Lake Winnipeg and Manitoba’s boreal forest define our province

By Marlo Campbell

Water, forest, wildlife – and us.
A special connection exists between Manitobans and the natural treasures of our province.

Lake Winnipeg, the 10th largest freshwater lake in the world, is one of these treasures. For generations, this iconic body of water has provided people with a wealth of experiences: sunny afternoons at the beach with family and friends, splashing in the shallow water and building castles in the sand. Starry nights at the cottage or campsite, sharing stories around a fire. Fishing on the water. Hiking, trapping or hunting in the pristine wilderness nearby. Watching the northern lights. Feeling the power of a late-summer thunderstorm. Lake Winnipeg is a vital part of Manitoba’s economy too. It directly supports commercial fishing, recreation and tourism – industries that, combined, bring in more than $100 million each year.

Surrounding this special lake is another natural treasure: Manitoba’s boreal forest. One of the last remaining intact forest ecosystems on the planet, this vast, diverse region covers 80 per cent of Manitoba with trees, freshwater lakes, and wetlands such as river deltas, peatlands and marshes. Manitoba’s boreal forest is home to 49 First Nations where Cree, Anishinaabe, Ojib-Cree and Dene families have lived since time immemorial.

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Canada’s boreal forest is a critical ecological and economic asset to our planet. The area contains one third of the world’s unfrozen fresh water supply. It stores more than twice as much carbon as the Amazon forests, greatly helping to mitigate the effects of global climate change.

In Manitoba, the boreal forest and the wetlands within it remain mostly intact. Because of this, this area is a vibrant component of our environment. It helps control floods and erosion. It also helps purify our water by filtering out nutrients which can lead to algae growth. Filtration is an essential ecological service that helps protect the increasingly fragile health of Lake Winnipeg.

At the heart of Canada’s boreal forest, one of the world’s largest intact forest ecosystems, lies Lake Winnipeg. This map shows the wide reach of Lake Winnipeg’s watershed, outlined in blue.
A watershed is an area that drains into a particular body of water. Lake Winnipeg’s watershed includes parts of four Canadian provinces, four American states and multiple First Nations, covering approximately one million square kilometres. It also encompasses a huge swath of Canada’s boreal forest.

Hundreds of millions of birds rely on Manitoba’s boreal forest to breed and raise their young, including eagles, pelicans, sandhill cranes, green-winged teals and buffleheads. Some migrate here from as far as South America each summer.

The carbon stored in Manitoba’s boreal forest and wetlands is comparable to 100 years of Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions, a testament to the region’s role in guarding against the impacts of climate change.

An estimated 2,500 threatened woodland caribou are found in as many as 15 ranges across Manitoba, seven of which are within the Lake Winnipeg watershed.

Lake Winnipeg is the 10th largest freshwater lake in the world when measured by surface area. It stretches approximately 436 km from north to south.

Covering 80 per cent of our province, Manitoba’s boreal houses one of the largest intact forest sections left on the planet. Its vital wetlands provide erosion protection, filter water and retain nutrients that would otherwise flow into Lake Winnipeg and contribute to massive algal blooms and deterioration of water quality.

Prickly pear cactus, carnivorous bog plants, rare orchids, flying squirrels, luminescent fungi and frogs that freeze solid over the winter months – these unusual species depend on the specific conditions found in the boreal forest of the Lake Winnipeg watershed to thrive.

The Saskatchewan River Delta, which straddles the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border, is one of the largest freshwater inland deltas in North America.

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The cow Moose and called picture here represent just one of many species that call boreal forest wetlands their home. These wetlands provide critical habitat for waterfowl, beaver, muskrat and mink, to name just a few inhabitants. The wetlands also serve as valuable fish nursery.

Lake Winnipeg: who’s in our watershed?

By Sandy Klowa

Lake Winnipeg Water Walk

When: Starting July 12, 2014
Where: All around the lake.
Want to get involved? Visit lake-winnipegwaterwalk.ca and join the Lake Winnipeg Water Walk group on Facebook for updates.

Walking for water

Manitoba woman to embark on healing journey for Lake Winnipeg

By Sandy Klowa

The water walk is looking for a variety of partners and resources, including donations for gas, food and lodging. Email katherine@morrisseau-sinclair.com if you’d like to participate or help out.

Katherine Morrisseau-Sinclair did not always have a personal connection to her Anishinabe roots. More than 30 years ago, when on a search for that lost link to her spiritual heritage, it was the beating of the water drum that pulled her in.

“When that water drum sounded, it was like that drum spoke to my spirit, to the very core of me,” she says. “I recognized that sound.”

This summer, the lifelong Manitoban and long-time Winnipegger will again participate in the healing of the drum as she embarks on a roughly 1,300 km walk for the health of Lake Winnipeg, accompanied by a group of family, friends and community members.

Morrisseau-Sinclair’s traditional Anishinabe name is Animoquiy and she belongs to the Bear Clan. Members of this clan are tasked with protecting the waters of necessary oxygen. “The boreal forest is like a beautiful carpet, providing oxygen and homes for [birds and animals] and humour and so on and so much more.”

Morrisseau-Sinclair says. “I look at my granddaughter, I want her to have access to good, clean water. I want my great-grandchildren to know what could be done about it. “I want my great-grandchildren to know what the first Reader to settle the area. Nearby Reader Lake was named after his family.

Reader, an engineering technologist for Ducks Unlimited Canada, now lives in the Parv but visits his homestead on a regular basis. “When you leave Highway 10 and enter the forest, within less than a minute you feel calm: it’s a cathedral of big spruce trees,” Reader says.

