

YOUR LAKES, YOUR VIEWS

Muskoka and Georgian Bay Regions Lake Activity Survey 2021

Summary Report



Safe Quiet Lakes

Research commissioned by Safe Quiet Lakes

Conducted by ERIN Research Inc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The third “Your Lakes, Your Views” survey is among the largest of its kind in North America – nearly 6,000 respondents participated. The results of this rigorous research, conducted in the summer of 2021, provide broad and credible trend data for the Muskoka and Georgian Bay lake community as well as for government and private sector stakeholders.

Respondents shared their passion for Ontario’s lakes and rivers and reported a powerful connection to nature and boating.

“The natural beauty and the respect our area has for the environment. It is an oasis in a turbulent world!”

“We like the range of activities that multiple generations enjoy. Canoes in the early morning, waterskiing before lunch, paddle boarding in the afternoon, swimming all day.”

“I love everything about being at the cottage, early mornings, sunrises, full moons, chipmunks, herons, kingfishers, friendly, helpful neighbours. Family and friends visiting.”

“We love all of the activities, but try to minimize our impact on others at all times. The lake is why we are here. We must protect it and all that lives in, on and near it.”

2. RESPONSE

Responses to the 2021 survey, *Your Lakes, Your Views* came mainly from the Muskoka and Georgian Bay regions and also drew from Haliburton, Eastern Ontario and beyond. The survey includes:

5,951 respondents, an 81% increase over 2017

1,100 from the Georgian Bay region, which participated for the first time

130 plus lakes and rivers

50 plus cottage and resident associations

6,000 plus written comments.



3. TOP PLEASURES

People love the lakes and their time on and near them. They talk about fun, family and friends, recreation, nature, time away from the city, freedom, and community.

In 2021 we hear the same passion and connection to the lakes as we heard in the 2013 and 2017 surveys.

"I love our little lake and community. Sitting on the dock in the peace of the morning and sunset. To swim and paddle board, with a daily water ski. Watching people having a blast doing water sports of their choice while being surrounded by the beauties of nature."

"Boating: Wakeboarding, slalom skiing, wake surfing, wake skating, tubing... it's an amazing healthy sport on the water. It increases athleticism and joy for everyone involved."

"The beautiful forest and nature around us in the Muskoka region. The peace and the quiet that it can provide. And most importantly the wildlife that we get to see."

"Peaceful coexistence with nature and a safe place for the family to relax."

"Being able to share waterskiing with close friends while also being able to get up early to go for a morning paddle."

"First and foremost nature, then sunrise, sunsets, shared time together with family members & friends, canoeing, kayaking, paddle board, swimming, fishing, bonfires with singalongs, gardening."

"The simple fact of the lake being there. We spend as much time as possible on our dock just enjoying the lake."

Three activities hold almost universal appeal. Interestingly, none of these activities involves a boat. Participants rated the following activities at 4 or 5 out of 5:

95% rated relaxing on the dock or near the water as a top pleasure.

96% rated swimming as a top pleasure.

92% rated enjoying nature on the lake or by the shore as a top pleasure.

All other major lake activities are based around a boat of some kind:

86% rated paddling, canoeing, kayaking, rowing and paddleboarding as a top pleasure, making this the most popular group of boating activities.

68% rated cruising as a core pleasure.

57% rated visiting friends and neighbours by boat as important.

54% rated transportation/getting things from A to B as important.

Substantial minorities are also attracted to fishing, towing sports such as wakeboarding and tubing, and the wind-based sports such as sailing and windsurfing.

