

Wildly imaginative

Community gets creative to save Lake Simcoe



Idea generation at the Pine Beach Design Lab

One thing leads to another. And when a group of dedicated people come together, it leads to change.

More than a decade ago, Annabel Slaight and her friend Jane Meredith were paddling in Lake Simcoe and were horrified by what they encountered: weeds so thick they couldn't pass through.

"I grew up on Lake Simcoe as a cottager in Sandy Cove and from the time I was two years old I swam in the lake, drank the lake water and grew up loving Lake Simcoe," says Annabel. "But since then the health of the lake has declined."

That proliferation of weeds, the result of too much phosphorus in the water, was unappealing to human eyes and detrimental to the fish population in the lake, reducing the amount of oxygen available to them. But the politicians the women approached said it wasn't an issue, that the state of the lake

wasn't something people were concerned about.

Annabel and Jane would soon prove them wrong.

From apathy to action

The politicians' indifference gave the women the impetus to create the Ladies of the Lake calendar, with tasteful photos of nude women posing amidst the beauty of Lake Simcoe. "We wanted to show that many people did care," says Annabel, "but we knew something needed to be done to shake things up. There was a lot of complacency about the state of the lake. I think it was just that people didn't know what to do about it."

The calendar raised more than \$250,000. Recognizing the degree of trust that had been placed in them by their supporters, the Ladies of the Lake became a charitable organization and immediately began projects that begat other projects that begat more projects again.

"We believe that everything

should lead to something else," Annabel explains. "We believe in the power of imagery and the power of people talking to people."

To get people talking and keep them talking, they knew that they would have to get the facts right. So their first action was to commission a study from the Windfall Ecology Centre. The resulting report, *The Naked Truth: Going Behind the Science of Lake Simcoe*, put the challenges facing the watershed in lay terms and set the stage for a series of public action planning events. At those events, they presented the science and encouraged volunteers – more than 300 of them, all citizens of Lake Simcoe – to venture out and take photos above, on and under their lake and share their ideas for change. Out of their ideas came a citizens' action plan, one that has paved the way for new projects to improve the health of the lake.

"Almost every idea that Ladies of the Lake has implemented came from that plan," says

Annabel. "One of those ideas was to get youth involved. So we created the WASTE – We Are Saving the Environment – film school and festival in 2009." The films were used as an inspirational tool and, out of them, came the idea for ReWilding Lake Simcoe.

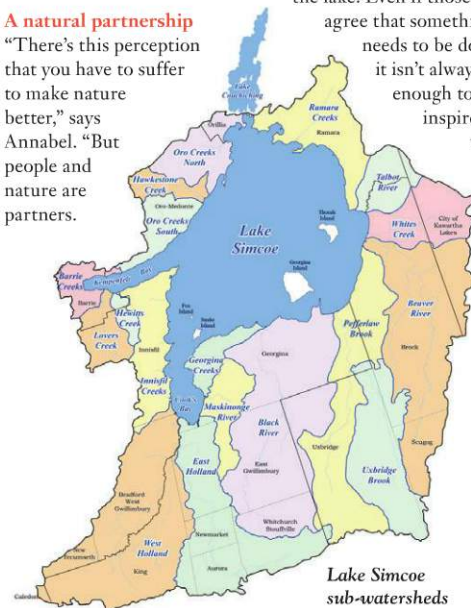
A natural partnership

"There's this perception that you have to suffer to make nature better," says Annabel. "But people and nature are partners.

Everything we do to help, we benefit from."

Unfortunately, the ReWilding team very quickly found that the concept of stewardship doesn't resonate with many people, especially those who live farther from the shores of the lake. Even if those people

agree that something needs to be done, it isn't always enough to inspire them to act.



Lake Simcoe sub-watersheds

But when people are allowed to collaborate and bring their ideas together, it cultivates change.

“ReWilding gets people working together in unusual ways,” says Annabel. “We chose our pilot project -- ReWilding Keswick Creeks -- because it was a place that was truly suffering. There were rampant weeds, hardened shores and high phosphorus run-off. It has the most unfortunate depredation of anywhere in the Lake Simcoe watershed.”

Armed with funding from the Lake Simcoe Clean-up Fund, the pilot project began in 2011 with PODcaching, a unique process for getting people to feel a connection with and desire to care for nature. First, the team identified PODs -- Potential Opportunities for Design -- prime sites where improvements would benefit both people and Lake Simcoe. Then they invited community participants to join a designer and the ReWilding team to look at those areas through the eyes of nature and imagine how it could be.

One of the PODs was Pine Beach, where a crumbling breakwall, neglected dock and overabundance of weeds made it unappealing for both people and wildlife. PODcaching generated imaginative ideas for a new design, and a master plan was created. The cement breakwall was replaced with a naturalized shoreline and, most importantly, the community gained a vision for the future.

“ReWilding gets people working together in unusual ways.”

“I heard from one person involved in the project who said it was amazing to see her community come together,” says Annabel. “It was very hard work, but there were new fire pits that benefited people and a renaturalized shoreline that benefited nature. And the loons came back!”

There are hundreds of places in Lake Simcoe where there is potential for communities to come together in similar ways, says Annabel. The

ReWilding team gathered 16 groups together and reapplied to the Lake Simcoe and South-Eastern Georgian Bay Clean-up Fund to expand the ReWilding project around the lake. With this second round of funding -- \$1.1 million -- 24 restoration projects are planned. The first will be at Pine Beach which will become a demonstration site to show what happens when people and nature work together. This fall, the group will hold The Great ReWilding Challenge to select the next locations around the lake to be restored.

“It’s very exciting to see all of the activity,” says Annabel. “Much of our success comes from Hilary Van Welter, ReWilding’s project director. And there are many groups and thousands of people in grassroots organizations around the lake who are also working to make changes. A real spark has been lit here. Saving a lake isn’t something that can be done overnight, but we’re having a good time while we’re doing it.” **DS**

BY DAWN HUDDLESTONE



Pine Beach before ReWilding

The **SPLASH** Floating Water Festival is a series of events to help people to love and understand Lake Simcoe and the lands that surround it. Now in its fourth year, the festival is a feast for the senses made up of four distinctive events around the lake:

CELEBRATE LAKE SIMCOE, July 26
Innisfil Beach Park, Innisfil
Experience the shores of Lake Simcoe with fun and merriment reminiscent of the roaring 20s!

THE FANTASTIC FOREST EXPERIENCE, August 9
Brown Hill Forest Tract, Ravenshoe Road, East Gwillimbury
A walk of wonders in the woods highlighting the powerful connection between forests, the health of our waters and your own health.

BROCK'S BIG BITE, August 10
Simcoe Street, Beaverton
Imagine a long, long table stretching down historic Simcoe Street and discover the vital connections between food and farming, water and watersheds, natural science, society, and the arts.

THE BEACH BASH, August 16
De La Salle Park, Jackson's Point
Come out, love Lake Simcoe - and feel good! A day full of all things beachy and fun.

Learn more at www.splashfestival.ca

