

YOUR LAKES, YOUR VIEWS

Muskoka Lakes Activity Survey, 2017 - Summary Report

By ERIN Research in cooperation with Safe Quiet Lakes





***Your Lakes, Your Views - Muskoka Lakes Activity Survey, 2017
Summary Report***

Research conducted in cooperation with Safe Quiet Lakes by
George Spears Ph.D. and Kasia Seydegart MSW
ERIN Research Inc.
www.erinresearch.com

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INTRODUCTION

Enjoyment of lakes and rivers is core to the Canadian experience.

Safe Quiet Lakes is a volunteer community organization that works to ensure that our lakes are as safe and quiet as cottagers and residents wish them to be. As part of its mission **to ensure the sustainable enjoyment of a treasured shared resource**, Safe Quiet Lakes is conducting research in cooperation with more than twenty lake and resident associations to understand the spectrum of views on lake activities.

This 2017 survey, which centers on Muskoka and the surrounding area in the Province of Ontario, is the second survey undertaken by Safe Quiet Lakes. It is one of the largest lake life and boating surveys in North America.

As in 2013, Safe Quiet Lakes commissioned a national research firm, ERIN Research, to design and conduct the study and analyze the data. Results will inform the priorities and plans of Safe Quiet Lakes and its many partners. The full survey report is available on the Safe Quiet Lakes website: www.safequiet.ca.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Respondents are passionate about their activities on the water. The 2017 survey, *Your Lakes, Your Views*, drew an enthusiastic response across the Muskoka region giving a larger, broader and richer base of data to analyze and compare to the 2013 baseline survey. Respondents voiced their viewpoints strongly and clearly, confirming many areas of consensus as well as some significant differences in perspective.

- People in the region love lakes and rivers, boats and boating
- An overwhelming majority of respondents feel that quiet enjoyment of nature is a critical part of their lake experience
- Perceptions of safety and quiet of the lake environment are directly correlated to the enjoyment people experience, a finding that crosses different groups of power and non-power boaters and holds for both larger and smaller lakes
- Change on the lakes is continuing with 50% + finding that there is more boat traffic, more boat noise, and a greater impact of boat wakes than four years ago
- The three most frequently mentioned problems in 2017 are all associated with unsafe and inconsiderate boating:
 - Boat noise, especially from personal watercraft and sound systems
 - Boat wakes
 - Boats operated at high speeds, especially when close to shore

- The commonly proposed solutions to issues have very different levels of support:
 - A strong and growing majority of respondents believe more education is needed
 - A majority of respondents support no-wake zones to protect people and wildlife, stronger enforcement of existing exhaust/muffler regulations and driving under the influence laws, and establishing decibel limits on boat noise
 - Lake users are divided on whether more or different enforcement is needed and whether additional regulations would be beneficial
 - There is very little support for mandatory Personal Flotation Device (PFD) use.
- Where opinions divide, the ends of the spectrum are defined by two groups who often voiced their views passionately: *paddlers* focus on canoeing, kayaking, rowing and related activities and do not value power boat sports, while the smaller group of *towers* focus on wakeboarding, wakesurfing etc. but do not feel paddling activities are important. The majority of respondents engage in both paddling and towing activities, and constitute the middle ground of opinion. The Full Report provides detail on this dynamic.
- Respondents offered a ringing endorsement of the need for boaters, sports enthusiasts, cottagers and residents to share the lakes and rivers respectfully.

METHOD

The survey questions were developed by ERIN Research Inc. in consultation with Safe Quiet Lakes and lake associations. The 2017 survey contained core questions from the 2013 baseline survey as well as new material to further explore topics raised by the 2013 survey and in subsequent stakeholder consultations.

The online survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Email, hard copy and social media invitations were the primary modes of directly engaging respondents.

