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Hundreds of fish found dead in Old Ausable Channel near Grand Bend

Hundreds of fish in the Old Ausable River Channel, in the Grand Bend area, have been found dead, likely as a result of a phenomenon called a 'winterkill.'

"This is one of the most common events that can kill a large number of fish," according to Kari Jean, Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) Aquatic Biologist.

A 'winterkill' usually occurs during prolonged ice cover as the open water has been sealed off and not recharged with oxygenated air, Jean said. The fish suffocate from lack of dissolved oxygen. Natural conditions in the Old Ausable Channel such as shallow depth, excess amounts of aquatic vegetation, and mucky bottom contributed to this event. Decomposing aquatic vegetation uses up available oxygen.

A number of dead fish became evident on the surface of the Old Ausable Channel as the ice came off.

The ABCA began to receive phone calls and e-mails on March 9 from concerned citizens who live adjacent to the Old Ausable Channel (OAC), as the ice started to melt and dead fish were visible. ABCA staff have been out on site on four different occasions to assess the dead specimens. Different species of fish vary in their tolerance of low oxygen. There were ten different species found dead as part of this winterkill, including species at risk. Sunfish species were the most abundant type of species found dead. Many of the dead fish will decompose on the bottom or will be eaten by scavengers such as birds, turtles and crayfish.

A winterkill of this level has not occurred for at least seven years, according to ABCA.

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