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MEDIA RELEASE

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A positive sign for Niagara's beaches

After nearly a decade of increasing frequency of beach closings in Niagara Region, researchers at Brock University are cautiously heartened at evidence that shows beach closings have been declining for two consecutive years.

A new study by Brock's Niagara Community Observatory notes that while pollutants and rising water temperatures have affected beach quality for years, there have also been continuing efforts to improve Great Lakes water quality, and the past two years – particularly 2012 – have seen a drop in the number of days beaches had health warning signs posted.

However, researchers also say the complex combination of factors affecting beach closures means it is unclear if the trend will continue in the future.

“The quality of our beaches, lakes and rivers is affected by a variety of natural and man-made factors,” says researcher Douglas Hagar, author of the study *Niagara's Beaches: Hidden Gems*.

“An essential component in a plan to increase the quality of our beaches is by addressing runoff. Runoff can carry fertilizers, metals and other pollutants directly into rivers and streams through storm sewers. “

Water quality is determined primarily by the presence of E.coli bacteria and is also impacted by a range of factors including rainfall, air temperatures, algae growth, sewage overflows and boating waste.

The report notes that Niagara's beaches along Lakes Erie and Ontario are monitored by public health staff who ensure the most accurate beach quality reporting possible, in an effort to keep swimmers and beach-goers safe.

“Niagara Region Public Health is mandated to monitor public beaches to assist in the prevention and reduction of water-borne illness related to recreational water use,” says Bjorn Christensen, the Niagara Region’s Director of Environmental Health.

“We will continue to work with our partners, including those at Brock University, to achieve that goal as well as striving to provide residents and visitors with the most accurate and up-to-date information on our local beaches.”

Hagar says residents can help protect water resources in their region by taking measures such as:

- diverting downspouts off of driveways and onto lawns to reduce runoff flowing directly into the sewer system
- reducing the amount of fertilizer people put on their lawns
- installing pervious driveways
- using eco-friendly soap and detergent alternatives (especially if washing cars in driveways)

“If everyone does their part in reducing runoff, we can continue to enjoy our local beaches and lakes for years to come,” says Hagar.

See attached images:

(1) 2011 NASA satellite photo shows extent of algae bloom in Lake Erie.

(2) Niagara Region public health staff conduct water quality tests at Crystal Beach, on Lake Erie.

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