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N.S. among top 5 mercury hot spots

North American study found levels in Keji loons ranged from quite high to astronomically high
By CHRIS LAMBIE Staff Reporter

Nova Scotia is one of five biological mercury hot spots in eastern North America, says a new study. ADVE

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A team of Canadian and U.S. scientists looked at yellow perch and common loons in a 2.4 kilometre area of the province, including much of Kejimikujik National Park. They found 92 loons tested in the park had mercury concentrations above levels of concern, some nearly higher than acceptable standards.

The study was based on samples collected over four years by the Northeastern Ecosystem Co-operative and used 7,300 observations for seven species.

"It's a sad testimony to what our impact can be on Earth," said David Evers, the study's l

SUDOKU

CROSSWORD

The area is sensitive to mercury because it has a lot of wetlands, a low pH due to acid rain of forest. Fog is also now thought to play a factor in how mercury enters the food chain.

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"You have a problem because you have just the right recipe to make the most of that mercury in," Mr. Evers said.

The other four hot spots named in the study, published in this month's issue of the scientific journal BioScience, are in New England and New York.



"In all of these hot spots, fish and loon mercury are somewhere between quite (high) and astronomically high," said Neil Kamman, a Vermont bio-geochemist who participated in the study.

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Coal-fired power plants are the biggest source of mercury contamination, followed by municipal medical waste incineration. The toxic element can travel long distances on air currents and wind up in water bodies.

Mercury builds up in fish and other marine life and can damage the development of young brains.

"The provincial government in Nova Scotia has issued consumption advisories for people eating freshwater fish for the same reason that we're concerned about the loons," said Neil Burgess, biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service.



"If people eat too much fish, they're going to get too much mercury."

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Nova Scotia's mercury comes from local smokestacks and those in the rest of the Maritimes, Mr. Burgess said.

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"At a much larger scale, there's a small contribution from places that are even further aw

"Scientists tell us that mercury can stay in the atmosphere for like a year and travel right globe. So it's possible that a small percentage of what's showing up in Nova Scotia is actu from places like China and India."

Mercury enters the food chain through plankton and eventually winds up in perch, which : loons, Mr. Burgess said.

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The reproductive success of loons in the Kejimkujik park area is very low, he said.

"We see a really tight correlation down there between the mercury levels in the fish and t the reproductive rates of the birds — how many chicks they produce.

"It seems to be that the pairs are less likely to start a nest. If they lay eggs, the eggs are hatch."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

" What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say. "

Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is, however, an odd counterbalance to the problem.

"There's young loons coming in from elsewhere that seem to be filling their place," Mr. Bu

They are probably cueing on the fact that there is food for them in the Keji area, he said.

"There is fish there; the trouble is, they're toxic."

Scientists are now looking at other creatures in and around the park.

"There's a lot of other wildlife species that eat fish and are, presumably, getting fairly high levels," Mr. Burgess said. "So we have concerns as well about things like mink and otter and bald eagles. They all eat fish and they're in kind of the same level of the food chain a

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