



**Healthy
Lake Huron**

Clean Water, Clean Beaches

HEALTHY LAKE HURON

HEALTHY LAKE HURON INITIATIVE AND
CANADIAN AGRICULTURAL PARTNERSHIP FOR
STEWARDSHIP CLUSTERS — MARCH 1, 2021





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2018, the Healthy Lake Huron team has used ‘stewardship clusters’ to engage agricultural industry and rural communities in conservation practices. The idea of a stewardship cluster is that people may adopt practices to improve water quality and soil health if they get support from peers and multiple trusted sources. The project has improved communication, marketing and raised interest in best management practices. For example, The Healthy Lake Huron (HLH) partners created new videos, articles, and social media posts in 2020. The outreach included information tailored to farmers and other specific audiences. The project also increased the capacity for local experts, such as Certified Crop Advisors, Municipal Drainage Superintendents, and agricultural organizations to advise landowners and incorporate a broader suite of best management practices. One example was to simplify how to find information about various grants to local crop advisors.

THE PROJECT

Healthy Lake Huron – Clean Water, Clean Beaches is a collaboration of government, local conservation agencies, agricultural producers and other rural landowners, and community groups on projects to protect Lake Huron. This group has already supported many positive actions for Lake Huron’s southeast shore over the past decade. They range from soil health and cover crop initiatives (things that were not being discussed 10 years ago) to water quality monitoring and reduction of water quality impacts from multiple sources. Since 2018, the Healthy Lake Huron (HLH) team has researched how to better reach ‘stewardship clusters’ in the broader agricultural industry and rural communities. The idea of a stewardship cluster is that people may adopt practices to improve water quality and soil health if they get support from peers and multiple trusted sources. The project involved professionals from Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority (SVCA), Maitland Valley Conservation Authority (MVCA), Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA), St. Clair Region Conservation Authority (SCRCA) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA).

The project consisted of several distinct but overlapping activities, including:

- Catalogue people, organizations and watershed events that promote soil health, water quality best management practices (BMPs) in the Lake Huron Watershed
- Interview expert resources
- Attend events hosted by the agricultural industry
- Catalogue environmental recognition programs in Ontario and recommend a Lake Huron recognition program
- Provide presentations in each watershed and co-host one or more field-based events with local experts
- Learn about and use social norming to inform marketing efforts, and explore the use of innovative media
- Promote the use of existing digital tools developed by OMAFRA

Detailed reports on each of the activities can be found [here](#).





THE VALUE OF PARTNERING

Ongoing relationships with Certified Crop Advisors (CCAs), Drainage Superintendents, community environmental groups, and others working on the landscape are essential. Collaboration on common goals was found to be very important. Many of these individuals are trusted advisors to their clients, so partnering with them can help us build our networks and expand our audience. In turn, we can offer them valuable weather data and specialized knowledge in areas such as funding opportunities and technical services related to hydrology and geographic information services. Said one participant: *“You can learn a lot by having an open conversation with an expert such as a Drainage Super. The number of future project ideas that came up during one lunch meeting could keep me busy for the rest of my career!”* Another noted: *“The value of this project was in pushing us out of our watershed sandbox, to see what others are doing, and how we can work together, find common ground and advocate for one another.”*

We also saw real value in attending meetings organized by agricultural groups, such as the Dairy Farmers AGM. These experiences help us to understand that they may be grappling with the same issues, but from a different perspective. As one participant said, *“If we only come at issues from our own conservation perspective, we won’t be able to move the needle.”*

LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMED BY SOCIAL NORMING

The COVID-19 pandemic struck during the project. As a result, several in-person activities had to be rearranged. Project participants pivoted to a social media campaign, #pieceofthepuzzle, to share information, ideas, and inspiration with key audiences.

The campaign educated audiences that community and individual actions work, and that everyone has a part to play in water quality and ecosystem health. Messaging was organized under six broad categories: soil, water, food, nature, beach, and community. Audiences were reminded that each of their 'puzzle pieces' fit into the complex process of achieving a healthy Lake Huron. The project partners created and shared more than 100 different social media products, distributed via Twitter, Facebook, an electronic newsletter, and the platforms of partner organizations

A literature review of social norming principles informed this campaign, making it as effective as possible. Said one participant, *"The learnings from our social norming research are universal and should have wider impact than just marketing communications. They are also good food for thought for any and all programming at our organizations."*

