

Closure of Experimental Lakes Area part of assault on science

Pioneering Canadian contribution to global environmental science could be silenced.

By: [Stephen Bede Scharper](#) Mar 25 2013 THE STAR

At the end of this month, an internationally renowned freshwater research station near Kenora will run out of funds, and may be closed for good. If this happens, a critical, pioneering Canadian contribution to global environmental science will be effectively silenced, and a one-of-a-kind freshwater living lab will be effaced forever from the planet.

This is serious, very serious.

Last May, scientists were told that the federal government intended to stop funding the [Experimental Lakes Area](#) (ELA) research facility, a site encompassing 58 lakes which, for more than 40 years, has provided cutting-edge findings on myriad ecological issues, including phosphate and mercury pollution, acid rain and aquatic effects of climate change. They were also told, according to some sources, not to talk about it with the media or other colleagues.

The government claims the move will save \$2 million annually, and says it is willing to allow another operator to take over. As of now, no alternative agency has come forward to assume operation of the facility.

According to [Cynthia Gilmour, senior scientist with the Smithsonian Institution](#), the ELA is “the only place in the world” where you can do controlled experiments within a lake ecosystem.

Since 2000, Gilmour has been conducting research on the effects of mercury within freshwater systems at the ELA. Named the Metallicus project, this \$10-million (U.S.) research venture, sponsored in part by the U.S. National Science Foundation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has led directly to environmental legislation in the U.S. limiting mercury emissions from power generation plants.

According to EPA sources, such mercury reduction will save not only billions of dollars in health-care costs, especially for those who suffer from respiratory ailments and asthma, but will also save lives.

Not a bad return on a research investment.

This impending ELA collapse comes amid a two-pronged federal government assault on environmental science, with hundreds of government research scientists being reassigned or removed in the past two years, and virtual gag orders preventing media outlets from discussing environmental research with federal scientists.

[Donald Jackson](#), former co-editor of the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences and interim director of the School of the Environment at the University of Toronto, was part of a panel at U of T last fall dealing with the “muzzling” of Canadian scientists, a move that has not escaped the international press or the international scientific community.

Jackson, who noted that the federal government had media “monitors” following Canadian scientists at a recent Montreal polar conference to screen their messages to the media, says that the only other time he has witnessed such control was when a Cuban scientific delegation came to Canada years back, and the translators filtered the conversations, chastising the Cubans when they spoke in English.

As [biologist Norman Yan of York University](#) noted at the panel, according to the [2010 Environmental Performance Index](#) published by Yale University, Canada has slipped about 25

positions in the past five years in terms of its environmental protection and performance and is on track to slip below another 25 to 30 nations in the next five years. Canada is now on the level of Mexico and Brazil in terms of lax eco-protection, and is doing worse than every European nation.

“We’re sinking on the environment,” Yan tersely observed.

To get a sense of how devastating the ELA closure would be to our collective health, imagine your doctor sending you to a lab to get a blood test. You discover that many medical labs are being shut down and lab technicians have been reassigned, fired and barred from discussing the results with you. “Wait a minute,” you say, “that blood test could save my life! It could detect early signs of cancer, warn me of high cholesterol or blood pressure, and let me know if my thyroid is out of whack.”

“Sorry,” your doctor replies, “but these are the new rules.”

Fortunately, many Canadian scientists, refusing to simply swallow the new rules, have mounted a campaign to save the ELA. Their website, saveela.org/ includes petitions, events and other opportunities to help preserve this unique Canadian research site.

The vitality of our waters and our democracy are at stake.

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