



*Good Grades
& a good swim*

The Muskoka Watersheds Report Card

By Scott Young

One of the great joys of my life occurs every spring when I take my first plunge off the dock. Thundering across the grey boards, casually tossing some '70's vintage beach towel into a dock chair, and taking off! The loose board slaps...the dock ring clangs...a dog goes woof...and I'm thinking: uh-oh, it's gonna be cold. And there I am. Kicking and spouting, like a kid again, laughing, though nothing really funny has occurred. It's just so great to be alive at this moment.

Water is Muskoka's element, and Muskoka's got fantastic water. It's something we can all smile about. But gorgeous water quality is no fluke; people have been very protective of Muskoka's water over the years. Recreational and drinking-water quality has consistently scored high grades but numerous pressures, including land development, poor air quality and climate change are threatening Muskoka's ecosystems. In the long term, that's bad news for our famous water quality.

The Muskoka Watershed Council began monitoring the health of Muskoka's watersheds in 2002 and published its findings in the Muskoka Watersheds Report Card in 2004 and in 2007. The report card uses decades of data for a scientific assessment of the quality of our water, air and land.

“For over two decades, measures of the health of watersheds of Muskoka focused on the quality of the water in lakes and rivers,” says Deb Cumming, chair of the Lake of Bays Association's Environment Committee and a past chair of the Muskoka Watershed Council. “A more recent and broader view of watershed health considers not only the state of the water, but the quality of the surrounding terrestrial and aquatic habitats such as forests and wetlands, and the air in which they function.”

It's when we look at that broader view that Muskoka scores some seriously low grades. Here are the results of our most recent report card:

- Air quality — D
- Wetland evaluation — D
- Development impact — C
- Fish habitat — C

There was some good news with acid rain, given a grade of B for relative success in reducing it, but there is still too much acid being deposited for full recovery.

Muskoka's air quality is getting worse, and it is also one of the trickiest problems to overcome. Pollution from the Ohio Valley is a major contributor to poor air-quality, triggering between 10 and 30 air quality advisories each summer. It's a huge issue for Muskoka, according to Ian Turnbull, chair of the watershed council. "We need to pressure our federal and provincial governments to set and enforce higher emissions standards. We must pressure our governments to negotiate better emission controls with the United States."

Mr. Turnbull says action on climate change is extremely important. In coming years we can expect increasingly severe storms, forest fires and insect infestations, while other species disappear. We must lobby governments for conservation programs, alternative energy sources, regulations that reduce industrial emissions and incentive programs to encourage sustainable technology.

At the same time, we have to take individual responsibility for addressing climate change. We can do that at home by increasing our own energy efficiency and in Muskoka by tackling the issues the report card identified as local concerns. Wetland evaluation scored a D because there is no program to assess these essential parts of the natural environment. Without information on wetlands, we can't plan effectively to improve the resiliency of Muskoka's watersheds. We could change that.

It's also well within our grasp to make planning changes to control development impact. Its grade was dragged down by the increase in paving and other hard surfaces, which disrupt the natural flow of stormwater, but could be improved with new municipal planning standards to minimize hard surfaces. Development also stresses fish habitat (although other human activities, such as fishing, certainly play a part). To preserve fish habitat, we need to protect shoreline vegetation through stringent planning controls — and to use conservation techniques when angling.

The report card makes it abundantly clear that Muskoka does not exist in a vacuum, and that the people who care most about Muskoka need to act accordingly. If we are going to help Muskoka ecosystems remain healthy and resilient, we have to find ways to make connections between these goals and the ways we live our lives. The first swim of the year is more than a momentary joy, it's a resource. Stuck in 401 traffic, the thought of that swim can be calming. In times of sadness, it cheers us up. Take it a little further. Try to keep protecting Muskoka in mind all the time. Perhaps when you're about to buy a major appliance, a new car or a new home, your Muskoka experience will guide you to make a greener choice. If we are going to improve our watershed grades, it's a connection we all need to make.