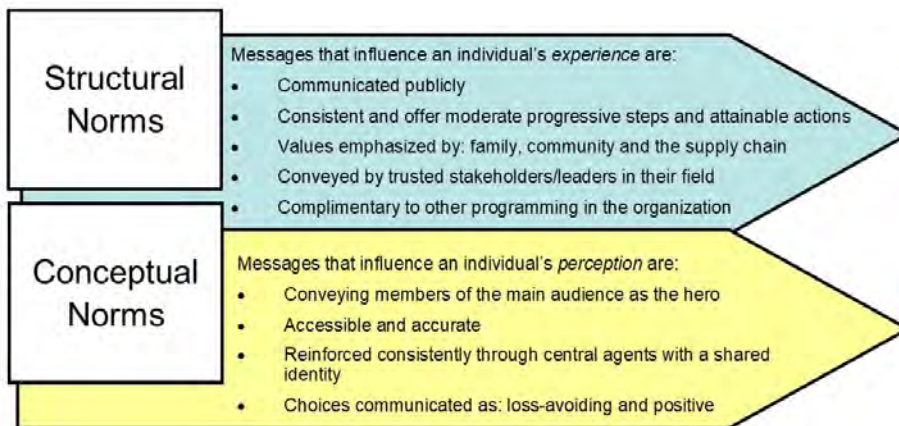
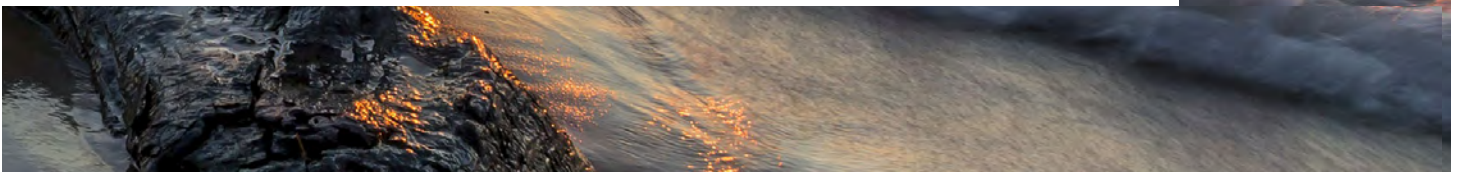
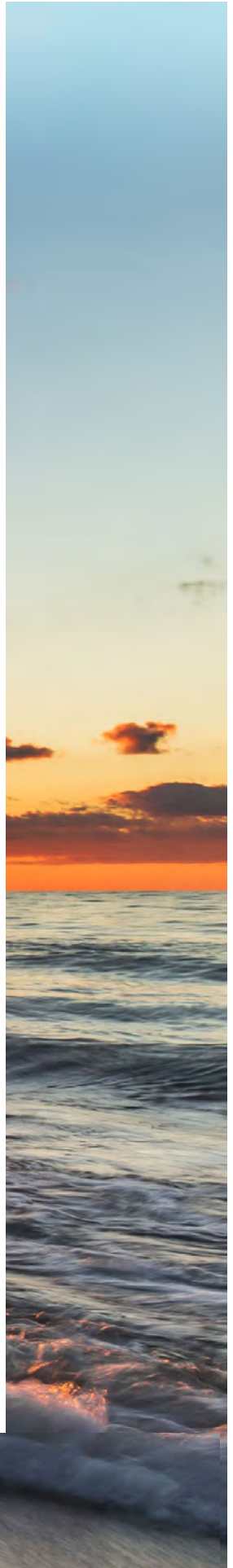


Figure 1. Social Norming, whereby best practices are a way of doing business





Among the principles learned and adopted:

- Use injunctive (perceptions about how people *should* behave) and descriptive (perceptions about how people are behaving) social norms to “prime” the audience
- Avoid negative framing (i.e., showing what not to do)
- Use consistent messaging across all platforms and programs
- Put stakeholders at the centre of all communication—see the story from their perspective, make them the “heroes”
- Let people with experiences in common with the audience deliver key messages
- Take advantage of anchoring (a bias that relies on the first piece of information received when making decisions) in fostering behavior change
- Use existing hashtags that are familiar with key audiences e.g., #ontAg

Participants used several different social media channels and experimented with new digital tools, such as video and Powerpoint-to-video. Said one participant: *“The biggest hurdle is the fear, pushing yourself to do it, but once you do, it’s not so bad!”*

