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Cottage consultant cashes in on clean-up consensus

Gradually, polluters are seeing that their own interest is served by shaping up

Cottagers, sometimes among them, get it — and it has spawned a new consulting field

[JUDY STEED](#)

The basis for a booming business can be deceptively simple — with far-reaching consequences.

Take Randy French, pioneer lake planner.

In surveys and workshops conducted on over 20 lakes in Southern Ontario, French has found that the top four values are consistent across the region for everyone from commercial operators to rural residents, farmers, resort owners and cottagers.

Those values?

- Water quality.
- Peace and quiet.
- Natural beauty.
- Fish and wildlife.

For French, this remarkable consensus — which embraces about one million people who have cottages or spend time at lakes during Ontario's glorious summers, plus thousands of residents — has enabled him to set up shop as an entrepreneur and Pied Piper for people who want to protect their lakes.

This is not small potatoes: seasonal residents and guests contribute well over \$1 billion a year to the cottage country economy.

"We do what the folks at the Ministry of Natural Resources would *like* to do," says French, a graduate of the University



KYLE GRIFFIN FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Do you really need a lawn? is a question often posed by lake planner Randy French, above with assistant Jasmine Chabot on a visit to Lake Katchewanooka on the Trent Severn Waterway. More natural vegetation cuts phosphorous levels, boosting water quality, he tells clients.

COTTAGE COUNTRY DO'S, DON'TS

Randy French's top six recommendations to cottagers, for protecting Ontario lakes:

- ✦ Don't cut the grass within 50 feet of the shoreline. Let native shrubs and bushes grow.
- ✦ Don't use chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They are harmful for humans, animals and the lake, and may encourage weed growth.
- ✦ Don't build a beach. Sand erodes, nurseries for fish and frogs get wiped out.
- ✦ Install septic systems at

of Waterloo's school of urban and regional planning who worked for MNR from 1988 to 1997.

But government cutbacks mean fewer staff to do the legwork — a problem solved by an army of volunteers: the people who live or summer on the lakes and who are motivated to take action in a way that's a dream come true for planners and politicians alike. Stepping into a boat on a lake in the Kawarthas, French is accompanied by his associate, Jasmine Chabot, a conservation biologist with whom he is working on his latest plan, for Stoney and Clear Lakes northeast of Peterborough.

In a twist on the traditional planning process — government sets rules and tries to enforce them — French reverses the order of things, working from the ground up. His clients recognize that as pollution increases, weeds proliferate, fish disappear and water quality declines, with ominous consequences. Property values are threatened — as is the long-term health of the environment and the region's water supply.

"The trouble with planning — for any consultant — is that you can come up with great ideas, present a great package, people say 'Yes, yes, yes,' then you walk out the door with all the knowledge and nothing happens," French says.

Plus there's the cost: a traditional consultant's lake plan could consume up to \$100,000. French Planning Services' model — with the clients taking the lead, providing their own legwork and expertise from among their fellow lake-dwellers and regional businesses — has a price tag of about \$20,000.

That's because French draws on the skills of his clients. "Cottagers are a unique bunch, they're do-it-yourselfers, and they want to be good stewards of the land."

But let's start at the beginning. Ontario is blessed in the water department. The province has more than 250,000 lakes — and close to 1 million, if you count the little ones. Together, Ontario and Quebec probably have more lakes than any region in the world. "It's a resource we don't fully understand or appreciate," French says.

Why do lakes need a plan if they've existed for millennia?

As the boat cruises along a weed-choked bay, French points. "Look at that." A large cottage that looks like a suburban house sprawls across a perfect green lawn stretching to the water's edge. What's wrong with this picture?

Just about everything, from an environmental standpoint.

"That's an urban landscape superimposed on a rural environment," French said. "The most important

least 50 feet from the lake. Consider innovative technology, such as the Rockwood, Ont.-based Waterloo Biofilter System, recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Waterloo's system filters out nutrients, virtually eliminating phosphorous.

