thames ends.

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