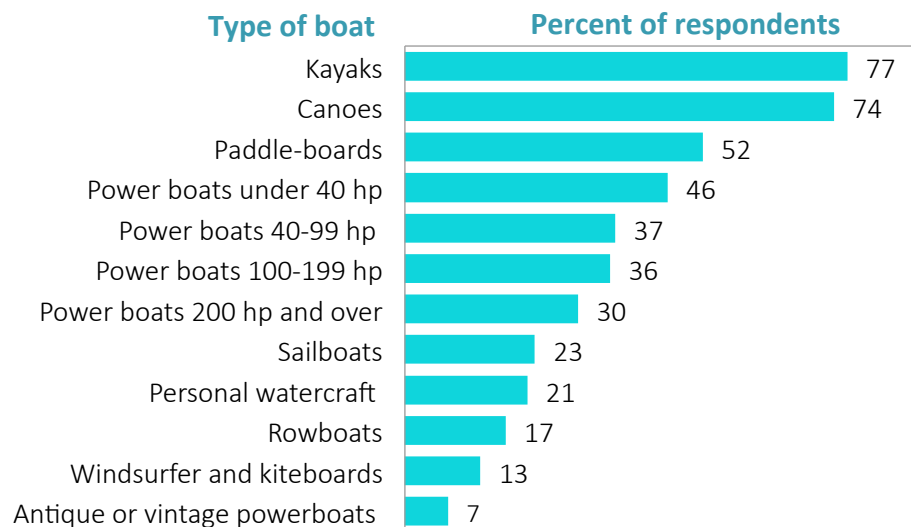


4. BOATING USE AND BEHAVIOUR

99% of respondents have one or more boats of some kind: 91% have one or more power boats and 95% have one or more non-powered craft.

70% have between 3 and 8 boats. Overall, there is an average of 2.3 power boats and 4.2 non-powered boats per family.

Figure 1. What boats will your family use this year?



An important change in boating equipment and activities is strongly correlated with evolving views on enforcement, regulation, and education.

There are significantly more kayaks and paddleboards today (up 16% and 33% respectively over 8 years), and more people who rate paddling as “Very Important” (up 18%). The proportion of people who use power boats has not changed materially, remaining at more than 90%, so the new paddling enthusiasts are mainly people who also have power boats and enjoy the activities that they offer.

But paddling brings a unique appreciation of risk and vulnerability on the water, and the fact that paddlers are an increasing majority of boaters may contribute to other trends that are apparent in 2021, including a slightly decreased sense of safety on the larger lakes and a greater openness to regulation and enforcement measures that were less supported in the past.

“Peace and quiet enjoyment of nature without being endangered in a canoe by a power boat or its wake.”

“The serenity of wind, water and natural sounds. Paddling around our island, close to shore without fear of motorboat traffic.”



5. QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

A large majority, 77%, rate their experience by the water as “Close to ideal” or nearly so (either 4 or 5 out of 5). Only 2% rate their lake experience as “Far from ideal.”

While many participants commented on the privilege of enjoying the lakes, it is important to understand what underlies this spectrum of ratings.

The 2021 results again indicate that safety, quiet, and a low volume of boat traffic are the critical factors that contribute to an ideal lake experience.

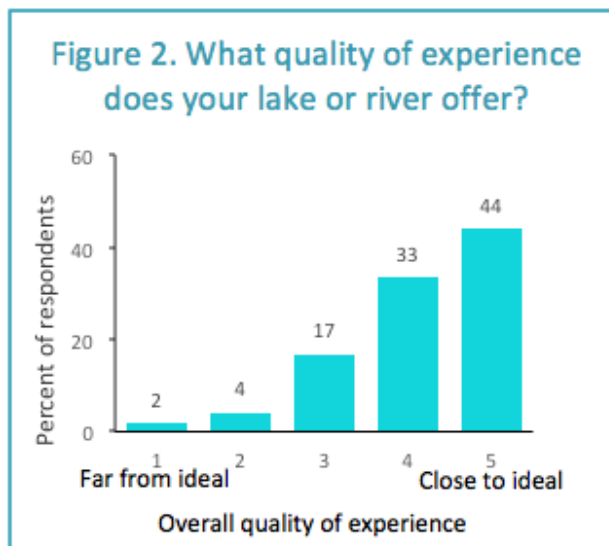
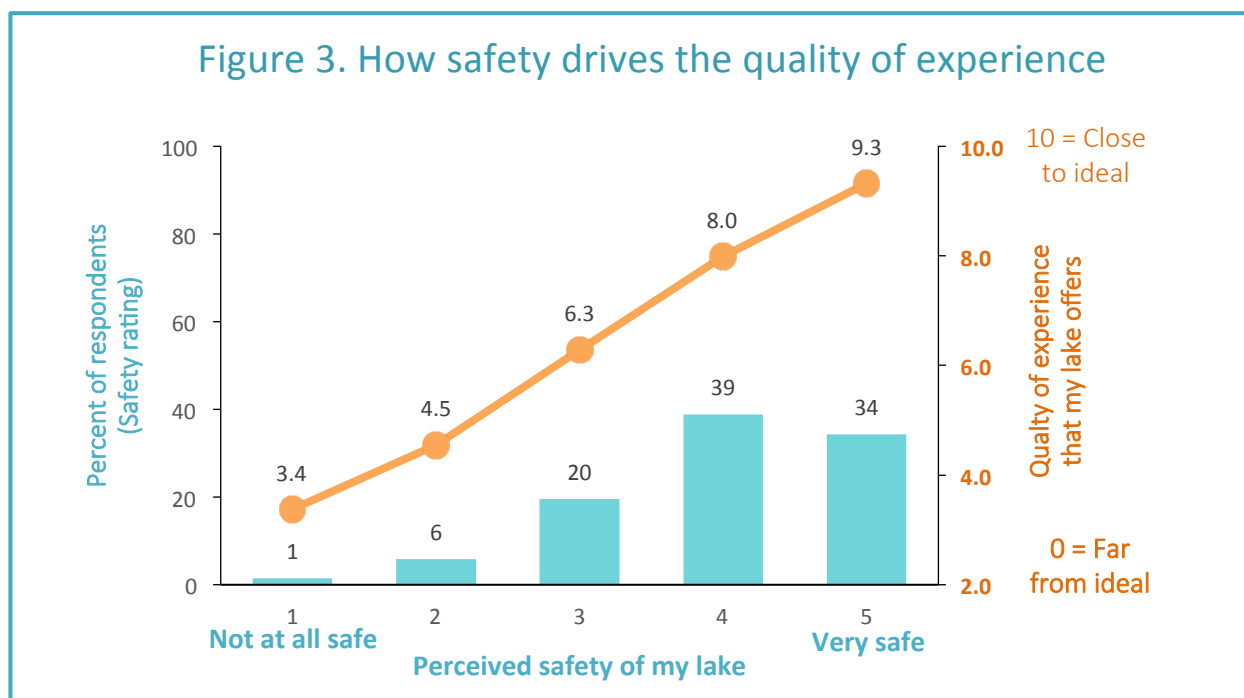


