

Engaging Our Communities

A Report to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to support efforts of the Healthy Lake Huron Initiative and the Canadian Agricultural Partnership for Stewardship Clusters

Stewardship Clusters Project #2018-010(a)

Activity 6

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August 15, 2020



Introduction

In 2019, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) provided funding to the Conservation Authorities along the southeast shore of Lake Huron - St. Clair Region, Ausable Bayfield, Maitland Valley and Saugeen Valley (the “Team”). The Canadian Agricultural Partnership awarded funding to review the involvement of the different agricultural stakeholders in the branding and marketing related to practices that make for healthy soil and water quality.

The premise of the project was that, for almost ten years, the Team has hosted/funded events, completed projects, written newsletters, partnered with other organizations, all with a goal to improving lake water quality. The Team wanted to take a step back, evaluate past initiatives, and see if they were missing anything. Is there some influencer or partner who can help make these messages resonate? Is there something that seems to be working well? Is there something that is not working well?

The Agreement required that events or presentations made through this project would focus on groups that would not normally be involved in promoting stewardship projects. For example, instead of focusing on farmers, the Team would focus on drainage contractors, agricultural retailers, or financial planners - all of whom have influence on lake water quality, but who are not the primary target audiences for the development of partnerships.

The purpose of Activity 6 was to help the Team make presentations with local experts, or “influencers,” to groups that are not normally partners in stewardship efforts. Early in 2020, the Team co-hosted seven presentations. However, the current worldwide health crises beginning in March 2020, caused the Team to rethink the method to accomplish the deliverables in this Agreement.

In-Person Presentations

Presentation Content and Feedback

Before the onset of the health crisis, the Team was able to hold seven in-person presentations. St. Clair Region Conservation (SCRCA) held a workshop on January 14, 2020 that focused on wetlands and phosphorus. Some of the topics addressed at this workshop included, species at risk and farms in the Sydenham River watershed, capturing phosphorus from agricultural runoff with wetlands, incorporating wetlands into the Drainage Act and how to retire fragile land with ALUS Lambton, and controlling phragmites along the shoreline and around wetlands. Approximately 25 people attended this workshop that was targeted at both farmers and other rural landowners.

Participants were presented with a survey, and 11 provided responses. Almost all participants who responded noted that they increased their knowledge about wetlands through this workshop. The majority also saw benefits to water quality, fragile land retirement, biodiversity and floodwater storage through the use of wetlands. The barriers to adopting wetlands in the agricultural community included the potential expense, limited access to information, perceived limited land use, perceived “government interference,” as well as a fear of attracting species at risk, which could cause more limitations.

Participants also provided some actions that could remove these barriers. Included was providing science-based information, increased educational opportunities and demonstration sites, increased funding opportunities and increased support from conservation authorities.

SCRCA also co-hosted a Nutrient Management Workshop with the Lambton Cattleman’s Association on January 22, 2020 in Alvinston, ON. Topics discussed at this workshop included regenerative agriculture for cattle and crop operations, responsible manure application, some of the OMAFRA tools that can be

used for calculating manure application rates and erosion rates, as well as some general information on the Sydenham River system. Approximately 20 people attended this workshop.

Participants filled in a survey to gauge their understanding and provide an opportunity for feedback about the kind of information shared. Eight participants returned surveys to the workshop organizers. Of the eight surveyed, six stated that their understanding of the Sydenham watershed processes (and by default, the state of the lake), as well as critical habitats was only poor to fair. When asked what kind of BMPs (in their opinion) could be beneficial to watershed health and species at risk, BMPs such as erosion control measures, cover crops, and reduced tillage were all submitted. Some of the topics/BMPs that they were interested in learning more about included cover crops, biostrips and planting green, reducing compaction, agricultural soil biology, reduced tillage, organic amendments, rotational grazing, soil sampling and 4R Nutrient Stewardship.



Figure 1- Participants at the Nutrient Management Workshop, co-hosted by the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority and the Lambton Cattlemen’s Association, Alvinston ON, January 22, 2020.

