

T wo Neighbours with a Shared Problem

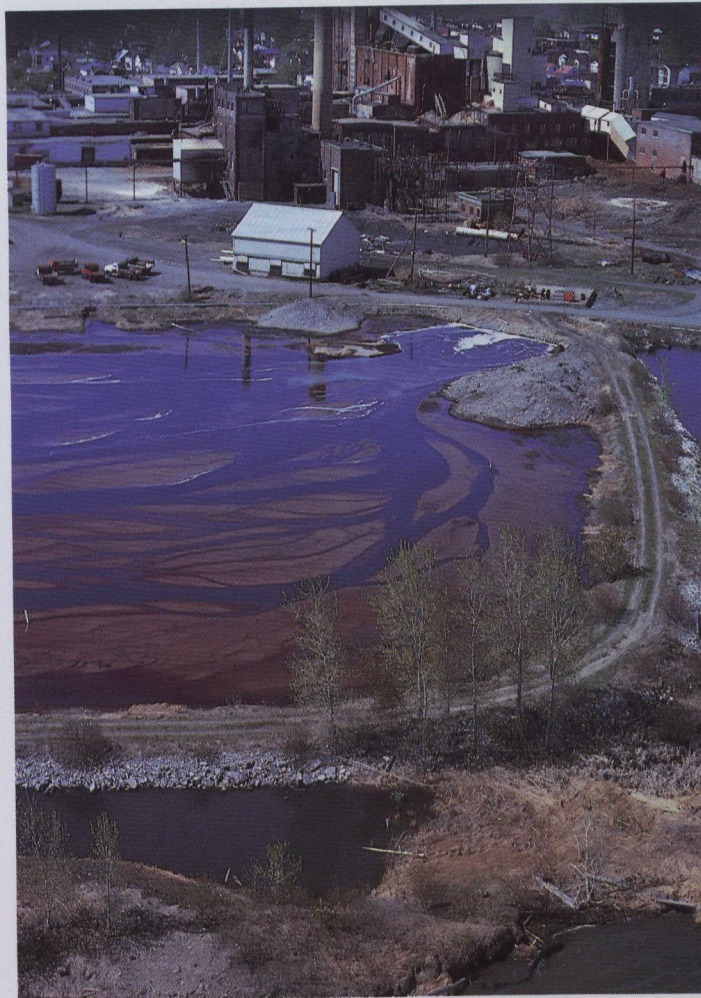
Canada and the United States have long boasted of sharing the world's longest undefended border, but this does not mean there are no disputed issues.

And some of the most contentious issues in the past century have been environmental and resource disagreements. A century ago, the two countries almost came to blows over rights to water for irrigation from one western river that flowed across the border.

After incidents like that, the two nations started to draw up agreements over the sharing of boundary waters and they wrote in promises to avoid fouling each other's environment. This created one of the oldest anti-pollution treaties around: The Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

The treaty's main job was to sort out the joint uses of shared waters for domestic and sanitary uses, navigation, and power production. But it also contained a potent clause about environmental protection: "Boundary waters and water flowing across the boundary shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or property on the other side."

That treaty also created the International Joint Commission, the world's first permanent body to mediate and advise two sovereign governments on shared water management and environmental problems. Half the commission's six members are appointed by the Prime Minister of Canada and half by the President of the United States.



Alain Cornu, Publiphoto

The quality of drinking water is a looming environmental issue.

For decades this body has advised the governments, held public hearings, issued reports on the state of boundary waters, mediated in disagreements and helped to monitor boundary-water agreements.

Cleaning the Lakes and Rivers

Two of the most important pacts are the 1972 and 1978 Great Lakes Water Quality Agreements. They are major

attempts to preserve the world's greatest international freshwater reservoir in a region that is home to about 37 million people and is an industrial heartland.

Over the years, development around the lakes led to their degradation. A couple of decades ago, Lake Erie was so polluted by phosphorus from sewage, soaps and fertilizers that it was turning into a green, soupy mess. In time, oxygen-starved zones, where no fish could survive, formed on the bottom of the lake and it was commonly said that Erie was dying.

Under the water-quality agreements, Canada and the United States have spent an estimated \$15 billion controlling sewage from towns and cities and, yes, Lake Erie is much cleaner now than it used to be. Green slime no longer coats its beaches, its waters no longer taste foul, and the fishing is improving.

The 1972 cleanup was aimed mainly at phosphorus, which was "over-fertilizing" the lakes. The 1978 agreement tried to tackle the much more difficult problem of toxic chemicals at a time when scientists were having a hard time even measuring all the chemicals in the water.

This 1978 agreement contained two historic clauses.

The first called for the elimination of all discharges of persistent toxic substances into the lakes.

The second said that protection of the lakes should be based on an ecosystem approach, which means that the effects of humans on all parts of the lakes' environment should be studied and controlled. It was written into the pact at a time when many people were reluctant to consider environmental linkages. Some still did not realize that toxic chemicals being found in the fish, birds, water and mud bottoms of the lakes were signals of a toxic chemical hazard that also threatened humans.