Reader describes the Saskatchewan River Delta as a unique area rich in wetlands, important for fish and waterfowl. He enjoys spending time on the wetlands observing the avian birds and animals. Reader has preserved his father’s small sawmill and still manages to find time to tend the traditional trap line.

A spiritual walk

Robin Reader: boreal traditions

By Sandy Klowa

Thousands of Manitobans depend on Lake Winnipeg’s fishing industry for their livelihood – an industry that returns roughly $20 million a year. One of those Manitobans is Sam Murdock.

A commercial fisher, Murdock co-chairs the Lake Winnipeg Fishery Co-Management Board, which represents all fishers on the lake, 80 per cent of whom are First Nations or Metis. He’s also the director of operations for Saskatchewan River Cove Nation, which sits on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. It’s a place he has called home all his life.

Murdock knows first-hand the importance of the lake on personal, cultural and economic levels.

“Being by the lake, you notice that the air is so much more fresh than [if you were] living in a city. The medicines that are in that forest nearby – there’s so much more. Everybody could benefit from. [Our ability to fish and hunt], that’s all because of that lake – it produces all of that for us,” Murdock, who has been involved with the Lake Winnipeg Stewardship Board in the past, says ensuring the health of the lake is an urgent priority.

“We have to start looking to the future in terms of how to protect this industry,” he says, and that includes safeguarding the forest around the lake, which acts as a water filter. “To lose a body of water like that would be a disaster,” he says. “In order to make change, and for protection of the forest, we all have to take a stand together.”

Lake Winnipeg: it’s like a beautiful carpet.

Photo by Kelly Jones

By Sandy Klowa

The boreal forest is lying here like a beautiful carpet.”

Lake Winnipeg: Manitoba’s boreal forest is important to Manitobans from all walks of life. Here are some of their stories

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Rhea Thiesen: a child’s love for the lake

By Sandy Klowa

My 10-year-old daughter Rhea has been swimming, boating, bird-watching and exploring Lake Winnipeg and its surrounding boreal forest every summer of her life. She’s hiked many trails and built dens of sand structures. Driving off the parking lot at Mattibiko Beach in one of her favourite activities. When Rhea is at Lake Winnipe-

Lake Winnipeg: Live-Work-Play in the watershed

By Sandy Klowa

Lake Winnipeg and Manitoba’s boreal forest are important to Manitobans from all walks of life. Here are some of their stories.
A new approach
Former adversaries find common ground in the boreal forest

"You come together and, after a while, you build a certain level of trust with each other and you move forward."
- GRANT GLESSING, TOLKO

Phosphorus comes from many different sources, industrial practices like agriculture among them.

"Because there isn't a simple cause and effect, it's really easy to just abdicate responsibility," says Alexis Kami, LWF's executive director.

"What we need to do is find the champions that are willing to step forward and make that first investment, show the success behind that and, rather than pointing fingers at everybody else who hasn't come forward yet, offer them an inviting hand and say, look, there is an opportunity for you to be a part of this.

Key components of the plan include conserving Manitoba's wetlands and boreal forest, vegetation-rich ecosystems which filter the water that flows into Lake Winnipeg. Like the CBFA, it also recognizes the need for industry and conservationists to work together, with the understanding that all Manitobans deserve a healthy and productive lake, and that it will take participation at the household, community and provincial levels to ensure that happens.

"What we're looking at is sustainable industries," Kami explains. "We want a strong economy going forward and we need a sustainable environment on which to base that economy."

To learn more about the CBFA, go to www.canadianborealforestagreement.com.

By MARLO CAMPBELL

Our shared natural resources are also our shared responsibility – but defining exactly that means can be challenging.

Historically, environmental concerns have differed from industry perspectives over how best to manage the boreal forest.

Fortunately, times are changing. The past several years have seen a new approach to natural-resource stewardship that finds common ground between former adversaries.

The Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement (CBFA) involves forestry companies and environmental groups working collaboratively to ensure a sustainable future for both the boreal forest and the people whose livelihoods depend on it.

Signed in 2010, the CBFA applies to 73 million hectares of forest across Canada. Current signatories include 19 forestry companies and seven environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs).

One of those companies is Tolko Industries Ltd. In Manitoba, Tolko employs about 320 people at its operations in the province.

According to Grant Glessing, who works as Tolko's stewardship and tenure department for B.C./Manitoba, it's a long, evolving process as company reps, environmental groups and local First Nations have worked to hammer out how to practically implement the agreement's six components, including improving sustainable forestry practices and protecting at-risk species such as woodland caribou.

"You come together and, after a while, you build a certain level of trust with each other and you move forward," Glessing says.

"Like in any relationship, the more you understand each other's interests, the better off you'll be."

Final say on whatever agreement is reached lies with government; ongoing CBFA negotiations are not prescriptive but rather, a way that industry and environmentalists can jointly – and respectfully – help guide the future of forestry and conservation.

"Well rather be part of the solution and be (on the) forefront with it than to be part of the problem," Glessing says.

The collaborative approach to proactive solutions is also the main focus of the Lake Winnipeg Health Plan (LWHP), Championed by the Lake Winnipeg Foundation (LWF), an ENGO working to restore and protect the health of Lake Winnipeg and its watershed, the plan was developed in 2012 with input from conservation groups, industry leaders and freshwater scientists.

Launched in January 2013, the LWHP identifies eight actions to reduce the amount of phosphorus flowing into the lake – the main cause of blue-green algae blooms which have been increasing in both size and frequency in recent years, contaminating beaches and raising alarm bells about the deteriorating health of the great lake.

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The coastal wetlands of Manitoba's great lakes are among the largest in the world.

Photo courtesy of Ducks Unlimited Canada

Photo courtesy of Ducks Unlimited Canada

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