Ausable Bayfield Conservation (ABCA) collaborated with Drainage Contractor Wayne Cook, to present at the Ag Erosion Control Structures Renewal Course, as part of the Land Improvement Contractors of Ontario Annual Conference in January 21, 2020. The presentation highlighted the drainage innovations, BMPs and monitoring opportunities at the Huronview Demonstration Farm. Approximately 10 people attended this presentation, at least half of whom were drainage contractors and municipal staff.

The drainage contractors who attended expressed a great deal of interest in the Huronview project and in hearing about the data collected and lessons learned over the next several years. There has also been discussion of moving the renewal course to the Huronview Demonstration Site, so they are able to have an in-field portion of the course.

In February 2020, Saugeen Valley Conservation (SVCA) held two Lake Huron Nearshore Workshops in Kincardine, ON and Southampton, ON, which were also livestreamed and recorded to post on YouTube.

A total of 145 residents attended the workshops, both in-person and online. Topics presented at the meetings included the characteristics and coastal processes along the east shore of Lake Huron, shoreline erosion and adaptation strategies for communities, green infrastructure and ecosystem services, as well as information to help understand the SVCA regulations along the Lake Huron shoreline.

Organizers provided surveys for participants at the two in-person workshops and 62 participants returned them. Two of the questions noted the participants' familiarity with shoreline processes and erosion along the lake both before and after the workshop. Most participants rated their knowledge as average or good before the workshop. However, after the workshop the majority of participants rated their knowledge as very good or excellent. Additionally, most participants noted that they better understood conservation authority permitting process to altering the shoreline after the workshop. The community sees both the need to continue to alter the shoreline to protect residences and the opportunity for letting nature take its course.

The ABCA held two further meetings specific to the Huronview Demonstration Farm. On December 4, 2019, ABCA staff members met with an engineer, drainage contractor, a farmer and county staff to explain the water quality and quantity monitoring initiatives at the Demo Farm. ABCA held a similar meeting on March 6, 2020 with a different audience. The second meeting included the Huron County Soil and Crop Improvement (HSCIA) Board of Directors, an OMAFRA staff member, as well as the President of the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA). Both meetings included a field tour to some of the monitoring sites. These meetings provided an opportunity for representatives of these organizations to learn more about BMPs and water quality monitoring, which they were then able to take back to other members. The OSCIA President referred to the Huronview group as "truth seekers" and was pleased to continue to work together to understand the complexities of these topics.

Additionally, the ABCA worked with the HSCIA to change the format of the Main Bayfield newsletter to suit the community. The HSCIA suggested that the newsletter focus on demonstrations (specifically the Huronview Demonstration Farm) from different agricultural perspectives. This was remarkably consistent with the feedback that we received when we survey the recipients of the Main Bayfield newsletter in the fall of 2019. Now titled "The View," this newsletter focuses on the various BMP demonstrations and features the perspectives of different members of the agricultural community. The View is now posted on the Huronview website (www.huronview.net) and it is hoped that it will reach a wider audience. The paper copy is reaching the same audience, but the ABCA believes that the information will resonate with more members of the agricultural sector.



Figure 2 – an example of The View, a newsletter featuring different agricultural perspectives.

Lessons Learned

From SCRCA’s workshops, we can learn a few broad lessons. It seems there is opportunity for agricultural communities to increase their knowledge about the state of their watersheds. The SVCA workshops would support this finding, in that participants felt their knowledge about coastal processes increased after one meeting. However, it would seem that these groups are interested in learning more about BMPs, soil health and water quality, as they site many different kinds of BMPs as topics of interests for future meetings.

Also of note are the barriers to adopting BMPs in the agricultural community. The cost associated with BMPs is a hindrance to many agricultural producers. Some grants do exist and can provide some financial relief; however, they are not available to every farmer or rural landowner. A financial expert who was interviewed regarding this topic earlier in the year noted that farmers are not always looking

for grants, but rather savings for their farm operations. As such, more we need further cost-benefit analysis of BMPs to address this financial barrier. There is potential to add BMP costs and benefits into the financial benchmarking process, which would help promote these practices.

