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2016 Okanagan Lake Foreshore Inventory and Mapping Update

An update to the Okanagan Lake Foreshore Inventory and Mapping (FIM) report has taken on additional significance in light of this year's historic lake levels.

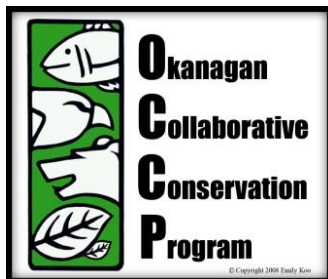
The report data was collected last year and a final version was completed this spring providing a summary of the condition of the Okanagan Lake shoreline in 2016. It marks the second time that the entire Okanagan Lake shoreline has been catalogued and mapped and provides excellent information about what the shoreline looked like last year. That makes it especially useful as governments and property owners recover from the flood and plan for the future. It also provides an ongoing measure of the environmental impacts of development over time.

Last fall, all 290 kilometres of shoreline along Okanagan Lake was surveyed. The 2016 FIM data shows that 59% of the shoreline of Okanagan Lake has already been developed while 41% of the lakefront is in its natural state. Rural and residential land use development has been an important factor in the loss of natural shoreline on Okanagan Lake. Since the initial report in 2011, 4.1 km or 1.42% of the natural Okanagan Lake shoreline was lost or permanently altered. Key changes to the shoreline included the removal of native vegetation; construction of 165 retaining walls that altered 1.45 km of shoreline; 164 new docks; 9 new marinas; more road access and general landscaping. Lakebed materials were also disturbed along 4.1 km of the shoreline.

Careful management to maintain natural habitat along the waterfront will be critical to prevent loss of key habitat for species like kokanee salmon. Important ecosystem services, like water filtration and flood protection, may also be permanently lost over time, unless these areas are better protected. Threatened and endangered species are also very sensitive to disturbance and often have a limited capacity to respond to changes.

"Each small change to the natural areas around the lake has a negative cumulative effect on the natural ecosystem to function and provide services such as clean drinking water, water infiltration, flood control, and critical habitat for fish and wildlife," says Jason Schleppe, Senior Biologist with the FIM project. "At the current rate of land development, the natural areas around the lake that are not located in parks or protected areas could be completely lost to development in 40 to 160 years." This large range reflects the fact that development rates go up and down from year to year. However, without any changes, all of the remaining unprotected natural shoreline along Okanagan Lake could be lost within the next generation or two.

"The foreshore has significant ecological, cultural, and economic values, and is extremely sensitive to disturbances," says Scott Boswell, Program Manager for the Okanagan Collaborative



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Conservation Program (OCCP). "Loss of these key values would impact the local economy, and the health and well-being of the communities in the region."

The 2016 report provides excellent baseline information that can be used by all governments along with other data collected during this year's flooding as record high lake levels recede and property owners look to move forward. In addition, the 2016 FIM project provides key information to resource managers to promote and implement better shoreline management. Understanding the rate of change can assist in developing plans that preserve important habitat.

The main recommendations of the report outline the need for collaborative action by everyone involved including development of an Okanagan Lake shoreline management plan. The report also calls for more active support and engagement through education and outreach initiatives around shoreline management. OCCP, the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP), and several partners have recently begun collaborating on an education initiative about best practices for shoreline management. A number of their partners are also interested in using the 2016 FIM data to compare the conditions of the shoreline of Okanagan Lake after this season's floodwaters recede.

Future natural shoreline loss from development can be prevented or reversed by retaining and rehabilitating the natural greenspaces along the waterfront. These permeable and absorbent buffer areas allow room for lake waters to rise and fall with the changing seasons, and provide a wide range of other benefits. Okanagan shoreline planning would benefit from a collaborative effort by all Okanagan individuals and communities, to preserve an important part of our social-ecological heritage and important driver of our economy. Many people are already working together to enhance shoreline protection, but much of the responsibility also lies with individual landowners to preserve shoreline over the long term.

This collaborative research project was initiated by the Regional District of Central Okanagan, and facilitated through a partnership with the SOSCP, the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), the City of Vernon, and OCCP through the support of Environment and Climate Change Canada. These partners recognized the value in expanding the mapping initiative to include all of Okanagan Lake and were able to collaborate across regional boundaries to build upon this inventory. The team was also able to expand upon the project to assist the OBWB in mapping invasive Eurasian milfoil in Okanagan Lake. These kinds of mapping projects provide governments with information about what actually exists on the landscape to assist in developing better conservation policies and development decisions.

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Supplementary Information:

Read the FIM 2016 Report on the Ministry of Environment Ecological Reports Catalogue (EcoCat):
<http://a100.gov.bc.ca/pub/acat/public/viewReport.do?reportId=52566>