

Phragmites spread impacts wildlife

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Phragmites look benign but the tall plant is having a devastating effect on the Long Point World Biosphere Reserve where it's taken over up to 70 per cent of the some of the marshes, choking turtle nesting areas and discouraging visits from certain birds.

"We've found female turtles that have gotten stuck in these dense stands of phragmites," researcher Chantel Markle said at the biosphere's fifth annual research and conservation conference held on the weekend at the Simcoe Recreation Centre.

"Some that we found were dehydrated and dead because they were trying to cross phragmites to get to a nesting site while most other turtles just try to avoid it."

Phragmites (pronounced frag-MY-tees, both singular and plural) can be seen in Brantford, along Highway 403, and throughout most wetlands and beach areas. They are a perennial grass that came from Europe, although no one knows how, and it is swiftly pushing out native plants and drastically affecting wildlife.

Markle, who is completing her doctorate studies on the reptiles affected by phragmites, said there's a tremendous fight underway to halt the plant's growth but it's an uphill battle.

"Even when phragmites is just growing in a highway ditch, it ruins the function of the ditch and the roots can grow under the road and break it up."

The tallness of the plant, which can grow to heights of 4.5 metres, obscures vision along roads and the view of coastal areas.

But Markle said that her biggest concern is for the wildlife population.

"These dense stands really disrupt the habitat. There's no good place for feeding, seeking shelter or light for heat."

Markle and other phragmites experts were at the weekend conference held to share the latest knowledge and concerns about the ecosystem that encompasses the land and water of Long Point, Port Rowan, St. Williams and the Backus Woods. The biosphere has an "area of co-operation" that extends throughout Norfolk County right up to the borders of Brant County.

Organizer Linda Warren said she was delighted with the 50 participants who showed up.

"We were hoping to get at least 30," she said.

"It benefits everyone to share information, especially on what I



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Brian Craig and Tara Carpenter, from the board of directors of the Long Point World Biosphere Reserve, help host a conference Saturday in Simcoe on issues that concern the ecosystem on the shores of Lake Erie.

consider the hot topic of research right now, this invasive plant that's taking over our coastal wetlands."

Protecting Long Point has a benefit to all of southern Ontario, Warren said.

"It's this amazing resource we're so fortunate to have access to, even in the state it's in. If everyone who attends this conference could take away one new piece of information, we'd have met our goals."

Among the researchers and working professionals sharing their knowledge at the conference was Courtney Robichaud, who is doing her doctorate at the University of Waterloo on the bird population and phragmites.

"We're finding that what appears so benign is no longer that way," she said about phragmites.

"The bird population is improv-

ished and we're seeing no novel birds coming in. We're hypothesizing that because phragmites is incredibly dense to move through the marsh nesting species are no longer using it."

"We've found female turtles that have gotten stuck in these dense stands of phragmites."

Researcher Chantel Markle

Brian Craig, president of the Long Point World Biosphere Reserve board of directors, said it is exciting to hear young speakers,

who care for the environment and are knowledgeable in their fields, share information.

"There's a lot of really good and pertinent research going on in the Long Point area and it's important to provide a mechanism to share that with the public and also with the researchers, so they know what each other is doing."

Craig said that the Ministry of Natural Resources has undertaken a phragmites spraying initiative to try to reduce the impact of the plant on the local ecosystem but eradication will require all landowners in Norfolk to work together.

"We have got to work collaboratively to try and control it. We'll never eliminate phragmites but we can manage it."

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