Other participants cited limited access to information, which is telling, as there have been numerous workshops and events held over the past several years, as noted in the report for Activity 2 (Gutteridge and Veliz, 2019). This would suggest that conservation authorities are reaching only a small percentage of farmers in their watersheds, and need to find ways to broaden the audience. Other barriers such as perceived risks to land use, and “government interference” needs ongoing communication. Some of the experts interviewed earlier in the year noted that they do not “see conservation authorities” on social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter. At the beginning of 2020, the Team was wondering how to use social media as an additional means of outreach.

The Shift to Social Media

Context

In March, the novel corona virus, COVID-19, struck Canada, and much of the country had to isolate to prevent the spread of the virus. During mandatory quarantine, in-person meetings have been suspended. Recognizing that we had a social media gap in our current efforts, the Team decided to “pivot” to reaching out through our social media platforms.

During the month of April, the Team took the opportunity to create a schedule of social media posts related to Lake Huron facts, soil health, water quality, and BMP adoption. The wide variety of topics and media were intended to appeal to traditional audiences (farmers and lakeshore residents), but also the surrounding community that may not be familiar with BMPs, soil health or water quality issues. One of the important lessons learned from reaching out to different agricultural partners is that there are many perspectives related to the adoption of BMPs, soil health and water quality story in Lake Huron. We called this campaign #pieceofthepuzzle.

All Team members contributed posts through major social media sites (Facebook, Twitter). These posts were a mixture of virtual Powerpoint presentations, websites, radio reports, infographics, videos, pictures, and virtual field demonstrations. The Team both created new content and used content from partners that the Team had been reaching out to in 2019 and 2020.

During the first week of May, the Team launched #pieceofthepuzzle with an introductory video and article on the Healthy Lake Huron website. Team members posted on their own social media platforms and other members of the Team, as well as Healthy Lake Huron shared it on their platforms. Some of the hashtags used to connect the posts were #pieceofthepuzzle, #healthylakehuron, and #landtolake. The Team decided that this was also a good way to promote the Healthy Lake Huron Facebook page and drive some traffic to the website. It was also a good connecting platform, as each member of the Team is also part of the Healthy Lake Huron team.

This campaign will continue well into the fall, and all of the material associated with the campaign can be found on the Healthy Lake Huron Facebook and Twitter pages, or by searching any of the hashtags found above.

Self Evaluation

The Team has taken some time to reflect on some of the lessons learned through this process. Many of us subscribe to social media channels, we did not have a lot of experience in trying to reach new audiences with specific materials. As such, we developed three categories for self-reflection and evaluation of this process.

Developing New Skills

Several members of the Team had an opportunity to learn new technologies to help us reach new audiences on social media platforms, specifically on Facebook and Twitter. The Team used Microsoft PowerPoint several times to turn presentations into a video with narration. As we were not able to present information to groups in person, this allowed the dissemination of some of the information virtually. This proved to be a useful way to present complex and specific material to a large audience. Team member will continue to use this technology in the future.

Some social media posts are simple photographs and descriptions or calls to action, some Team members experimented with social media creation tools, such as Canva. These tools provide templates to make infographics that are aesthetically pleasing to viewers and, therefore, more likely to be viewed, liked and shared. The repeated templates and patterns created continuity in the posts. Determining what is most eye-catching to audiences can take time, but the increase in views and interactions with the posts is worth the effort.

Another helpful tool is to create a 360° virtual tour of a demonstration project in lieu of a traditional in-person tour. Team members learned how to take 360° photos with their smartphones, which they arranged into a “tour” with Google Poly. Adding historical photos and points of interest to 360° photos improves the effectiveness of the tour.