Figure 3 shows that those who see their lake as “Very safe” rate the overall quality of their lake experience at 9.3 out of 10.

On the other hand, those who consider their lake “Not at all safe” rate their quality of experience at just 3.4 out of 10.

Boat traffic and boat noise have similar impacts on quality of experience.

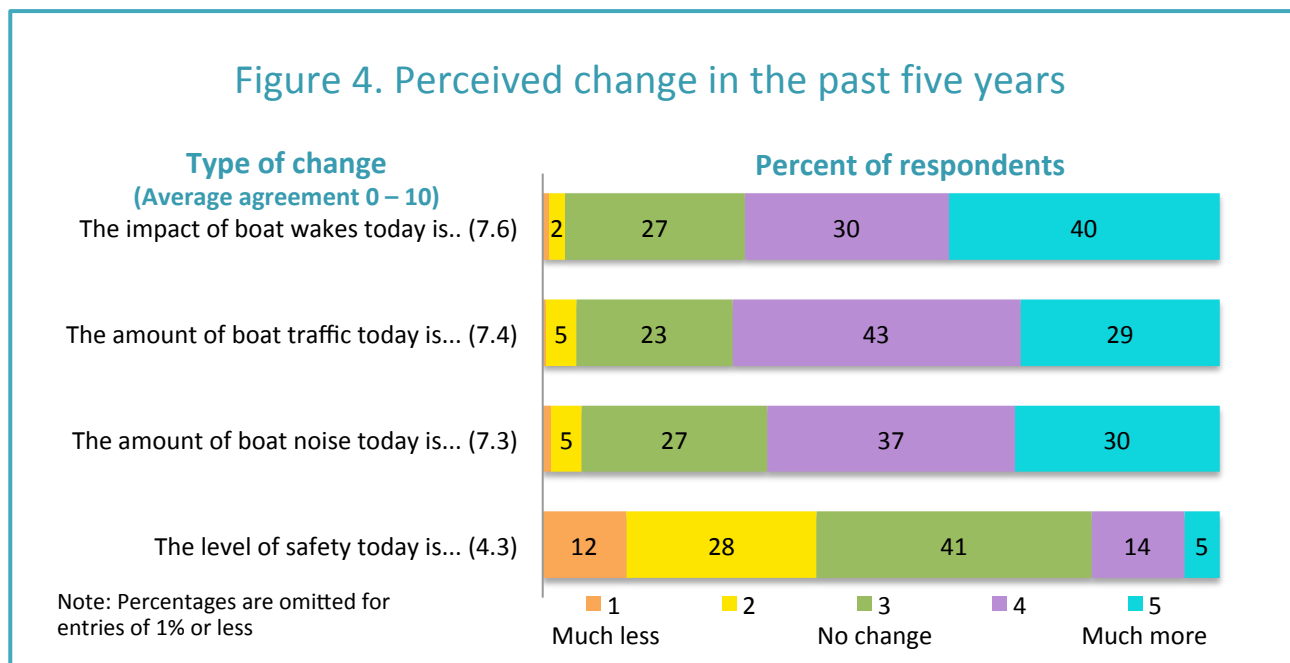




6. THE CHANGING LAKE EXPERIENCE

Two-thirds or more perceive that there is more boat traffic, more boat noise, and a greater impact of boat wakes today than five years ago.