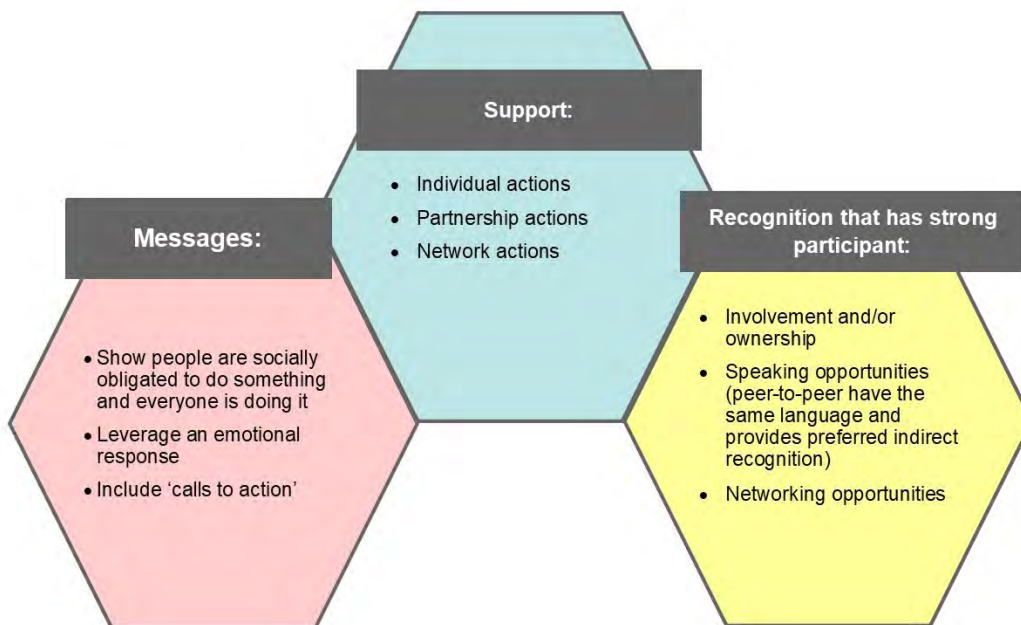
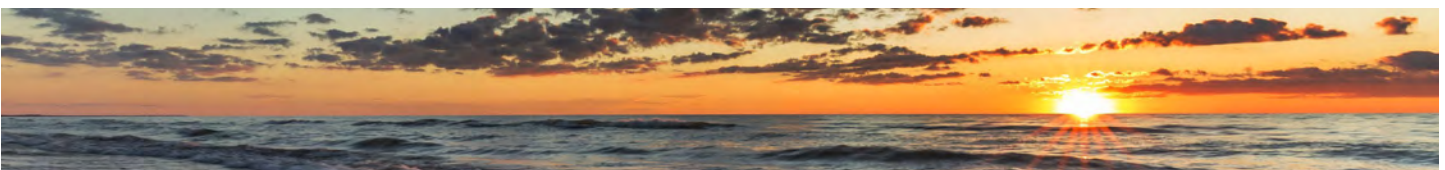


Figure 2. Successful Programs, whereby best practices are promoted

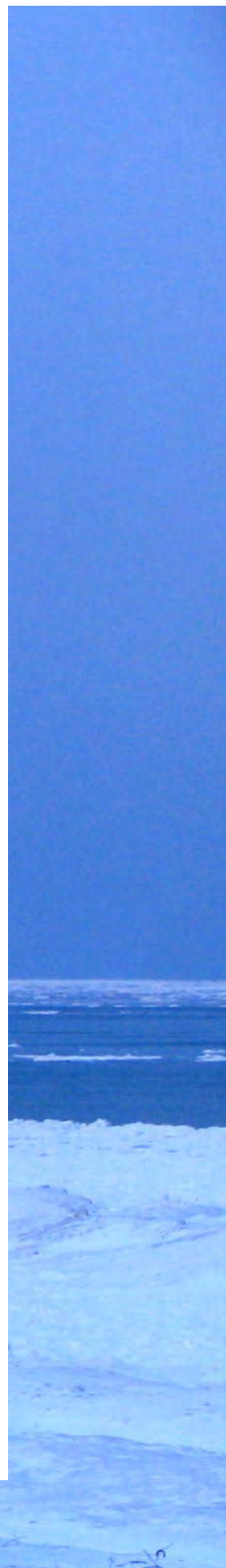


There is good evidence that this campaign was effective:

- The Healthy Lake Huron website, supported by #pieceofthepuzzle, had nearly 6000 unique page views between April and December 2020, an increase of 35% from the previous year.
- There were more than 600 FB likes and 400 shares in the same time period.
- Videos were viewed more than 1,700 times on the Healthy Lake Huron and ABCA websites.