★ Update land use policy in your area; many zoning bylaws allow golf courses and cattle on shorelines. Golf courses should be required to have a pesticide/weed killer management program to mitigate the impact of chemicals. Farms should have buffer zones between cattle, crops and lake.

★ Establish a monitoring program for your lake. Contact Bev Clark at the Ministry of the Environment; he's co-ordinator of the Lake Partner Program and collects water samples from volunteers at 800 Ontario lakes. Email bev.clark@ene.gov.on.ca or call 705-766-2150. —**Steed**

thing is to naturalize the first 10 to 20 feet of shoreline — 50 feet, if you can — letting grasses, shrubs and trees grow to filter out pollutants."

In other words, don't plant a lawn close to the lake, and if you've got one, don't cut the grass close to the lake.

"Fertilizers and chemical pesticides have been used on that lawn," says Chabot, who has a B.Sc. in environmental science and biology, with courses in natural resource management. "It's like pouring chemicals onto your drinking water supply."

French points to a large hump of very green grass just west of the cottage. "That's where the septic tank is buried. It's too bad they didn't put it behind the cottage, away from the lake. Man-made phosphorus (from human excrement) breaks down through the soil and is the major cause of weed growth in lakes."

French and Chabot reach down into the water, where clouds of yucky stuff — what they refer to as "cotton-candy algae blooms" — are smudged among dense weed beds. Chabot pulls out handfuls of "aquatic vegetation."

"There's a lot of good stuff in here that makes for an excellent nursery for fish, frogs and salamanders," she says, combing through the vegetation. "Here's native coontail, native Northern milfoil, and Eurasian milfoil, which can be invasive." It appears to be under control, "but that could change," if average water temperatures rise or if more nutrients are pumped into the lake, "which helps the invasives, which tolerate extremes that kill off native plants."

`This is not about cottagers saying no to development

or farming. It's about research and mediation, making sure every point of view is heard, while laying

out in graphic terms the consequences of failure to act'

Lake planner Randy French

French talks about the plague of blue-green algae, which can be toxic and has appeared in Georgian Bay near Point au Baril, in Sturgeon Bay, and in Three Mile Lake, where "it's a disaster, like a mat on top of the lake — and the smell!"

"It smells because it's dying off," Chabot says, "like something rotting." Blue-green algae, she explains, "is like any microscopic plant — it needs nutrients to proliferate. When it becomes dominant, it causes problems; the 'good stuff' dies out and the blue-green algae chokes out other life forms."

As we cruise the lake, they pull out more vegetation. They spot birds. Trees. Streams flowing into the lake. This is what they do when they're preparing a lake plan — check out the natural elements, create an inventory.

Lake planning as a business is relatively new, born in 2000 when the cottagers of Peninsula Lake in Muskoka decided they needed to take action. Close to Huntsville, Peninsula Lake is home to Deerhurst Resort, which had expanded and put in a golf course.

The cottagers' concerns were heightened by the appearance of algae in the late 1990s, fed by nutrients coming from increased commercial development, monster cottages, the clearing of shoreline vegetation and massive changes to the landscape.

When they contacted Randy French to help them figure out how to save their lake, the cottage association was amazed to discover that they wanted the same things as the commercial operators and local residents: "They all wanted to preserve the water quality, the natural beauty, the wildlife, the peace and quiet," French says. "The commercial folks need to protect the environment for business reasons — that's why tourists come." Farmers likewise rely on a healthy environment; when manure from a farmer's field contaminated the water supply of Walkerton in 2000, E. coli bacteria killed seven people and infected more than 2,000, with a devastating impact on the entire region. (Property values fell precipitously.)

With his company, French Planning Services, based in Bracebridge, French worked as a mediator to bring all sides on Peninsula Lake together as a team, to focus on their common goals.

