

# Where have all the fish gone?

By [Janet Trull](#) Haliburton Echo Monday, June 3, 2013 4:35:11 EDT PM

The Stanhope Fire Fighters Hall was packed with more than 100 people on Saturday, May 25 as the Coalition of Haliburton Property Owners Association (CHA) and Haliburton Highlands Stewardship Council (HHSC) brought together some of the top fish experts in Ontario for Where Have All The Fish Gone? Both groups were encouraged by the supportive turnout to hear Dr. John Casselman, adjunct professor at Queen's University and former Senior Scientist Fisheries Research for the MNR. Casselman studied effects of acid precipitation on fish and fisheries in the Highlands at the Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve. This led to the discovery of The Haliburton Gold lake trout. He is widely considered to be one of the top fish experts in the world. His presentation was entitled Haliburton's Lake Trout - from the Past to the Future.

MNR fish biologist David Flowers and Haliburton Forest owner/operator Peter Schleifenbaum, and MNR fish biologists from Peterborough, Minden and Parry Sound also brought their expertise to the presentations and panel discussions, giving the audience a comprehensive overview of local lakes' health.

CHA president Paul MacInnes gave a report on declining oxygen and calcium levels along with increasing lake temperatures, weed growth and algae blooms. Septic systems, particularly those not operating at peak efficiency, and the loss of natural shorelines, contribute to the already too high phosphorus levels in our lakes and the corresponding decline in oxygen. The presentation and panel discussions focused on the importance of the lake trout in determining lake health. This species, found in only 1 per cent of Ontario lakes, is a precious, 10,000-year-old resource that contributes greatly to tourism and the economy. They will not survive in oxygen starved, polluted water. Up to 70 per cent of the trout caught July through September are female lake trout (versus approximately 14 per cent during the rest of the year). Since the average eight-year-old, 2.2 lb. female produces approximately 1,100 eggs, reducing the selective harvesting of mature female fish from mid-summer onward would increase the reproductive capacity of spawning populations. Haliburton Forest changed its lake trout season a few years ago to end July (instead of Sept. 30). This change has resulted in an increase in the Lake Trout population. Fishermen, who were initially upset at the change, now say that it was a great move - the populations have rebounded – best fishing ever. Lake trout spawn in early October and hatch in March. If water levels drop after the spawning, it leaves the spawn without enough cover.

If changes, like this one, are put in place to ensure natural reproduction, our fish populations could be rebuilt in twenty-four years. If not, they will be destroyed.

After a lot of questions and discussion the audience consensus seemed to be clear that our local lakes are facing real and serious threats. There is a heightened awareness about lake health and fish populations. The disappearing lake trout are giving us a dire warning, just as the canary in the coal mine foretold imminent disaster. How can you help? The CHA website ([www.cohpoa.ca](http://www.cohpoa.ca)) offers many suggestions, including a tool kit for lake stewards. Education and action can save your lake.