We learned the importance of tracking engagement in social media posts, to deepen our understanding of which posts get the most traction. For example, a simple photo of a beloved tree generated lots of lively discussion, whereas more complex scientific posts saw less engagement.

Likewise linking pizza to water quality helped to bridge the important gap between food, land and water. In developing the #pieceofthepuzzle pizza interview infographic and video, we treated water as a part of the supply chain to find a unique lens for describing the community effort involved in protecting water quality. When we consider water as a component of economic sectors;; we were invited to look at the ice cream factories, water bottling plants, pizza restaurants, breweries, surf shops that make up our communities. This lens brought us full circle to interview and gain an appreciation for not only the ways that water contributes to the different sectors but also the individuals and communities those sectors serve.



EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL MEDIA OUTREACH



A lone elm on Highway 4 saved during road repairs connects people to the landscape.

Twitter, 18 June 2020



Surfing in Lake Huron is a #pieceofthepuzzle.

Twitter, 22 July 2020



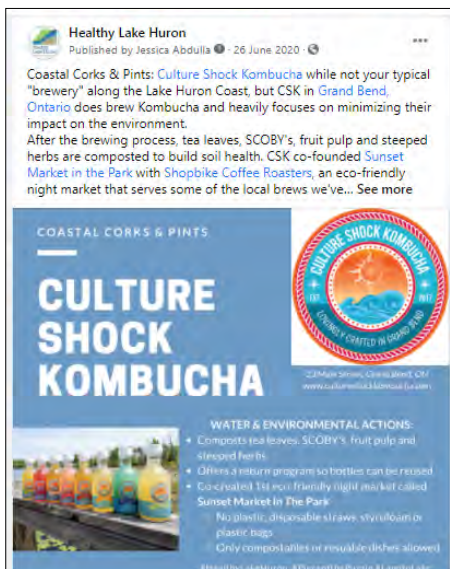
Beer and Cows. Connections between breweries and beef farmers. Part of the Coast Corks & Pints series.

Twitter, 27 June 2020



Connecting your favourite snack with water quality.

Twitter, 9 February 2021



Culture Shock Kombucha . Composting and Soil Health. Part of the Coastal Corks & Pints series.

Twitter, 26 June 2020



Integrated Pest Management at Twin Pines Orchards and Cider House. Part of the Coastal Corks & Pints series.

Twitter, 28 June 2020



WHAT DIDN'T WORK

Given that the project was an experiment in new ways of communicating, some ideas didn't work as well as others.

