

## **Uncertain Future for South Cooking Lake – a Call to Action**

We should not take Cooking Lake for granted. In fact, the slow decline of North and South Cooking Lake has been studied in detail over the past fifty years, and each time a review is published, the recommendation of expert opinion is that any water management program must start with having an available external source of water.

We are at a crucial time in the life of Cooking Lake. Average depth is now less than one foot. There is a thick layer of organic soup on the bottom of the lake. The water column is nutrient rich and biologically very active. If we have a few successive dry years, there is the possibility that the entire lake could be gone. It is difficult to imagine that large expanse of lake (25 square km) disappearing, but it is quite uniform in depth so once it reaches the nominal bottom depth, its demise may come as a surprise to many.

Public concern in the late 60's regarding the decline in lake levels led to public hearings in 1971 conducted by the Environment Conservation Authority. The outcome of this was to undertake a multi-agency study tasked with establishing an environmental management area covering the Cooking Lake moraine and parts of the Beaverhill watershed. The planning and feasibility study was commissioned in 1973 and resulted in a lengthy report (various subject matter experts; twelve volumes, 1977). It involved 31 agencies or organizations, and in total, input from over 100 people. In summary, the focus was on land, water, fish, wildlife, cultural heritage, recreation, and industry. In every analysis, the common requirement for a future is to have stable water levels in the major lakes.

A more recent report was prepared in 2005 for Rob Lougheed, MLA Strathcona, to update lake level status and review any new information regarding management options. This review supported the feasibility of pumping water into South Cooking Lake from the North Saskatchewan River. However, there continues to be climatic variation that causes decision makers to second guess the need to implement the recommendations. In 2005 lake level was higher than in 1970 when the first study was requested. The result has been inaction for the subsequent 17 years.

The focus of this article is on the recreational potential of Cooking and Hastings lakes. The 1977 G.R. Shelly & Associates report states, "Within the regional area, there are few water-related, forested, scenic land tracts that can compete with the recreational potential of the Study Area". Two points of record for limitations were noted; poor water quality; and inferior tree cover. Neither of these have since been addressed or improved. Rather, almost all recreational infrastructure and supporting business around Cooking Lake have simply vanished.

In the first half of the century, Cooking Lake was the go-to spot for Edmontonians for water and beach recreation. Beautiful white sand beaches still line the south and east shores but are now hidden by grass and shrub overgrowth. Development of parks, trails, summer cottages, and supporting business was happening and on a trajectory comparable to Sylvan Lake or Wabamun Lake. Similarly, Miquelon Lake Provincial Park (within the Cooking Lake moraine) had the highest park visitation rate in the province prior to 1971. Deterioration in water level and water quality has resulted in a very much-reduced level of park usage, and at present it has no water access at all.

The Waskahegan Hiking Trail was established in 1969. The Trail is a somewhat disjointed 309km loop connecting the Edmonton river valley trail link to Fort Saskatchewan with Elk Island, Blackfoot

Recreation Area, Ministik Bird Sanctuary, Miquelon Park to Camrose, then return through Wetaskiwin to Edmonton. At conception, this was to have been the second longest hiking trail in Canada next to the Bruce Trail in Southern Ontario. The cultural significance of this route has kept the more remote parts of the trail alive, but generally, support for the project has been a challenge in areas of degraded wetlands and encroaching development.

There is a critical need to acquire, preserve, and improve land and water for future outdoor recreation purposes. Research by government agencies and consultants have generally agreed that any water management program that is to have measurable effect on the lake must involve a pumping system from the North Saskatchewan River. The report lists a number of other necessary priorities before augmenting water level such as: land acquisition, shore-zone improvements, development master plan update, area reforestation; but the first step has to be approval of a water supply system.

The path forward must start with bringing sufficient public attention to Cooking Lake's status such that it becomes a priority on the political agenda. One thing that we can do at a local level is to support the Cooking Lake Trails project. Way-finding signage will be designed to provide visual education on the effects of declining lake level on historical recreation, business, culture, and ecology at the shores of the community.

There is a small group of people working to support the Strathcona County five-year capital plan for construction of this trail. The hope is that this small start can eventually link South Cooking Lake Community to a recreational node at Lakeview and continue to join the Waskahegan Trail. Please go to the SCL website at [News | South Cooking Lake Community League](#) for more information. We are looking for people to join Friends of Cooking Lake Moraine to work on this and other related initiatives to save the lake before it is gone.

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