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December 19, 2012

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Great Lakes stressed out: Study

By DEBORA VAN BRENK, QMI Agency

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LONDON, ONT. - If the Great Lakes were human, they'd be in serious need of stress counselling and intervention.

The University of Michigan's David Allan led a study called the Great Lakes Environmental Assessment and Mapping (GLEAM) project, which mapped and quantified how each part of each lake is faring against 34 different stressors, such as heavy metal contamination, mussel invasion and high nitrogen levels.



The Toronto skyline can be seen beyond a brown, churned-up Lake Ontario which is all the remains after a violent storm overnight on Oct. 30, 2012. (QMI Agency)

It found Lakes Erie and Ontario are under the greatest stress. They're also where the highest concentration of people lives and works.

"We've all heard the phrase, 'Loving a place to death,'" Allan said. "We love these freshwater lakes so much — having made them a foundation of where we live, work and play — that we're doing them damage."

Some aquatic ecosystems are feeling the heat from climate change while others are particularly hard hit by industrial waste or agricultural runoff.

"We don't know enough about the resilience of these locations," Allan said. "Is that system reaching the point where it can't bounce back?"

The study took three years to complete and featured participation from people on both sides of the border. It's the first comprehensive look at a variety of factors that influence the health of the lakes.

The assessments are also weighted so that light pollution, for example, is given a different ranking of importance than

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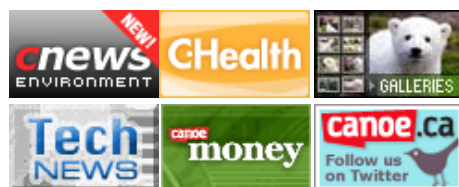
Allan says this makes it a valuable tool policy-makers and communities could use when figuring out where best to focus their money and energy.

The data could lead to new strategies — perhaps working on areas where a little money could go a long way rather spending a lot of money to make only a minor difference.

On the map, Lake Ontario is a virtual sea of red — multiple stress factors having a big impact in many places — while Lake Erie appears to be only marginally better. On the Canadian side of Lake Huron, areas of concern include Goderich, Ont., and areas north of Kincardine, Ont.

The research doesn't suggest the red places are dying or beyond repair, Allan says, only that they are at the upper end of the scale researchers used.

Allan described it as a snapshot in time, a scientific survey intended to spark conversation, deliberation and community action.



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