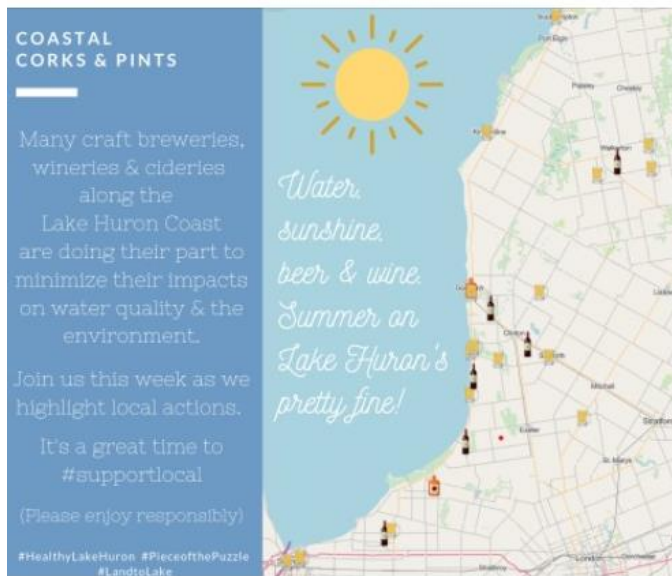
The Team also created videos to share on social media. This was often a time-consuming process, but Team members gained experience on creating and editing videos. These posts had varied success. The Team also tried a live video during Family Fishing week. This video had many views, likes and interactions. With more practice with the Facebook Live application, it is possible to use it to create two-way conversations over social media.

The Team also used several other Facebook features, such as scheduling posts and boosting posts with advertising. The scheduling tool allowed the Team to set up posts at the beginning of the week. Facebook posted the content at the scheduled times throughout the week. This feature takes some time to set up, it does save Team members time during the week. Boosting a post by paying for advertising was also useful. Facebook allows the user to tailor the post to specific audiences or locations, which can increase viewership and post interactions.

Healthy Lake Huron
June 22 · 🌐

This week, we highlight #HealthyLakeHuron Coastal Corks & Pints. Craft breweries, wineries & cideries are another #PieceofthePuzzle when it comes to ensuring healthy water quality in Lake Huron from #LandtoLake.

Many of these coastal businesses are doing their part to minimize their impacts on water quality & the environment. You'll find an interactive map of locations & links to websites for all the coastal breweries, wineries & cideries from Sarnia to Tobermory here: <https://> See More



Healthy Lake Huron
Environmental Conservation Organization

Learn More

6,841 People Reached 352 Engagements

Boost Again

Boosted on June 25 By Jessica Abdulla Completed

People Reached	3.9K	Post Engagements	246
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View Results

Healthy Lake Huron
June 18 · 🌐

Pavement vs Permeable surface?
Shingles (roof) vs Sedum (plant)?
Which will increase water infiltration and prevent urban runoff?
Check out Brockton Community Garden's response to our Water Infiltration Challenge!
Try it yourself: <http://healthylakehuron.ca/post/?ID=529> ... See More



422 People Reached 5 Engagements

Boost Post

1 2 Shares

You Retweeted
SVCA Stewardship
@SVCAstewardship

There are so many great people in our watershed walking the walk and talking the talk of water quality for Lake Huron! Here we will highlight just some of them, starting with @albadonadam - stay tuned for the interview!

#healthylakehuron #pieceofthepuzzle #landtolake



4:32 PM · May 20, 2020 · Twitter Web App

8 Retweets and comments 14 Likes

Figure 3 – Examples of social media posts from the #pieceofthepuzzle campaign. left – Facebook post that reached almost 4000 extra people due to an advertising boost; top right – Facebook video post that was not boosted, but still had good reach; bottom right – Twitter post with multiple retweets and likes.

Time Management Considerations

Engaging audiences through social media and through meetings and workshops take time. To set up a meeting, there is typically some groundwork on booking the venue, speakers, lunch, etc. The amount of time spent on such a venture would also depend on the size of the event. Is it a small 15-person workshop or a demonstration event for 300 people? A small workshop will be much less time consuming to plan than a large event, which may take weeks or months.

Posting to social media is generally quick. However, there is a steep learning curve to some of the technologies and techniques, as well as background research and locating or creating materials that must happen prior to posting. If the post is part of a larger campaign, such as #pieceofthepuzzle, in which there are many topics and multiple posts, this can become a very time consuming venture.