RESPONSE

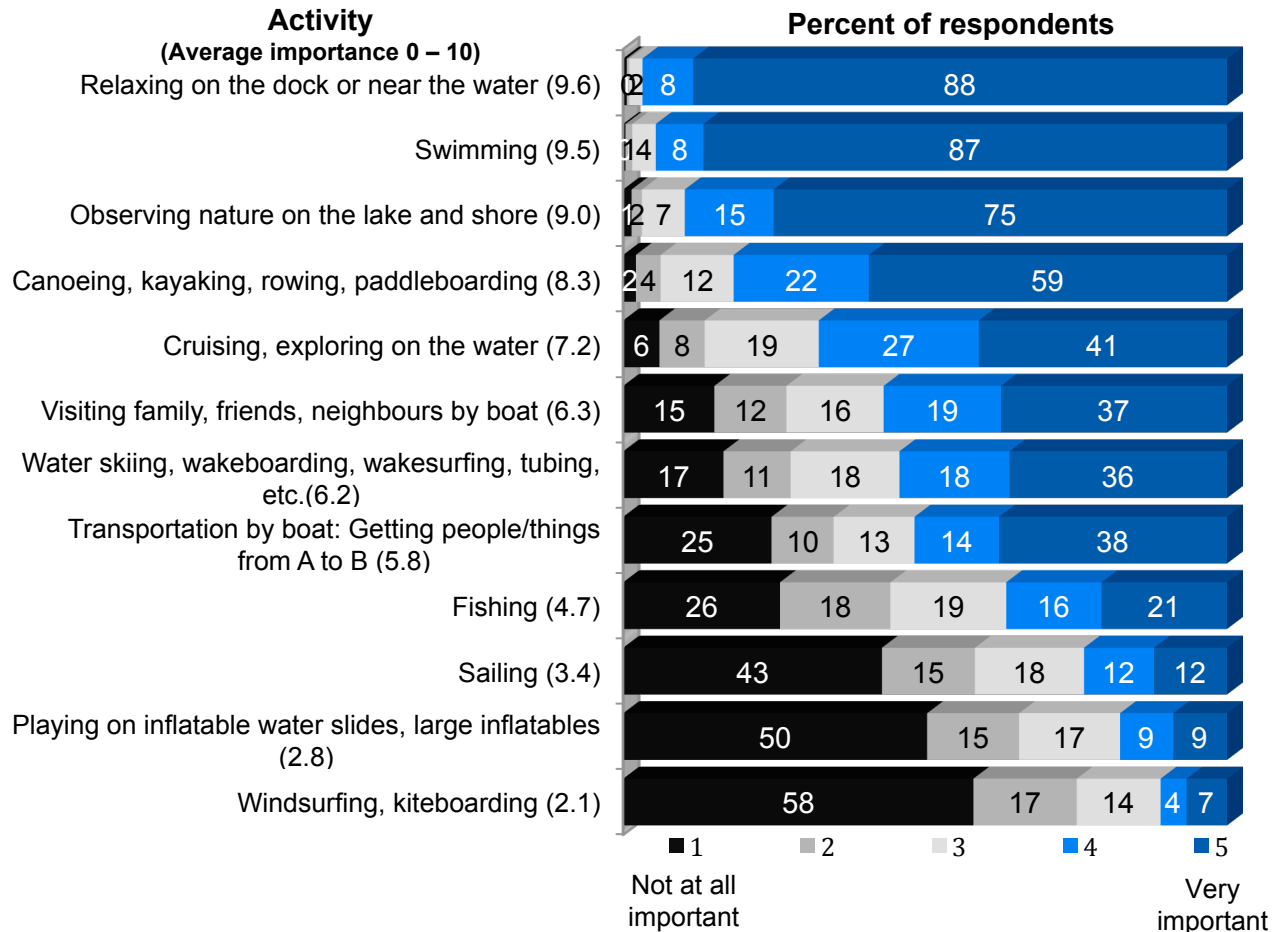
- **3,300** respondents participated in the 2017 survey, a 44% increase (1,000 more respondents) over 2013
- **130 +** lakes and rivers in the Muskoka Region are represented in the results
- **78%** of respondents made written comments, a total of 274 pages; the volume and content of these reveal that people care deeply about the lakes and are passionate in their views

BOAT OWNERSHIP AND USE

- **98%** of respondents have one or more boats of some kind; 87% have one or more power boats and 94% have one or more non-powered craft
- **62%** have between 3 and 7 boats. Overall, there is an average of 2 power boats and 4 non-powered boats per family

LAKE ACTIVITIES

Figure 1. How important are each of these activities to you and your family?