As a result of the increases in boat traffic, noise and wakes, there is a small but statistically significant decline in the overall quality of experience rating for the three larger Muskoka lakes (Joseph, Rosseau and Muskoka). This trend could not be accurately assessed in the area beyond the three larger lakes, because the geographic reach of the survey has expanded each year. Still, the trend seen in the larger Muskoka lakes will be of concern to everyone in the survey area.



“Over the years the boat traffic and noise has increased significantly with a significant number of boats going too fast and coming too close to the dock. This causes safety concerns.”

“Lack of consideration for human powered craft and swimmers has become a major safety problem.”

“The lake is busier and the wildlife has dwindled since we arrived in 1972. Less respect for other cottagers and wildlife. More rentals so people are there for a short time, very noisy, irresponsible in boats often, not respecting cottages or wildlife.”

“In recent years, there’s a ridiculous volume of music coming from some boats and noise from above water exhaust.”



7. TOP CONCERNS

For many boaters, raising adrenalin levels is a vital part of recreation. It's a matter of speed, testing your skill against changing conditions on the water and perhaps a hint of danger. Sailing, wakesurfing, paddleboarding, waterskiing, kayaking and jumping waves in a PWC all test a person's limits and provide individual enjoyment as well. The great divide for the survey participants is between activities that require engines and those that do not. The former can have an immediate impact for a kilometre or more around while the latter, in most cases, affect only the person in the boat. Power boating activities also have a delayed effect on people in non-powered boats.

The kayaker and the wake surfer have different minute-by-minute experiences on the water. Power boaters and towing sports participants are fully in control of their situation, and paddlers are at the mercy of larger, faster boats that change the boating environment. A calm moment can be transformed in an instant by a tow boat, or a PWC doing figure eights, or indeed by any large boat whose wake bounces off the rocky shore creating chop that requires focussed attention to stay upright. Over time, thousands of separate experiences combine to create a sense of vulnerability that is familiar to paddlers, but perhaps not to those who exclusively enjoy power boats.

PWC's are identified as the single greatest source of concerns about noise and boating behaviour. Survey respondents listed the boats that they would use this summer, and PWCs represent just 5% of all boats on the water – 14% of all power boats. Respondents say that their disproportionately irritating impact stems partly from the apparently erratic manner in which they are sometimes driven – stopping, starting and changing speed. Based on participant comments, groups of PWCs operating in this manner can give the impression that their drivers may not be paying full attention to their surroundings and those that they are sharing the lake with.

Top impacts on safety

- **60%** Power boats and PWCs that do not follow “the rules of the road”
- **59%** Power boats and PWCs travelling at high speed
- **49%** Large wakes that endanger small craft or swimmers

Top contributors to unwanted noise

- **57%** Personal watercraft
- **42%** Power boats driving by
- **42%** Sound systems on boats

Top impacts of boat wakes

- **46%** Erosion of shorelines
- **46%** Damage to docks and moored vessels
- **44%** Danger to people canoes, kayaks, small boats



8. CONSENSUS

Three activities hold almost universal appeal – relaxing by the water, swimming, and enjoying nature by the shore. Interestingly, none of these activities involves a boat.

Nearly all members of the lake community, from paddlers to wake surfers to those who do little boating at all, find that safety, along with minimal noise and traffic create the ideal lake experience.

90% of participants say we have a responsibility to preserve the natural state of our lakes for future generations.

90% agree with the statement that motorboat operators have more responsibility to ensure the safe coexistence of activities on the lakes.

9. SOLUTIONS

There are a host of reasons to appreciate life by the water, and just one element – unsafe and inconsiderate boating behaviour – that is widely seen as a threat to enjoyment of the shared environment. Increasing numbers of people and boats and a significant change in the mix of activities on the lakes heighten this tension.

