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, Oji-Cree and Dene families have lived since time immemorial, according to elders.

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Lake Winnipeg, our boreal forest supports Manitoba’s economy through forestry, mining, hydropower and other industries. The area also supports nature’s food chain, it encompasses the annual breeding grounds for millions of migratory birds, the annual spawning grounds for more than 100 species of fish, and the full-time habitats for a wide variety of animals — from tiny chipmunks to giant bull moose.

Lake Winnipeg and the bor-

eal forest that surrounds it are part of an interconnected natural life-support system that operates for the mutual ecological benefit of all of its parts. Humans have a place within this system, too. Whether we live on the lake’s shores, in a Northern community, in a large urban centre or on a farm, Manitoba’s waters, forests and wetlands influence our shared culture, contribute to our shared economy and better our society’s shared health. We are all connected.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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

Lake Winnipeg: what’s in our watershed?
The healing journey for Lake Winnipeg Manitoba woman to embark on water drum that pulled her in. for that lost link to her spiritual she says. “It's all part and parcel of the same. The boreal forest is a beautiful tract of land that holds many of our stories – of our past, but of our future as well.”

Morrisseau-Innis says everyone is part of the water. She stresses the impor- tance of cooperation in the face of a threat that will impact all Manitobans. “This isn’t just an Aboriginal issue,” she says. “It’s going to be a human issue. I’m hoping we can all just walk for life.”

Lake Winnipeg Water Walk When: July 12, 2014 Where: Norway House Why: All around the community are partners and resources, including donations for food, fuel and lodging. Email katherine.morrisseau.innis@gmail.com or facebook.com for info and updates.

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Katherine Morrisseau-Innis did not 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 recog- nized that sound.”

This summer, the lifelong Manitoban and long-time Win- nipegger set out to honour the beating of that drum as she embarks on a roughly 1,300 km walk for the health of Lake Winnipe- g, accompanied by a group of family, friends and community members.

Morrisseau-Innis’s tradition- al Anishinabe name is An- imkiiquay and she belongs to the Bear Clan. Members of this clan are tasked with protecting healers, and protectors. “It’s all part and parcel of the same. The boreal forest is a beautiful tract of land that holds many of our stories – of our past, but of our future as well.”

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Designated 2013’s Most Threatened Lake in the World by German-based Global Nature Fund, Lake Winnipeg is ailing as a result of excessive nutrients making their way into its waterways, causing an excess growth of algae which ultimately robs its waters of necessary oxygen.

People live along that lake – their livelihood is through fishing and trapping. If we lose a lake like Lake Winnipeg, we are losing connection to the self,” Morrisseau-Innis says. “When I look at my granddaughter, I want her to have access to clean, clear water. I want my great-grandchild- ren to know I was here.”

A water walk is a spiritual cer- emony of healing for a body of water in need. Morrisseau-Innis’s Lake Winnipeg Water Walk is set to begin on July 12 in Norway House, near the north- ernmost tip of the lake.

While plans are in the works, she expects the group to walk to Peterfield, on the south- eastern tip, before travelling by car up the east side of the lake as far as possible by road. She will then walk down the east side to Lower Fort Garry National His- toric Site, near Selkirk. The entire walk is expected to take roughly three weeks to complete.

“We will walk, conduct water ceremonies, offer prayers and songs to the lake performing the spirits of the water to heal her,” she says. “Lake Winnipeg: who’s in our watershed?”

“By the lake, you notice the air is so much more fresh than if [you were] living in a city. The medicines that are in that forest nearby 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.”

“Let’s save our boreal forest. Let’s save the big lake she loves so much. I believe we are up for the challenge if we work to- gether to make it happen. And the coolest thing is, I know my girl wants to do what can to save the big lake like she loves so much.”

Rhea Thiessen: a child’s love for the lake.

Mickey Reader has been swimming, boating, bird-watching and exploring Lake Winnipeg and its surrounding bo- real forest every summer of her life. She’s lugged many trails and built dozens of sand structures. Driving off the Loose Moose, Ronch is one of her favourite activi- ties. When Rhea is at Lake Winnipe- g, life feels ideal: carefree, fun, adventurous and happy. I recall meeting this woman inquiring about her life as the lake loses it in trouble and a leg of- feet is now required to make it better. I felt torn between wanting to protect her childhood inno- cence and needing to teach her what it is to be a human.

When I finally broke the news, Rhea wanted to know what she could do. I told her that a large part of the solution is reducing nutrients from the lands and waters that flow into the lake. I shared with her that more people need to understand that protecting and properly managing the lake’s surrounding boreal forests and wetlands is fundamental to this effort. With roughly 70 per cent of the wa- ter entering Lake Winnipeg through Manitoba’s boreal forest, we need to maintain its natural ability to filter and hold water on the land as best as we can.

“Seeing Lake Winnipeg and conserving Manito- ba’s boreal forest may be two of the best leg- acies we leave for our children and upcoming generations. As a born and raised Manitoban, I believe we are up for the challenge if we work to- gether to make it happen. And the coolest thing is, I know my girl wants to do what can to save the big lake like she loves so much.”

Rhea Thiessen is the executive director of the Manitoba and Northern Fishers’ Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS).
0ur shared natural resources are also our shared responsibility — but defining what 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 Pas, which include its kraft paper mill. "Like in any relationship, the more you understand each other’s interests, the better off you’ll be," says Grant Glessing, Tolko’s director of stewardship and tenures department for B.C./Manitoba. "It’s a long, evolving process as companies, 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.

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.

"We’re looking at is sustainable industries. Kamu explained. “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.

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Former adversaries find common ground in the boreal forest

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— GRANT GLESSING, TOLKO

Phosphorous 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 Kamu, LWF’s executive director.

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