- **93%** hold the view that “we have a responsibility to preserve the natural state of our lakes for future generations”
- **82%** strongly agree or agree with the view that “I like to hear the sounds of nature when I am on the lake”
- **96%** rate relaxing on the dock or near the water as important
- **95%** rate swimming as important
- **35%** rate their experience of the lake as “close to ideal”. Perceptions of safety, noise and boat traffic all contribute to the quality of the lake experience
- **93%** agree with the view that “we have a responsibility to preserve the natural state of our lakes for future generations” and 82% agree with the view that “I like to hear the sounds of nature when I am on the lake.”

“We feel so blessed to be able to experience the amazing landscape of Muskoka!”

“Quiet enjoyment of the waterfront is crucial to our cottage enjoyment.”

“Not having too many rules. Boating and relaxing.”

“Boat rides make everything better.”

“Water Skiing and Wake Surfing, dock parties, fireworks.”

“Peace and quiet. A gentle cruise. Lots of birds and trees. Clean water.”

“I love kayaking and swimming on the lake and just sitting on the deck or dock.”

“A gathering place for the family.”

“The lake is part of my identity.”

SAFETY

- **31%** rate their lake as “Very safe” and rate the overall quality of their lake experience at **8.8 out of 10**. The **2%** who consider their lake “Not at all safe” rate overall quality at just **4.1 out of 10**

Operation of power boats is the greatest safety-on-the-water concern

- **59%** believe that water safety is reduced by operators of power boats who do not follow “the rules of the road”
- **52%** believe that safety is reduced by the operation of boats operated at high speeds
- **49%** believe that large wakes can endanger small craft or swimmers.

Other practices that raise safety concerns

- **32%** are concerned about swimmers going too far from shore without an escort boat
- **32%** are concerned about human powered boats not following “the rules of the road”
- **31%** are concerned about the use of alcohol/drugs by boaters

Finally, only **20%** see a safety risk for people not wearing life jackets or Personal Flotation Devices.

BOAT TRAFFIC

- **5%** consider their area to be “Very quiet” in terms of traffic and rate the **overall quality of their lake experience at 9.2 out of 10**. The 12% who consider their area of the lake to be “Very busy” rate the **overall quality of their experience at 5.2 out of 10**.

NOISE

Top five contributors to unwanted noise

- 46% view personal watercraft as contributing to unwanted noise
- 38% identify sound systems on boats
- 34% identify modern power boats diving by
- 32% identify towing sports such as wakeboarding, water skiing, tubing.
- 30% identify sound systems on docks

Non-boating sources such as fireworks, aircraft and construction, which are outside the mission of Safe Quiet Lakes, are not major concerns to most people, but are significant irritants to some.

BOAT WAKES

A “No Wake Resolution”¹ has been endorsed by 27 Ontario municipalities as of July 2017. The resolution refers to seven types of damage that boat wakes can cause. The survey asked respondents if any of these seven problems occur in their area.

- **53%** of respondents identified one or more of the following boat wake impacts as problematic:
 - 39% experience erosion of shore lines
 - 37% experience damaging of docks and vessels
 - 33% experience swamping of nest of loons and other waterfowl
 - 31% experience upsetting of canoes and small boats
 - 27% experience danger to swimmers
 - 28% experience disruption of wetland habitat
 - 23% experience interference with safe navigation.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

- **50% +** perceive that there is more boat traffic, more boat noise, and a greater impact of boat wakes today compared to five years ago.

¹ The text of the resolution can be found [here](#) (pdf download),

PROBLEM RESOLUTION

45% reported having had a concern about noise or water safety in the previous year that they wished to take forward with others.

- Three quarters of these respondents did nothing, or discussed the issue with family and friends. Of this group, 3% found a resolution and 13% a partial resolution
- One quarter took the issue forward to their lake association, their municipality, or the OPP. Of this group, 5% found a resolution and 29% a partial resolution.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Safe Quiet Lakes held stakeholder workshops in spring 2017 with lake associations, marinas, industry associations, representatives of sporting groups and elected officials. These workshops, complemented by other consultations conducted since 2013, produced a number of proposals that the survey tested.

Education and communications

- **72%** of all respondents support **increased education and communication** about responsible boating. This proposal receives the strongest support of all the proposals included in the survey.
- Support for increased education and communication is significantly greater in 2017 – up 10% from the 62% in favour in 2013.

