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The Development and Evolution of the
Lake Ontario Organizing Network
and its Projects

In December of 1987, Great Lakes United sponsored a regional meeting of groups active and concerned with the quality of the Lake Ontario ecosystem. Groups attending that meeting unanimously agreed that in the ten years since Love Canal, we had not accomplished enough, that new mechanisms were needed to co-ordinate public agendas for action around Lake Ontario.

Rather than each group pursuing individual local objectives, our shared toxic threats called for co-ordinated lake-wide initiatives. Because many groups could not join coalitions, and groups felt no need to create a whole new group, it was decided to form a network that would be a shared project of groups around the lake. This project was soon christened the Lake Ontario Organizing Network (LOON). While no one group would own the network, each participating group could utilize the LOON umbrella to carry out common goals, objectives and projects as long as those projects had been mandated by the Network.

A Steering Committee was formed, made up of Great Lakes United (GLU), the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), the Ecumenical Taskforce, Energy Probe, Centre for the Great Lakes, Citizens' Action of New York, Atlantic States Legal Foundation, and Pollution Probe. The first project that the group set out was to develop the Citizens' Agenda for the Restoration of Lake Ontario, a much expanded and embellished report of the first regional meeting.

Pam Miller of Pollution Probe, Sarah Miller of CELA, Tim Eder of GLU, Paul Muldoon of Energy Probe, and Tony Luppino of Citizens' Action, met regularly for the next six months to produce this report which was published by GLU. LOON members released the report in simultaneous news conferences around the Lake in July 1988 and it received a lot of press attention in the hot summer before both federal elections. That same summer Pollution Probe

decided to use the LOON umbrella to do a Caravan around Lake Ontario to reach and involve more people in the constituency-building of the Network. The LOON Caravan was to conclude with a LOON meeting in Kingston to endorse the Citizens' Agenda and to plan further co-operative projects to advance that agenda. Pollution Probe successfully approached the Mott Foundation and the Public Welfare Foundation for funding to co-ordinate the Kingston workshops. The LOON Steering Committee encouraged Pollution Probe to carry out LOON canvasses in all Caravan locations with the understanding that funds raised would be used for the Kingston Workshop costs.

At the Kingston meeting in September, groups attending spent two very productive days planning four priority projects to carry out in the next year. Because one of the predominant concerns to emerge from the LOON caravan was the public's anxiety and lack of knowledge of the health implications of toxins in the Lake, a human health survey was overwhelmingly the first priority of the four projects.

The other projects targeted were: an election campaign, a project on Remedial Action Plans (RAPs), and a computer communications network. CELA volunteered to carry out the election project which took the form of an open letter to President Reagan and Prime Minister Mulroney. In the fall of 1988 that letter was circulated widely to the press and politicians in both countries. As a result of this campaign in Canada, all three parties made increased commitments to the Great Lakes and the Canadian funding was doubled, bringing it in line with U.S. levels. The RAP project is being carried out by GLU and grants for it are now under consideration. The NIRV Centre has been funded to establish a Great Lakes communication network.

Pollution Probe took responsibility for the Binational Health Survey and formed a Project Steering Committee. The Committee is made up of LOON members, experts in public health and epidemiology, statistics and polling, and Great Lakes scientists. Considerable Probe staff time from Pam Miller, Alice Grange, and David McArthur was spent designing and researching models for citizen surveys. LOON members were informed of the progress of this project in a mailing of the Kingston meeting report and in issues of Do It. In the Spring of this year, Pollution Probe solicited the Public Welfare Foundation to utilize their Lake Ontario funding for 1989 to carry out the LOON survey. The grant was approved for this purpose and another grant was prepared for submission to Environment Canada's Great Lakes Program.

As this project committee examined their task within the social and political context they felt that a simple health survey was fraught with pitfalls but that an attitudinal survey would be

much more effective because it would demonstrate the collective anxiety of Lake Ontario residents about their health and would give a clear message that governments had to respond in a meaningful way to new scientific information that was coming to light. The need for this health survey has become more and more pronounced this year for all of the Great Lakes Basin.

