



As with many other natural resources, Canada is well supplied with water, possessing nearly 9 per cent of the planet's fresh water. Rivers and lakes cover almost 8 per cent of the land area, and wetlands (ground inundated or saturated with water such as ponds, marshes, swamps and bogs) take up another 14 per cent. Canada's coastline, the longest in the world, extends over 244 000 km, while its ocean fishing areas cover around 4.7 million km<sup>2</sup>. But here, as elsewhere, figures must be put in perspective. The population is concentrated in southern Canada, and there has been a staggering increase in demand for water over the years. These factors, when added to pollution and other encroachments, are evidence that this seemingly vast resource is in danger. The west of Canada is already suffering water shortages; in the east, water quality is a grave concern.

## Fresh water

Freshwater reserves are under attack from all sides. Acidification, agricultural and industrial pollution, dumping of waste water and draining of wetlands are some of the dangers to the quality of Canada's fresh water. Industry discharges at least 30 000 chemicals into the Great Lakes basin; around 800 of these are considered toxic, and many of them remain in the environment.

The evolution of bird and fish populations is evidence of the harmful effects of this contamination. The St. Lawrence River beluga whale, for example, is particularly affected. Tests have revealed the presence of 24 possibly toxic contaminants in this mammal, as well as a high incidence of lesions. This has led to a decrease in fertility and a long-term decline in the beluga population. Scientists believe pollutants are endangering the very survival of belugas.

The federal and Quebec governments have agreed to implement a plan to clean up the St. Lawrence. Quebec has also reached an agreement with major polluters, who have agreed to reduce the volume of toxic wastes they discharge into the river. Governments and industry foresee allocating over five billion dollars between now and the year 2000 to clean up the St. Lawrence.

The Great Lakes form part of the Canada-U.S. border. Canada and the United States are party to the 1972 Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (modified in 1978), which provides for cleaning up and protecting the largest freshwater reservoir in the world. Although much remains to be done, efforts made over the past few years have allowed a number of fish species to gain a new lease on life, to the point that fishing some species is again possible.