

Volunteer monitoring urged for river

By DON LAJOIE
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Mobilizing an army of "citizen scientists" to monitor environmental conditions on the Detroit River could offer a grassroots answer to Great Lakes pollution, but it doesn't excuse government from its responsibility.

That was the message of the State of the Strait conference held at the University of Windsor Thursday. About 200 delegates, including participants from the Great Lakes Institute, the International Joint Commission and the Wayne County Department of the Environment, encouraged a growing trend which has seen organizations of bird watchers and other outdoors enthusiasts to take a stewardship role for the watershed.

Conference organizer Jan Ciborowski, of the University of Windsor, said initiatives like Essex County's Hawk Watch, Project Feederwatch at Point Pelee and the Rouge River Volunteer Frog and Toad Survey glean data on habitat conditions and wildlife population that scientists could use to help gauge Great Lakes environmental health.

He suggested environmentalists and government reach out to groups such as bird watching societies, fishing

clubs and other outdoor enthusiasts to encourage more of those kinds of studies and help train volunteers to ensure the research is scientifically valid.

He said that such data, when added to the "high-tech" research that scientists and government agencies throughout the basin already provide, will result in a more complete picture of the region's environmental health.

Use volunteers

"We need to take advantage of that volunteer monitoring," said Ciborowski. "We need to find citizen scientists, students, birders and volunteers and train them to do it well. The tools are not that complicated to use. Over time they will provide reliable data."

But John Hartig, manager of the Large Lakes Research station for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said such efforts should "in no way" be seen as a substitute for hard, high-tech, government-funded research. He said funding for pollution monitoring programs decreased markedly during the 1990s as two federal governments, two provinces, eight states and dozens of municipalities bordering the lakes cut spending.

He said environmentalists and scientists must lobby all levels of government in Canada and the U.S. to restore



HABITAT DESTROYED

John Hartig, manager of the Large Lakes Research station for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said development and urban sprawl has destroyed 97 per cent of the natural watershed habitat along the shores of the Great Lakes. "When 97 per cent is already gone that last three per cent becomes pretty important."

funding. He argued that it was the effectiveness of monitoring and management practices instituted in the 1960s which has resulted in the gradual improvement of watershed health in the 1970s and 1980s.

Hartig compared monitoring to regular medical checkups to prevent illness rather than waiting until the patient is gravely sick.