In addition, some of the posts and videos relied on outside sources to provide material (such as video footage). Community members were not always as willing to commit the time to produce video materials as they might have been to speak at event. There are many logistics to consider in conducting interviews for videos, particularly when individuals must stay distant from each other. Additionally, participants are not always willing to keep their material within the agreed upon parameters. These considerations can make it difficult to keep to a specific timeline for the production of materials. In general, the Team felt that a social media campaign of this scale was more time consuming than planning a workshop or meeting.

A Change in Approach to Communication

When the Team typically speaks to audiences about water quality, soil health and best management practices, they have some time to develop and communicate ideas. However, social media posts must be short (less than 280 characters on Twitter), and therefore must be impactful. Therefore, Team members learned to break down complex concepts into something that was appealing to a general audience. Occasionally, when Team members had content-heavy topics they used social media to direct viewers to the Healthy Lake Huron website, where they could expand on the topic. Videos, before and after photos and virtual tours that demonstrate the particular topic tend to gain more views, likes and shares.

Tying the topic to another concept that is important to larger audiences is also a way to engage more of the community. For example, the Team posted about the connection between water recreation, like surfing, and the importance of water quality. One of the topics that received the most likes and shares, and reached the widest audiences were spotlights on local breweries, wineries and cideries that are making conscious choices to use practices that will not impact water quality or the health of the watershed. Social media has allowed the Team an opportunity to make these connections with broader audiences, which is not always possible in an event setting.

Team members already use social media for outreach, this campaign allowed an opportunity to create legacy material for future applications, and to hone our skills in this type of communication. One of the considerations going into this campaign was noticing which social media platform appealed to different audiences. Facebook appears to have a wide reach to community members, businesses, etc. Twitter, by contrast, seems to be the platform most used by the agricultural community, as well as other environmental groups. Engagement with the #pieceofthepuzzle posts would seem to support this observation.

Observations and Conclusions

It is difficult to gain an understanding of the success of a social media campaign. If we examine the total reach of the campaign to date (on Facebook, with analytics), the total reach was over 30 000 views. Compared to a reach of just over 700 post views in the first four months of 2020, this seems to be a significant increase. Additionally, the page likes and follows for the Healthy Lake Huron Facebook page have more than doubled during the past four months. This engagement is encouraging, and may seem

successful, the question remains - did this campaign cause a shift or change in attitudes or behaviours in groups that do not typically promote water quality, soil health and BMPs?

Some of the posts may cause a change in behaviour, which leads to action. For example, the posts about local breweries, etc. that seek to minimize their impact on the environment might cause customers to choose to purchase there instead of other breweries who do not use those good environmental practices. Likewise, it might cause other breweries to take on some of these positive actions to increase local sales if they believe that customers value environmental standards. However, it is very difficult to track these changes with a social media campaign.

From experience, the Team believes that direct peer-to-peer learning opportunities tend to be the most successful mode of encouraging a change in behaviour that produces actions. Individuals may be influenced by those whom they respect and perceive as leaders. First-hand knowledge and experience from influencers will continue to be the optimal way to cause a shift in behaviour.

As a follow up, Team members contacted some of the expert resources interviewed as part of Activity 3 to ask them about the campaign and if the content meets the needs of their clients or group. At this time, our "Expert Resources" would prefer not to review our communications through social media #pieceofthepuzzle posts. This reflection is helpful. We sometimes get busy pushing our information out, that we do not look for opportunities to share content from other sources. Although the information that we are creating may be useful to these other agricultural sectors and groups, and they would reflect on it if it was readily available and seen, but they will not necessarily go searching for it. Thus, it seems that there is opportunity to better promote others when they do share environmental messaging. This supports the necessity of continuing to work with influencers in our communities to reach a broader audience. We likely need to share information from some more influencers with more intention over the next few months.

There are many benefits of posting on social media or directly delivering information that the Team feels would be useful, but we need to find out the needs of the agricultural sector from an environmental perspective, and determine our common goals and outputs. Only when we work together can we begin to reach our mutual desired outcomes with respect to the health of the watershed, and ultimately the health of Lake Huron.