Says French: "We collected every bit of information known about the lake — the ministry is a rich resource — we gathered all the data about lake capacity and the number of septic systems a lake can sustain, we looked at water quality studies and phosphorous loads, we did the watershed planning at the lake level with the people on the lake, getting their input as it developed."

Ultimately, their success reached beyond practices on Peninsula Lake to strengthen land use policies, with a new official plan amendment "rolling out in the township of Lake of Bays," he says.

For Bobs and Crow lakes, north of Kingston, an American cottager named Charlie Stewart invited French to attend the cottage association's annual general meeting in 2003.

"This is a typical evolution," French says. "A core group gets it going, they spread the word and get 20 people to come to a workshop, and by the third year, you've got 60 people at a workshop ready to take action."

It starts with a survey conducted by the cottage association, saving the group \$15,000 when they do it themselves. The survey asks the question: What do you value in your lake? "Over and over again, the top four come up," French says. "Water quality. Peace and quiet. Natural beauty. Fish and wildlife."

For the next step, the workshops broaden out to include rural residents and business people, resort owners and commercial operators.

With Bobs and Crow, the survey has been completed and seven workshops held with all the stakeholders. "We've listened to everybody's input for the last year," French says, "cottagers have done bird counts, reports on water levels and fish stocks, mining and minerals." Chabot contributed a 40-page report on vegetation, wildlife, wetlands and invasive species. French wrote up 20 pages on land use and the official plan. "Our goal is to go back to the municipality and clean up the plan. Often we find that they allow agricultural use on shorelines. Cattle in the water, manure piles, cornfields and all their chemicals — not a good idea."

(Agricultural land use policies have changed over the years. After Walkerton, the province set new restrictions on manure on fields. Many farmers establish buffer zones to protect shoreline from cattle and crops.)

All the assembled material goes to a Bobs and Crow volunteer, Dan Wilson, who will "cut and chop and produce a user-friendly version that's easy to read," French says.

"This is not about cottagers saying no to development or farming," he adds. "It's about research and mediation, making sure every point of view is heard, while laying out in graphic terms the consequences of failure to act."

Valerie and Gerry Hunnius worked with French Planning Services on the plan for Paudash Lake, close to Bancroft.

The Paudash Lake Conservation Association "wanted to be pro-active," Valerie Hunnius says. "We wanted to be ahead of the game, to put the right rules in place. We didn't want to see monster cottages and overdevelopment."

Having "retired" to the lake in April, 2000, after cottaging there since 1974, the Hunniuses were impressed by French's ability to "animate a crowd" and draw together the diverse interests in the community.

Says Valerie: "Randy guided us through the process — he was working on seven other lake plans at the time — and helped us strengthen our partnerships with MNR and MOE (Ministry of the Environment) and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans."

Today, having published their lake plan this summer — selling 75 copies for \$50 a piece, plus \$15 for the CD — the Paudash group is deep in meetings with municipal and county officials to alter bylaws and zoning rules.

Involved in lake plans for 20 lakes, and still the only planner doing what he does, French's reach keeps expanding.

"The vision is huge — to do watershed planning across Southern Ontario. The province does it from a top-down approach but property owners usually aren't involved.

``We do it from the ground-up, bringing all the users in to protect water quality and the natural environment.

"We're doing a chain of lakes, from Kennisis Lake at the top end to Big Hawk, Little Hawk, Hulls, Kushog and Mountain — the headwaters of the Gull River watershed that empties into Balsam Lake on the Trent Severn Waterway. We're connecting all these lakes, all these people — put them together and we've got a huge watershed plan covering hundreds of square miles."

That's crucial. In order to manage our water supply, citizens have to be aware of the points of pollution in an entire watershed — which includes all the rivers and streams that flow within it.

Eventually French's bottom-up plans could cover most of the lakes in Southern Ontario. "That's our dream — to connect all the lakes and the people in a broad watershed plan that protects our most

precious resource."

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