Regulation and enforcement

- **31%** say there is ***no need for additional laws and regulations*** to protect our enjoyment of the lakes
- **45%** disagree with this statement, suggesting that they support additional laws and regulations
- **30%** say there is ***no need for additional enforcement measures*** to protect our enjoyment of the lakes
- **49%** disagree with this statement, suggesting that they support additional enforcement measures.

This split in respondents' views on regulation and enforcement is strongly reinforced in the comments:

“Education is key, but not the only solution required. Enforcement is important but costly; give more responsibility to citizen groups and more authority to by-law officers.”

“More OPP enforcement is the only way to get the message across. Education just preaches to the converted. For some reason, people feel it is their right to travel at high speeds close to docks. I have little confidence in the future of Muskoka as a quiet safe haven. Going down the tubes rapidly.”

“Safe Quiet Lakes needs to promote education for both sides. Water skiers, wakeboards have just the same rights as the non-water sports people.”

“As much as I would like to preserve the lakes I want to preserve the rights of the responsible and not create rules for the lowest common denominator.”

“Boats are fun and if people enjoy them in the right way there is no need for change. OPP write tickets more than they educate people on boating. It is not about more enforcement it is about the right enforcement.”

“People who are over zealous of adding more restrictions and regulations to our enjoyment of the water scare me.”

There is a growing new group of cottagers (or renters) who did NOT grow up in a cottage environment and who treat cottaging like a trip to Disneyland or a holiday resort. Informing of, and enforcing, the rules that we have already will only go so far. Making our lake inhospitable to new and increasingly powerful craft MIGHT help.

“Government should add a very significant additional pleasure tax on deep V and wakeboard boats over 18 feet in length. These funds could be directed to conservation agencies.”

A majority supports these specific proposals

- **71%** support no wake zones to protect people and wildlife in sensitive areas
- **67%** support frequent and consistent enforcement of laws about illegal above water exhausts
- **62%** support stronger enforcement of boating while under the influence, and support establishing decibel limits on noise made by boats.

Approximately 40% support these specific proposals

- **44%** support adding an on-water competency component to the Pleasure Craft Operators Card
- **44%** support extending the 9-10 km speed limit from the current 30 m. from shore to 60 m.
- **40%** support increasing police patrolling

One fifth supports this specific proposal

- **20%** support requiring everyone to wear Personal Flotation Devices while boating.

FORWARD COURSE

The 2017 *Your Lakes, Your Views* survey, along with the 2013 benchmark study provide data and insights that will enable lake users and policy makers to have more informed discussions about the behaviours, practices and policies that affect the shared use of the water. The survey shows strong support for increased education and communication, and for some enhancements to regulation and enforcement.

The forward course will require close cooperation among lake associations, government jurisdictions, elected representatives, law enforcement, emergency response agencies, boating associations, watersports organizations, marinas, resorts, manufacturers of watercraft, environmental groups and other interested stakeholders.

The strong alternative views expressed in the comments indicate a need for increased dialogue between groups of lake users, some of whom have significantly different visions for the appropriate balance of use.

Almost everyone recognizes the importance of being able to enjoy quiet moments with nature and the importance of preserving the lake environment. And although there are many different viewpoints and ideas, a strong majority of lake users appear to favour solutions based on balanced use of the water and respect for others.

“We would all be better off if we made it a priority to all get along.”

“We must all share the lakes. Quieter boats will help. But the varied uses make coming up with legislation or regulations complex.”

“When everyone is respectful of each other's rights to enjoy the lakes in their own way, without imposing their way or activities on others, or disregarding safety and courtesy. That usually means simply giving each other space. ”

“I am opposed to further government regulation. Those who love cottage life know we are stewards of the lake. There are always a few inconsiderate people but most are very caring.”

“I love the mixed use of my space: I love going for a quiet paddle, sitting on the dock in quiet relaxation, but also love doing donuts on the tube with music coming from the boat. Everything needs to be in balance.”

“It is hard to find the balance between those people who want a fun filled action packed (noisy) day on the lake and those that want peace and quiet. Lakes are for everyone’s enjoyment. Being accepting of both views is important – just difficult to do in practice.”