Why? Very recently Great Lakes scientists have realized that the primary focus of their research into human and wildlife health has been skewed. Traditionally they have been looking for cancer links with gross amounts of toxins. However, recent findings are that the effects of isomers are showing behavioural changes on high risk groups, in-utero fetuses, nursing infants, the chemically sensitive, and consumers of Great Lakes fish. These discoveries have shaken the Great Lakes community because of the vast implications it has for change that needs to occur in regulatory and in scientific approaches. These discoveries have been a big setback for the Great Lakes and threaten to throw us once again into a wait-and-see mode. Clearly a whole new body of knowledge and scientific investigation needs to be undertaken, and it is crucial that this research begin at once.

Realizing that the LOON survey could be the tool that would coalesce the public call for action on this issue, another opportunity arrived which LOON members targeted as the release point of the survey. Members of LOON, including Pollution Probe, started meeting in January 1989 to plan a public component to the biennial meeting of the International Joint Commission, conveniently scheduled for October 12-14, 1989 in Hamilton. What emerged was the first biennial meeting of the people of the Great Lakes. It was our intention to make human health the focus of the public's agenda at that meeting and the LOON Survey was to be the basis of the citizens' platform at the Hamilton meetings. There is a crucial need to do this at this meeting. The Science Advisory Board (SAB) in its report will recommend that there be a human health reference. However, the SAB is often ignored by the much more conservative IJC Commissioners and Water Quality Board members. If this matter is deferred at this year's IJC meeting we will have lost two more years to the backsliding on human health. Scientists are asking us to do this because they are already seeing their research requests into new human health areas are going unfunded. Progressive Great Lakes regulators are aware of and have encouraged this survey because it will help them make the case that Health and Welfare has to plan a role in the Great Lakes which have always been the exclusive territories of the environmental agencies.

This LOON survey is a way to jumpstart meaningful human health research in the Great Lakes Basin this fall, not years from now.

LOON in its short life of two years has been the most effective organizing effort on Lake Ontario. Its accomplishments and momentum in this short period are impressive and Pollution Probe has made a huge contribution to this. LOON's success largely is because of its methods of co-operative strategy and consensus-building, and task sharing to a common end.

If the LOON Health Project were to be cancelled at this time, with no consultation with the rest of the network, there is a risk that Pollution Probe will be putting itself at odds with that Lake Ontario constituency represented by LOON.



July 21, 1989

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Members of the Strategic Planning Committee
Pollution Probe
12 Madison Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M5R 2S1

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Pollution Probe and the Lake Ontario Organizing Network


Recently the Steering Committee of the Lake Ontario Organizing Network (LOON) was dismayed to learn that your committee would like to withdraw from the health survey project you were undertaking on behalf of LOON. We would like to request that you consider the attached background on LOON and our rationale for that particular project, and meet with us before you finalize your decision.

We have not yet contacted our full membership about the premature termination of this co-operative effort because we would like you to fully understand the implications of your decision and the value of the project to the whole Great Lakes Community. However, should you decide not to grant us a meeting to discuss this, we would feel that it would be necessary for you to stop all direct mail, door to door canvasses and public outreach, and displays under the auspices of LOON. We have nothing but esteem for the work of Pam Miller on the LOON Caravan, the LOON Kingston Conference and on the planning for the LOON Health Project, and do not want our concerns to reflect negatively on her capability. We very much want to continue our work with her.

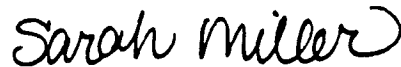
We sincerely hope that we can convince you of the value of this effort and of the need to have Pollution Probe continue its Lake Ontario efforts within the LOON framework. Please contact Sarah Miller at CELA (977-2410) to arrange a convenient time for us to discuss our concerns with you.

Yours truly,

LOON STEERING COMMITTEE



John Jackson
Great Lakes United



Sarah Miller
Canadian Environmental
Law Association



Paul Muldoon
Hamilton Environmental
Action Team

cc: Geoff Love