

Watersheds Canada deploys brush bundles on local lakes



By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Watersheds Canada, in association with several local lake associations, deployed brush bundles on several lakes during what they called 'fish week' last week, the first time they did multiple programs all week long, according to Melissa Dakers, habitat and stewardship program manager with Watersheds Canada. Beginning on Sept. 9 on Baptiste Lake they did six lakes in four days (Baptiste Lake, Papineau Lake, Diamond Lake, Lake St. Peter, Kamaniskeg Lake, Wollaston Lake and Paudash Lake), finishing off the week on Sept. 12 on Paudash Lake. Monica Seidel, programming and communications manager with Watersheds Canada, invited Bancroft This Week out to cover the deployment of these brush bundles on Baptiste Lake on Sept. 9. While some lake associations build the brush bundles the day of their deployment, some of them, like the Baptiste Lake Association and the Lake St. Peter Lake Association, built them beforehand so they could be readily deployed the day of. Brush bundles are woody debris structures made of branches tied together with rope and anchored to cement blocks that are deployed in water deeper than 12 feet. They're placed with the concrete blocks so they sink and don't interfere with boat traffic and are strategically placed by Watersheds Canada and the lake associations in accordance with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Underwater woody debris is a healthy component of lake environments providing fish like smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, northern pike, yellow perch and panfish a place to eat, rest, spawn and hide from predators. Following the deployment of these brush bundles on Sept. 9, Watersheds Canada and the Baptiste Lake Association moved to private property to wash and restore an historic walleye spawning bed. Dakers says that woody debris is naturally occurring in lakes but with development, much of this naturally occurring woody debris is removed. 'What we're finding, with all the development, people aren't letting the trees fall into the water anymore. They clean it up. They want to make sure it's not a hazard, it's not covering their swimming areas or whatever. So, we're finding more and more lakes don't have that natural woody debris component that fish habitat needs. So, it's used for rearing of young, places to hide from predators, feeding there. It's just a whole structure where fish can hide and seek shelter,' she says. Deploying these brush bundles are made easier with the assistance of what are called 'Gordi boards', which, according to Dakers, were first created on Farren Lake by a gentleman named Gord. 'He had a little tiny tin boat and wanted to help. And it was just him and his wife so he created this board to put the bundle and blocks on and his wife could stand in the front of the boat and just tip them over and it all fell in. So, it made deployment really fast, easy and safe and we have recreated them for our use,' she says. Dakers says Watersheds Canada started doing the brush bundles' deployment in

2014, and she says that the MNRF used to do it but they no longer had the funding to do it. So, Watersheds Canada took their protocols, mimicked them, and worked with the MNRF in accordance with their fisheries management policies. Sometimes a lake association will contact them, having seen they've done it on another lake, and Dakers says she'll go to the MNRF and talk to them and they'll say yes or no. Watersheds Canada is a federally incorporated non-profit organization and registered Canadian charity that provides programs to communities across the nation that work to engage and help shoreline owners enhance and protect the health of lakes and rivers. For more information, go to www.watersheds.ca. Dakers says they use a variety of wood branches for the brush bundles, with the exception of invasive species of course. It takes two to five minutes to tie one up, and they use wire to attach the brush bundles to concrete blocks so they sink and don't cause a boating hazard. They use a diamond braid anti-rot, anti-UV rope so it last longer and doesn't come apart, potentially lasting for years. And we recently were able to go check on bundles we did in 2015/2016 and they're still holding. So, that's eight or nine years later, she says. Watersheds Canada deployed 20 brush bundles on Baptiste Lake on Sept. 9 and 20 bundles on Lake St. Peter on Sept. 12, although the number may vary according to the lake, according to Dakers. The MNRF has approved another 20 bundles to be deployed next year on Baptiste Lake. So, we'll be coming back next year and doing it again. We'll be focusing on the western portion of the lake this year and on the eastern portion next year. I also GPS all the locations and share that with the MNRF then I'm able to go back next year and look at them to see the successes. Usually within a day, fish are on them, she says. Dakers wanted to thank Bass Pro Shops, Cabellas Outdoor Fund, the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame, Ontario Bass Nation, the OFAH Community Conservation Fund and IA Financial Group for their support. Gary Pirko with the Baptiste Lake Association was really happy with the number of volunteers that came out and said he can't thank Watersheds Canada enough. Melissa [Dakers, habitat and stewardship program manager with Watersheds Canada] and I are the two that kind of put the program together and her enthusiasm is just infectious. The Facebook posting brought four people I didn't even know on the lake so it was fun to meet new people who are really interested in it and get them involved in community things. It went really well from the community side and the placement of the brush piles I can't see how it's going to hurt. We'll really know the effects in the year, he says. Bonny McCleery Scanlan with the LSPPOA told Bancroft This Week that she thought the day went great on Sept. 12 and that Mother Nature even provided them with a perfect day to be on the water. We seemed to have just the right number of volunteers that everyone had a hand in the deployment. Even on the day of building the bundles the volunteers gathered the brush and built the bundles with enthusiasm. A few rain sprinkles that day but nothing to hold us up! The Watersheds team were amazing and as you know had a very busy and demanding 'fish week'! Over all very pleased with this phase of the project! It was also nice to get a couple of new volunteers that stepped up to help with this new project too. On to planning the next stage for 2025! she says. Dakers told Bancroft This Week that she thought all the fish projects went extremely well because of all the dedicated volunteers. Each lake spent so much time helping to organize the event and for that I am truly thankful, she says. I love how our projects bring the community together and make our projects so successful.