The change in mix is driven by more kayaks and paddleboards in use (up 16% and 33% respectively over 8 years), and more people who rate paddling as “Very Important” (up 18%). The proportion of people who use power boats hasn’t really changed so that means the new paddlers also enjoy power boats. There are also significantly fewer people who say that towing sports are central to them and paddling is not – now just 7% of the sample (versus 50% who say that paddling is central and towing is not).

1. Increased education and communications

78% of all respondents support increased education and communication about responsible boating. This proposal receives the strongest support of all the proposed actions included in the survey. Support is up by more than 15 percentage points from 2013.

"We have a "good thing" at our cottage and on our lake, however with the pandemic AND with new cottage owners on the lake, we are seeing a need for some basic awareness and education about the topics and issues raised in this survey. Some of the most common courtesies and respectful practices AND safety protocols are obviously not known or followed by many."



2. A majority supports these specific actions

71% support no wake zones to protect people and wildlife in sensitive areas.

67% support frequent and consistent enforcement of laws about above-water exhausts.

70% support stronger enforcement of boating while under the influence

67% support establishing decibel limits on noise made by boats.

3. Greater support for regulation and enforcement

The 2021 data indicate a markedly greater acceptance of solutions that involve regulation and enforcement. The greater acceptance seems to have evolved in these ways:

- Increased boat traffic leads to a greater perceived need for authorities to monitor it.
- Increased paddling activity leads to more people feeling vulnerable on the water, and so a greater need for clearer rules and the presence of authorities.
- Bigger and faster boats in a limited space create more problems with wakes and congestion and so create a demand for regulation and enforcement
- Media attention to high-profile and other tragic accidents puts a spotlight on risk, regulation and enforcement.

The regulation and enforcement issue was addressed using positive statements (e.g., “Increase patrolling of the lakes...”, and negative statements, e.g., “There is no need for additional enforcement”). In both instances the trend from 2013 to the present favours greater enforcement:

57% support increased patrolling of the lakes today, up from 41% in 2013.

18% say there is no need for additional enforcement measures today, down from 31% in 2013.

(Note: These two points apply to the three larger Muskoka lakes, where accurate trend data are available.)

“I have not put emphasis on new laws, but feel we have very little enforcement of existing laws. The alcohol consumption we see on boats is frightening.”

“Our only concern is the lack of visible police enforcement on our lake. We very rarely see an OPP boat on our lake. How much trouble could it be for the local OPP detachment to drop a boat into our lake periodically to demonstrate that enforcement of the Small Vessels Regulations of the Canada Shipping Act is being enforced.”

“Mandate that all boat renters have completed and obtained a pleasure craft operator license in addition to on-water proficiency and safety courses.”

“Establish decibel limits. Set minimum shore clearance. “Cigar boats and/or “poker runs” are a menace to the enjoyment of the lake. Laws must be implemented and enforced. Their noise levels suggest they have absolutely no regard for anyone else on the lake, whatsoever.”

“In the last few years, the increase in traffic and PWCs and speeding, large wakes, too close to shores has somewhat diminished my enjoyment of the lake.”



10. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey team put forward eight broad recommendations that are in keeping with the emerging consensus seen in the survey data and participant's comments.

For the lake community to develop strategies to address these complex issues, the report recommends that stakeholders engage in summit meetings to address concerns before they worsen.

The forward course will require close cooperation among lake associations, elected representatives in all jurisdictions, law enforcement agencies, emergency response organizations, boating associations, watersports organizations, marinas, resorts, manufacturers of watercraft, environmental groups, trade associations, and others.

Survey participants have high expectations of the positive role that all stakeholders can play in this process.

2021 *Your Lakes Your Views* research recommendations:

- 1. Provide more education about responsible and respectful boating**
- 2. Ensure greater protection of shorelines and people from wakes**
- 3. Develop limits on noise levels on the lakes**
- 4. Enforce existing laws/regulations and increase OPP visibility**
- 5. Enhance laws/regulations especially re boat wakes, speed and noise**
- 6. Celebrate and build on the approaches of successful lakes, bays and rivers that share the space respectfully**
- 7. Continue to conduct comprehensive surveys of lake activity**
- 8. Monitor emerging issues and ideas raised in participant comments**
including float planes, convoys and other groups of boats, use of PFDs, accidents, renters, day visitors and their boat use, the need for a PCOC practical on-the-water test, possible activity zoning options and alternative on-the-water patrolling. These matters should be monitored and explored in greater depth by multi-stakeholder groups in future years.

- The challenge is big, but the treasure of the lakes is worth every effort -