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BY PATRICK STARK

Is it too  
late for

# THE BAY?

This summer I spent 40 days circumnavigating Georgian Bay, paddling my kayak and raising money and awareness for the Georgian Bay Land Trust. From Parry Sound to Lion's Head, Nottawasaga Bay to Manitoulin, I was asked the same question again and again: do I have any hope for the future of Georgian Bay?

My answer varied, depending partly on where in the Bay I was paddling at the time. In some parts of Georgian Bay the level of development is truly astonishing. Throughout Nottawasaga Bay, for example, there is barely a scrap of shoreline that has not been developed in some way. Amazingly, some property owners are under the mistaken impression that they are more talented landscape architects than Mother Nature. Sand dunes have been irresponsibly bulldozed so that the beach reaches far inland, right to the front door

of the beach houses. Other areas of shoreline have been destroyed by the installation of retaining walls and man-made harbours. Many native plants are removed and replaced with non-native plants, flowers, and often lawns.

This type of shoreline modification is frustrating to see because property owners have a choice in how they treat the land. There are responsible ways of building on the shore, techniques that will protect and preserve the land while still allowing people to use and enjoy their property.

Unfortunately, some landowners believe these modifications are necessary to "protect" their property from eroding away. The natural shoreline is a dynamic and resilient environment that is perfectly suited to protect itself from the erosion caused by waves and wind. Native species of plants are always perfectly suited to

Photo by Kathy Komlos

## IS IT TOO LATE FOR THE BAY?

their environment; they do not require additional watering and certainly do not require mowing. Adding non-native species and lawns to a property will disrupt natural cycles and can sometimes promote invasive species.

But even on heavily developed Nottawasaga Bay, all is not lost. While paddling along the shoreline of Tiny Township, I had the pleasure of meeting Andre Claire. Andre is a Tiny Township councillor who gave me a tour of the Bluewater Dunes restoration project. This is a wonderful example of an area being restored to its natural state. For years the dunes were used as a playground for ATV riders and as a source of sand for the municipality. Restricting access to the area and adding "snow fences" is allowing the

dunes to be naturally restored. This project is well underway and has seen very encouraging results.

The Bluewater project is an example of what can be done to reverse damage caused by inappropriate development or land use. This project is also a reminder that in recent years many people have become more environmentally aware and are interested in supporting this type of work.

Heading north up the Bruce Peninsula, the developed shoreline gave way to pristine undeveloped

shoreline. Much of this is protected as parkland, or as a nature reserve. It was here that I had my first encounter with a black bear, saw my first deer, bald eagle, otter and fox. Paddling past this shoreline I quickly forgot about the development farther south and began to enjoy the solitude. This area of Georgian Bay is an internationally recognized UNESCO world biosphere reserve and is one of the largest remaining unbroken chunks of wilderness in southern Ontario. The peninsula has spectacular cliffs dropping straight into the Bay, with thousand-year-old cedar trees clinging to the rocks. The water here is crystal clear and often extremely deep.

After staying overnight at the historic lighthouse on Cove Island near Tobermory,



Photo by Andre Claire



Photo by Andre Claire



Photo by Patrick Stark

Once degraded by ATV use and mined for sand by the municipality, the Bluewater Dunes site on Nottawasaga Bay (above and top left) is a symbol of what can be done to restore overstressed areas of Georgian Bay. By restricting vehicle access, installing fencing to limit erosion and building walkways across the fragile regions, the municipality has worked to reverse years of damage.

While parts of Georgian Bay are heavily used, there are still many more areas that remain in a pristine state. Wasaga Beach (right) draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to enjoy its enormous beaches. Bruce National Park (left) is just as famous, but remains a much more solitary place.

I paddled toward Manitoulin Island and managed to go for eight days without seeing another person. In this area of the Bay it is hard to believe you are on the same body of water as Wasaga Beach. Long stretches of undeveloped rocky shoreline stretched out in front of me; only the odd sailboat cruised by. The solitude was briefly interrupted at Killarney but soon returned as I headed south, down the eastern side of the Bay. This shore is also a UNESCO

world biosphere reserve and is thought to be the largest freshwater archipelago in the world. With only 15 UNESCO biosphere reserves in Canada, it is extraordinary to think that two of them are on Georgian Bay.

So, do I have any hope for the future of Georgian Bay? Yes, I certainly do. There are a few areas on the Bay that have been overdeveloped, but there are many more that have not. For

every kilometre of shoreline that seems to be overcrowded with cottages, there are 10 kilometres of shoreline that are pristine and undeveloped. Organizations like the Georgian Bay Land Trust are working to ensure that our grandchildren will be able to enjoy the Bay as we know it today.

It is definitely not too late for Georgian Bay. It is important that we continue to visit the Bay, but always remember to treat it with the respect it deserves. Georgian Bay has been recognized twice by UNESCO for good reason and we owe it to ourselves to ensure its undeveloped areas remain that way for generations to come. *BTC*

