

The Fishy Side of Habitat Preservation

Anyone who has been in Muskoka for a few years knows that fishing is a large part of the culture. In fact, with over 3 million recreational fishers in Canada, fishing is an important part of our Canadian heritage.

However, the past few years has seen a decline in the amount of fish caught. While this can be attributed to several factors, one of the most important is the destruction of fish habitat caused by human activities.

In Canada, fish habitat is protected under the federal ***Fisheries Act***. Under section 35 of the Act, projects must not alter, disrupt and/or destroy any component of fish habitat. Fines levied under this section range from \$2000 for small infractions to over \$100,000 for more serious occurrences.

The *Fisheries Act* defines fish habitat as “spawning grounds and nursery, rearing, food supply and migration routes on which fish depend directly or indirectly in order to carry out their life processes.”

While you may not see fish in a particular area (such as in a grassed ditch), fish may rely indirectly on it as a food source, and so it may be protected under section 35 of the *Fisheries Act*. Section 35 also covers shorelines and riverbanks and areas that are not underwater, such as floodplains.

When you start a project at your shoreline, the appropriate authorities must review the proposal to ensure that it will not result in the loss of fish habitat. In Muskoka, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or Trent-Severn Waterway may need to issue permits before any work can begin.

While the above agencies work to protect fish habitat, you can also play a part. The following are a few simple guidelines that we, as users of the resource, can follow.

Let the water flow so fish can move throughout their habitat. The improper installation of roadway culverts, damming streams to create small ponds, and extracting water from rivers and lakes can all stop migrating fish and eliminate fish from upstream watersheds.

Leave natural vegetation alone. Vegetated buffer strips filter runoff from surrounding areas and provide shade to keep the water cool for fish. Buffer strips also provide the habitat for plants, insects and other animals that form a part of the fishes’ diet.

Be careful when clearing land or building near water. Operating heavy equipment near shorelines can destroy important feeding or spawning areas and also remove shoreline vegetation that serves as cover to protect fish from predators.

Do not infill small bays, wetlands or margins. The riparian area is the most important place for the production and nurturing of young fish. This area provides an abundance of nutrients and food for fish and also acts as a nursery for many commercial species.

Keep livestock away from streams. Allowing cattle free access to water bodies destroys shoreline vegetation, stream banks and stream bottoms. Their manure introduces contaminants to the water and results in the overgrowth of algae and bacteria.

Do not allow chemicals, garbage and untreated sewage to enter the water. Many chemicals such as pesticides, fertilizers, detergents, waste oil and gasoline products are as harmful to fish as they are to people. Untreated sewage and wastewater released into the water can cause algae and bacteria problems.

Remove garbage from water and shorelines. Litter can ruin the water and may be toxic to fish and wildlife. You can help by not littering and removing litter from fish habitats.

For more information on how to preserve fish habitat, contact the Ministry of Natural Resources or Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Preserving fish habitat is often just a matter of proper planning, following a few simple rules as you carry out projects along your shoreline, and keeping the above guidelines in mind as you carry out your daily activities.

The fish will thank you for it!

