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## Algae blooms a growing problem

Don't touch the water, cottage country warned

**Graeme Hamilton**  
National Post

VENISE-EN-QUEBEC, Que. - The campground was immaculate and the beach freshly raked, but on a perfect summer morning this week, Camping Kirkland was practically deserted. The shimmering waters of Missisquoi Bay, owner Christa Baertschi advised potential campers, were toxic.



**CREDIT: Christinne Muschi, National Post**

**Richard St. Onge and his wife, Louise Bougie, sit on their dock on Quebec's Missisquoi Bay. St. Onge is one of the few people who now dares to defy government warnings and go into the water.**

With its name borrowed from the Italian city of canals and romance, Venise-en-Québec used to be a destination of choice for Quebec vacationers. But the appearance in recent years of toxin-producing algae in the bay at the northern end of Lake Champlain -- as well as the related deaths of several dogs, and warnings to avoid "all direct contact" with the water -- has scared away all but the bravest swimmers. As government-ordered beach closings come earlier every summer, a town built on tourism is wondering how long it can survive.

"It's a natural resource, the lake," Ms. Baertschi said. "It should be here for generations to come. If they don't find a solution soon, the lake is going to end up being a swamp."

Scientists say the blue-green algae choking Missisquoi Bay are turning up increasingly in lakes across North America.

Environment Canada has identified the algae as "a growing threat to water quality in Canada and around the world." Hamilton Harbour and Bay of Quinte on Lake Ontario face serious algae problems, as does Lake Winnipeg.

The algae bloom when warm surface temperatures and calm conditions combine with an abundance of phosphorus in the water from fertilizer or human waste. The organisms produce

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toxins that can cause serious health effects in humans and can kill dogs. The Vermont Department of Health reported two dogs died last year after swallowing algae, one on the Canadian side of Missisquoi Bay and one on the American side. That followed several algae-related dog deaths in Lake Champlain in 1999 and 2000.

Gregory Boyer, a biochemist at the State University of New York in Syracuse who is studying the algae problem in Lake Champlain, said in one case, a Labrador retriever was dead within an hour of being exposed to the algae. He said the situation in the lake, which is surrounded by intensive farming, appears to be worsening.

Richard St-Onge, who owns a cottage in Venise-en-Québec, has witnessed the deterioration first-hand as he crosses the bay on his windsurfer. He continues to take to the water, reasoning that on windy days, the waves will break up the algae, but he says he is one of a dwindling number surfing the bay.

"We have to find a solution. We've been aware that something's wrong for 10 years, but there has been no progress," he said. "I think that if Paul Martin had a property on the shores of Lake Champlain, they would have moved a lot more quickly."

Quebec is working with Vermont and New York state, which also borders Lake Champlain, to find ways of reducing the pollution flowing into the lake. An agreement signed last year between Quebec and Vermont specified 60% of the phosphorus entering the bay is from Vermont sources and 40% is from Quebec. It calls for a gradual reduction of that input, largely through controls in farming practices and sewage treatment, but the full impact will not be felt until 2016.

Michel Jobin, an aide to Thomas Mulcair, Quebec's Environment Minister, said the new Liberal government intends to make Missisquoi Bay a priority. But he said there are no immediate solutions. "It is a problem that has persisted for many years, and it will not be solved in a few weeks," he said.

Dr. Boyer's forecast was also gloomy. He said the best way to reduce the risk to humans in the short term is to improve the identification of algae blooms so they can be avoided.

"The toxic species is established, and it's likely going to be here for a long time," he said. "It's like zebra mussels or loosestrife or dandelions: Once it's established, it's hard to get rid of."

It is not exactly good for business, but sharing these sobering facts is part of operating a beach in Venise-en-Québec these days. As required by the public-health authorities who closed the beach on July 25, Ms. Baertschi has staff posted at the entrance to distribute pamphlets about the algae.

"Avoid all direct contact with the water, e.g., swimming and aquatic activities (note that a wet suit will not protect the skin)," the document advises. "Do not drink the water and do not use it to prepare or cook food (boiling the water will not eliminate the toxins) .... Avoid consuming fish or other aquatic species taken from the affected area. Do not let animals drink water or bathe in it."

How does one know if he has been exposed? "Stomach ache, diarrhea, vomiting, nausea," are some of the symptoms. Also possible are irritation of the skin, nose, throat and eyes, and -- "more rarely" -- liver damage and nervous system damage.

For Ms. Baertschi and her husband, René, it is a heart-breaking message to deliver. They fell in love with Venise-en-Québec and moved from Switzerland 15 years ago to run the campground. "We were looking for a place where we could bring up our kids in a nice environment," she said. "Look, it's a beautiful spot, but all our work is going down the drain."

This is the third straight summer provincial authorities have closed the beaches after detecting high levels of microcystin, the toxin produced by the algae. In the past, Venise-en-Québec businesspeople were reluctant to make a fuss, fearful they would only further tarnish their town's name

by drawing attention to the pollution. But now they are starting to realize staying silent is accomplishing nothing.

Michel Vanier, a real-estate developer building homes in Venise-en-Québec, is in the early stages of organizing a class-action suit against the province on behalf of businesspeople and landowners who have seen the value of their properties plummet.

"It's not really good publicity, but it has to come out so there will be pressure on the politicians to do something," he said.

Murray Charlton, an Environment Canada research scientist in Hamilton, said Canadians should not be complacent about the quality of their water. He began noticing the blue-green algae blooms re-appearing in Hamilton Harbour in 1999 after more than a decade's absence.

"I feel, personally, that people should be concerned about this and we should be making plans about how to deal with this instead of just saying, let's get used to it," he said. "There are more and more people living around these bodies of water and we can't keep doing the same things we did 40 years ago."

Robert Galbraith, a photojournalist whose family owns a cottage in Philipsburg on Missisquoi Bay, has been trying to draw attention to the algae problem for years.

A video he shot in 1996 shows a neighbourhood dog cavorting through a thick slick of algae near the shore. He has posted handmade signs along the shore with a skull-and-crossbones warning that the lake is poisonous, but so far, he said, he has seen no results.


So on Sunday, he began a hunger strike.

"I don't want my children to be the first victims," he said. "I'm going to fall before they do. If I have to be the canary in the coal mine, I will."

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