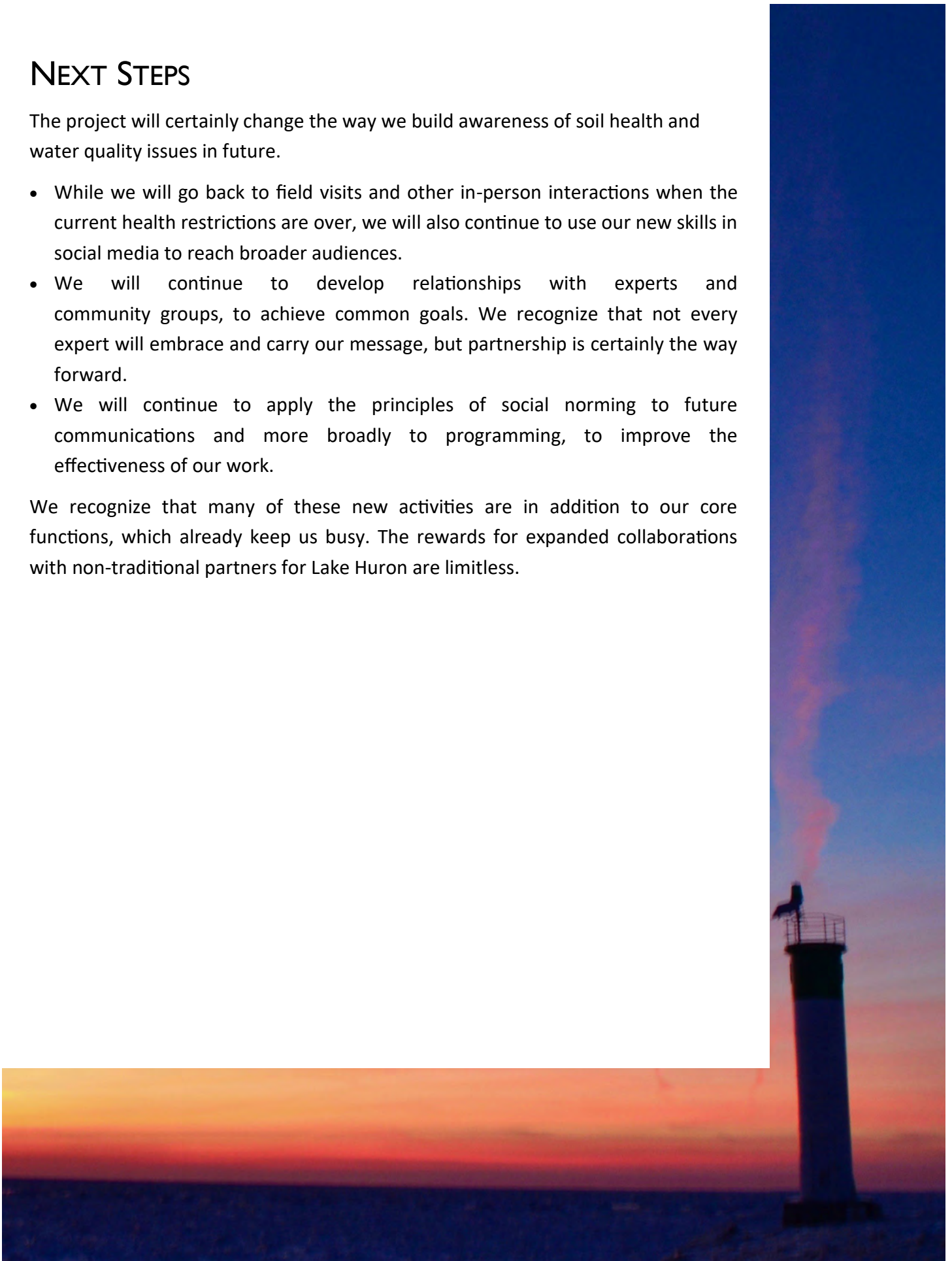
- Encouraging farms to use digital tools developed by OMAFRA proved difficult. Simple print communication pieces to promote the digital tools were welcomed by CCAs. Also a benefit: conservation authority staff are now familiar with the tools and will use them to give better advice (to farmers).
- The expert meetings involved structured interviews with set questions. Several participants felt that a more informal, organic process of relationship building would be more effective.
- It was difficult to take the new relationships with the experts to watershed walks during 2020.
- Although we assume that our audience wants CA staff to provide the science behind recommendations, we learned that they often only want to hear confirmation of what they already believe and do. Scientific information must be presented with simplicity and clarity and may not always be the most effective way to engage with our audience.
- While it's easy to find common ground with CCAs and drainage superintendents, it's harder to do so with other stakeholders, such as financial advisors.
- The social norming material, while useful, is complex: a quick checklist is provided.

NEXT STEPS

The project will certainly change the way we build awareness of soil health and water quality issues in future.

- While we will go back to field visits and other in-person interactions when the current health restrictions are over, we will also continue to use our new skills in social media to reach broader audiences.
- We will continue to develop relationships with experts and community groups, to achieve common goals. We recognize that not every expert will embrace and carry our message, but partnership is certainly the way forward.
- We will continue to apply the principles of social norming to future communications and more broadly to programming, to improve the effectiveness of our work.

We recognize that many of these new activities are in addition to our core functions, which already keep us busy. The rewards for expanded collaborations with non-traditional partners for Lake Huron are limitless.

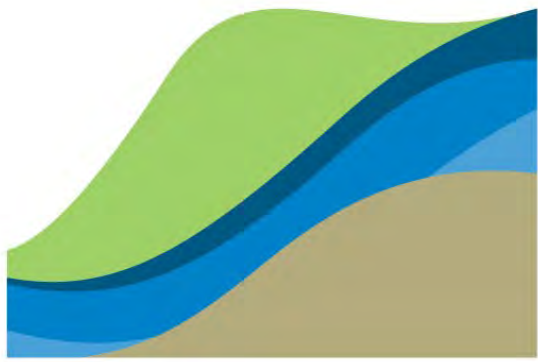




SUMMARY

The Stewardship Clusters Project has helped to build better relations with more people in the agricultural industry and producers. Some new contacts include some who may not have attended past stewardship events. The project has helped us to understand factors that influence actions and decisions at the farm operation. We now have a better understanding of who can influence decisions and what messages can best reach the people who can take positive action on their farm operations. More people in the agriculture sector and agri-business are now engaged in best management practices and we have started to build a network of peers and experts and influencers who can improve a watershed stewardship approach to the benefit of the lake and the people who rely upon the lake.





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