



Jewels of the Finger Lakes

Hemlock and Canadice Lakes are brought under the state's protection.

Your canoe glides gently across the mirrored surface of the tranquil lake. Morning sunlight flickers on the water. Ahead, you can see mile after mile of undeveloped shoreline. An unbroken band of verdant forest extends from the shore up a steep slope, and towering white pines break the canopy. A bald eagle soars in the distance, its call echoing in the silence of a calm summer morning. You're the only person in sight. This may not be an uncommon scene in some parts of New York, but what makes this scene extra special is that you're canoeing on a lake that's fewer than 30 miles from Rochester.

Of New York's 11 Finger Lakes, Hemlock and Canadice are the only two with undeveloped shorelines. And now, because of a broad partnership between state conservation groups and local communities, these two Finger Lakes are permanently protected by the State of New York.

The story of Hemlock and Canadice Lakes is an interesting bit of western New York history indeed. Rochester once obtained its drinking water from cisterns and wells. A deadly disease put an end to this practice. In 1832, a cholera outbreak swept through Rochester, following epidemics in Montreal, Quebec, other places

in New York, and throughout Europe. The epidemic hit the city again in 1834 and 1848, but by the latter, residents' views changed from merely trying to battle the disease to eliminating its sources, such as dirty tenement buildings and stagnant pools of water. Better hospital amenities were built and the city was more prepared for an 1852 outbreak. The 26 fatalities which occurred by early August, however, caused further civic action in the areas of water and drainage facility management.

Looking south, city officials identified Hemlock and Canadice Lakes as clean, reliable sources of water that could be



Scott McDonnell

By Jim Howe

delivered to the city by gravity. These pristine waters from Hemlock and Canadice Lakes were tapped, and helped Rochester prosper into one of our state's largest cities. Since 1876, the City of Rochester has used water from the lakes as its primary source of drinking water.

Shortly after the city built its conduit system, Hemlock Lake experienced a boom in cottage and hotel development along its shoreline. In the 1890s, a proposal to build a hotel and summer resort on the lake prompted the city to begin acquiring lakeshore properties to protect its investment in its drinking



Photo courtesy of the City of Rochester

The conduit carrying water to Rochester was installed in 1893.

water supply. “By the 1950s, the city had acquired nearly 7,000 acres of land in the watershed, including the shorelines of both lakes and much of the surrounding forested hillsides,” says Don Root, the city’s watershed conservationist.

In addition to their importance as sources of drinking water, the lakes are also prime fish and wildlife habitat. In the 1970s—when bald eagle populations were critically endangered in the Lower 48—the sole remaining nest in the entire state was located at Hemlock Lake. Today, two pairs of bald eagles nest in the watershed. “That’s a testament to the

quality of the water, the habitat, the lack of human disturbance, and the excellent stewardship by the City of Rochester staff at Hemlock and Canadice Lakes,” says DEC’s Endangered Species Unit leader, Peter Nye.

Hemlock and Canadice Lakes also offer outstanding recreational opportunities for the public. Every year, thousands of people visit the two lakes to fish, mountain bike, canoe, kayak, hike, bird-watch and hunt in a pristine setting. For more than 100 years, the city carefully managed these lands, allowing compatible recreational use. But considering all the economic pressures facing our municipalities today, how could this drinking water source and recreational haven be secured for posterity?

In the mid-1980s, tighter federal water standards forced the City of Rochester to build a water treatment plant at the two lakes. Some feared that, once the plant

was operational, the city might regard its holdings around the two lakes as surplus, given that the treatment plant could remove any impurities caused by development of the lakes’ shorelines or hillsides. In one sense, it was no longer necessary to prevent development of the lands surrounding the lake. Sensing this potential problem, conservation groups assembled and initiated an effort to secure permanent protection for these lands. Over the last 25 years, the State of New York and the conservation community in western New York, including The Nature Conservancy, have been working toward this goal. Under DEC’s leadership, the city and the state have now finalized the deal.

In June of this year, DEC purchased the city’s 7,000 acres around the two lakes, including their shorelines. The department intends to manage these lakes for wildlife habitat and compatible recreation, much the way the city has been

doing for the last century. “There is tremendous public support for keeping these two lakes the way they are...forever,” says DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis.

The city is also grateful to have found a buyer that will continue its legacy. “Without this purchase by the state, I’m not sure we could have continued to hold these lands much longer,” says Rochester Mayor Robert Duffy. “We’re thrilled to work with the State of New York to permanently protect these two Finger Lakes.”

For the last 15 years, The Nature Conservancy has helped facilitate the transaction, keeping officials from both the state and the city at the table through multiple administrations. Over the last few years, the Conservancy has also acquired 1,100 acres of sensitive lands in the Hemlock-Canadice watershed, augmenting the protection of these two Finger Lakes.

The protection of Hemlock and Canadice Lakes illustrates the importance



Bill Banaszewski



of dedicated state funding for conservation of New York's land and water. "Without the state's Environmental Protection Fund, these two lakes might have seen a very different fate," says Commissioner Grannis.

"In my 27 years with DEC, this is the only project that I've worked on that has 100% support from the public, local community leaders, hunters and anglers, elected officials, and environmental groups," says DEC Region 8 Director Paul D'Amato.

Jim Howe is director of The Nature Conservancy's Central and Western New York Chapter, but prefers to spend his time canoeing, fishing, and hiking at Hemlock and Canadice Lakes.

Visit Hemlock and Canadice Lakes!

If you'd like to visit Hemlock and Canadice Lakes, here are some options:

Hiking—The City of Rochester established a network of trails that DEC manages today. One of my favorites is a four-mile trail along the western shore of Canadice Lake. In 2008, The Nature Conservancy developed another trail, Rob's Trail, which enables hikers to begin at Bald Hill—the ridge between Hemlock and Canadice Lakes—and hike down to Canadice Lake.

Fishing—The lakes abound with lake, brown, and rainbow trout, pickerel, and bass. Fishing is allowed in accordance with state regulations, and ice fishing is popular.

Boating—Canoes, kayaks, and boats with small electric or outboard motors (10 horsepower or less) are permitted. There are two boat launches on Hemlock Lake and a single boat launch on Canadice Lake. Cartop boats can also be put in at a separate launch at the south end of Canadice Lake.

Biking—Trails and roads in the Hemlock-Canadice watershed offer great mountain and road biking.



Bill Banaszewski

Hunting—Forests that blanket the ridges around the lakes provide great hunting for white-tailed deer and black bear.

Birding—The forests around the lakes are popular places to see and hear songbirds in late spring and summer months. The lakes also provide habitat for migrating waterfowl and are regular stopovers for common loons in spring and fall.

Wildlife Watching—In addition to abundant birdlife, the deep woods are home to fisher, and otters are sometimes seen in the lakes.

For more information on these properties, visit www.dec.ny.gov/lands/66521.html. If you'd like to find out about recreational opportunities available on other state lands, check out www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/347.html.