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GTA

Conservationists angling for a fight over fishing in High Park

Family Fishing Week allows residents to fish without a licence. Toronto Urban Fishing Ambassadors are hosting the Urban Fishing Festival on Sunday at Grenadier Pond.

By **Ben Spurr** City Hall Bureau
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David Kearney had some special cargo wriggling around in his Jeep last week; about 1,500 worms.

The slimy critters are a key element of an important weekend for Kearney and David Clark, who are directors of the Toronto Urban Fishing Ambassadors (TUFA), a group that promotes recreational fishing in Toronto and the GTA.

The pair were gearing up for Family Fishing Week, an annual event during which the provincial government allows fishing without a licence in order to encourage more Ontarians to take up the pastime. TUFA supplies equipment, instruction, and bait for learn-to-fish events during the week — hence the many worms.

Angling is permitted almost anywhere in Toronto, and Clark says it's great way for city-dwellers to spend time outside and connect with nature. Grenadier Pond in the west end's sprawling High Park, where TUFA is scheduled to host the Urban Fishing Festival on Sunday, is a great spot to land panfish like bluegill, pumpkinseed, and bullhead, as well as larger species like bass, Clark said.

"It is about families engaging in their local parks and watersheds," he says.

But not everyone is hooked on the activity. The High Park Natural Environment Committee (NEC) opposes the fishing festival and is urging the city to put a stop to fishing at Grenadier Pond for good.

The volunteer-run organization has been pushing for a fishing ban at Grenadier for at least a decade, arguing that it harms the sensitive ecosystem of the 160-hectare park, which both the city and province have designated as environmentally significant.

"Conservation at Grenadier Pond is absolutely seriously undermined by fishing," said NEC member Lenka Holubec.

Although Clark says the vast majority of fishers throw back their catches, Holubec says studies show released fish can still die at high rates, and hooking top predators like bass and pike disrupts Grenadier's food chain.

The urban waterway is home to several turtle species, including snapping turtle, midland painted turtle, and Blanding's turtle, and they and other animals can be injured or die if they swallow an angler's hook, Holubec argues. Her group also says lines get caught on branches near the pond and harm birds, while people fishing can trample vegetation that's home to nesting sites.

NEC also complains that although the city has agreed to restrict fishing to the pond's southeast shorelines, many anglers don't stick to the designated area.

Holubec argues that with Toronto and the rest of the world losing natural spaces to climate change, the city needs to get serious about conservation.

"Biodiversity is in serious decline," and environmentally sensitive lands "will succumb to degradation" if they're not protected, she said.

Clark is unmoved by NEC's arguments. He says he's "beyond frustrated and angry" at having to respond to the group's criticism for the past 10 years, and accuses its members of trying to "demonize" a harmless recreational activity.

"There is no issue with fishing in the park," he said, noting that fishing in urban areas is supported by all three levels of government as a way to promote recreation and conservation. It's also backed by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, which has partnered with the province and federal government on a recreational fisheries plan for the GTA.

Clark said he's not certain how many people will show up to the event at Grenadier on Sunday, but he estimates that on an average day dozens of people fish in the park. At those numbers the practice is easily sustainable, he said, especially because most people practice catch-and-release.

While Clark doesn't dispute that animals like birds can occasionally be harmed by lines and hooks, he said a bigger threat are people who feed ducks and geese in High Park, causing them to swarm around anglers looking for food.

But perhaps most importantly, Clark argues people should be allowed to fish at Grenadier because of High Park's 150-year legacy as place for all Torontonians to enjoy.

"There's a lot of people who don't have cottages and are contained in the city and don't get to enjoy a pond to fish in or a park to cycle through," Clark said. Groups like NEC "are trying to make (High Park) a wildlife sanctuary ... which it should not be."

The city shows no signs of considering a fishing ban at Grenadier.

"The City of Toronto supports recreational fishing across the city," it said in a statement. A spokesperson declined to weigh in about the potential threat to wildlife, but said anyone who does fish is advised to cast their line with caution, be mindful of people and pets nearby, and take lines and hooks home for safe disposal.

Local councillor Gord Perks (Ward 4, Parkdale-High Park) wants the city to conduct an in-depth ecological assessment of the park to determine how much, if any, fishing can be permitted without harming the pond. He said the current rules that allow the activity are "not based on sound ecological research."

In the meantime, he said the municipality should do a better job of enforcing existing restrictions on which parts of the pond anglers are allowed.



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