

# Things not fine on the Winter River

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- BY DONMAZER AND CATHY CORRIGAN COMMENTARY Don Mazer and Cathy Corrigan are co-chairs of the Winter- River Tracadie Bay Watershed Association, which was recently awarded the Council of the Federation Excellence in Water Stewardship for Prince Edward Island



We were encouraged to see that the City of Charlottetown has finally got to the point of committing some funding to begin the new wellfield in Miltonvale Park and take pressure off the Winter River watershed (The Guardian, March 27, 2013), its sole source of water. But we were dismayed and astonished at Mayor Clifford Lee's comments that the Winter River will be "fine" for the four to five years before the new wellfield is operative (and this time frame assumes that uncommitted future provincial and federal funding will fall into place). Apparently, the fact that more than five kilometres of major feeder streams were dry for more than three months last summer just doesn't impress the mayor as much of a problem: or the fact that the city had basically maximized its capacity to pump water from the Winter River during that time, and had to open the auxiliary pumping station at Malpeque for the first time in years. The mayor also seems to find some comfort in attributing these events to the fact that city water use was up five per cent last summer, a puzzling source of reassurance since this increase occurred at the same time the city was implementing water restriction guidelines and urging its citizens to do all they could to conserve water.

It's no wonder that the city has taken such a relaxed approach in commitment to developing a new water source. After all, where's the urgency? The mayor says that "none of the experts are telling us we're going to have that source dry up anytime in the near future. The water is there." Apparently, as long as the water continues to flow through the tap, things are fine. Why not continue to put millions into projects like infilling ditches rather than putting such funding toward a new water source?

And along with his "experts", the mayor has good company in his denial of the impact of city water extraction. Last summer, Environment Minister Janice Sherry was also not very concerned about the dry stream beds and degradation of habitat that occurred: she stated that it was nothing that a couple days of soft rain couldn't clear up.

Perhaps it's just difficult for the mayor and others to see the problem. After all, the water comes out of the tap, so there would seem to be lots of water down in the aquifer. The fact that water is being extracted at more than twice the sustainable rate at some wellfields isn't a problem as long as the water flows through the tap. The fact that habitat is seriously degraded, the ecological health of the watershed endangered and a whole generation of fish lost last summer isn't a problem as long as the water flows through the tap. The fact that long sections of surface water dried up in the streams in 2012, in 2011 and on part of the main branch of the river in 2000 isn't a problem - as long as the water flows through the tap.

The problems on the Winter River are longstanding, the culmination of more than 80 years of water extraction by the City of Charlottetown. The dried up stream beds of recent years represent a dramatic reflection of the state of the groundwater supply below.

The springs that feed the river and streams have themselves dried up. Residents have long observed the diminishing water levels in the river, and sometimes had problems with their wells. When we arrive at the point when the surface water dries up, the long-term impacts of unsustainable water extraction have become a crisis. But even when the water returns to the streams, the problems underground persist. We simply cannot replenish all the water used by the city through the precipitation that falls from the sky each year.

And there wasn't much snow this winter, and a dry summer is predicted.

We'd certainly like to hear from Mayor Lee's "experts" on this matter. It might be instructive if they were to publicly present their reasons why they don't see problems with water extraction on the Winter River. We, of course, are not "experts": we are just a group of ordinary citizens, observing what's happening where we live and working to protect the ecological well-being of our watershed.

Given the dramatic events of last summer, we have to ask what would it take for our leaders and their experts to acknowledge that there is a problem with water extraction on the Winter River? What kind of environmental degradation or species impacts would be required for our leaders to concern themselves not only with the users of water, but with the well-being of the watershed environment that sustains all of us so well? When will this become an urgent issue?

Our fear is that there is only one answer to those questions: only when the water no longer flows through the tap.