

VITAL SIGNS

Abundance of water a mirage

This is the second in a series digging deeper into the Central Okanagan Foundation's Vital Signs report. This week: Environment

Special to The Daily Courier

The average Canadian uses 329 litres a day of water — whether it's showering, flushing toilets or doing laundry.

But in the Okanagan, we use more than twice that amount. For a family of four, that's 81,000 litres of water a month, or enough to fill an average backyard swimming pool.

Yet, the Okanagan has the lowest per person water availability in Canada.

In the Central Okanagan's Vital Signs report card, issued by Central Okanagan Foundation earlier this month, our community gave itself a grade of "B -" in the environment category.

Vital Signs is a program supported by Community Foundations of Canada. Twenty-two communities produced reports as part of a regular checkup to measure the quality of life, identify trends, and share opportunities for action.

The Central Okanagan report features 11 issue areas and a variety of statistics, both positive and negative.

The perception the Okanagan is blessed with an abundance of fresh water has led many to think that we have an endless supply and we don't have to worry about conserving, says Corinne Jackson, communications and research co-ordinator with the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OKBW). With population growth and climate change, changes in behaviour are a must.

"Our research has found that in the Okanagan basin, outdoor irrigation accounts for almost 25 per cent of our water use. That means that almost a quarter of all the water we use is going towards greening our lawns," she explains.

"And the only reason we have green lawns is because of how much water we use. It's not natural to the area. The only desert in all of Canada is in our watershed."

About 18 months ago, the OKWB launched Okanagan WaterWise, an education and public outreach program to increase awareness about water issues in the Okanagan and to bring residents of the Okanagan Valley together with the understanding that our water source is connected — we all share the same resource.

Jackson says public education is key to changing behaviours.

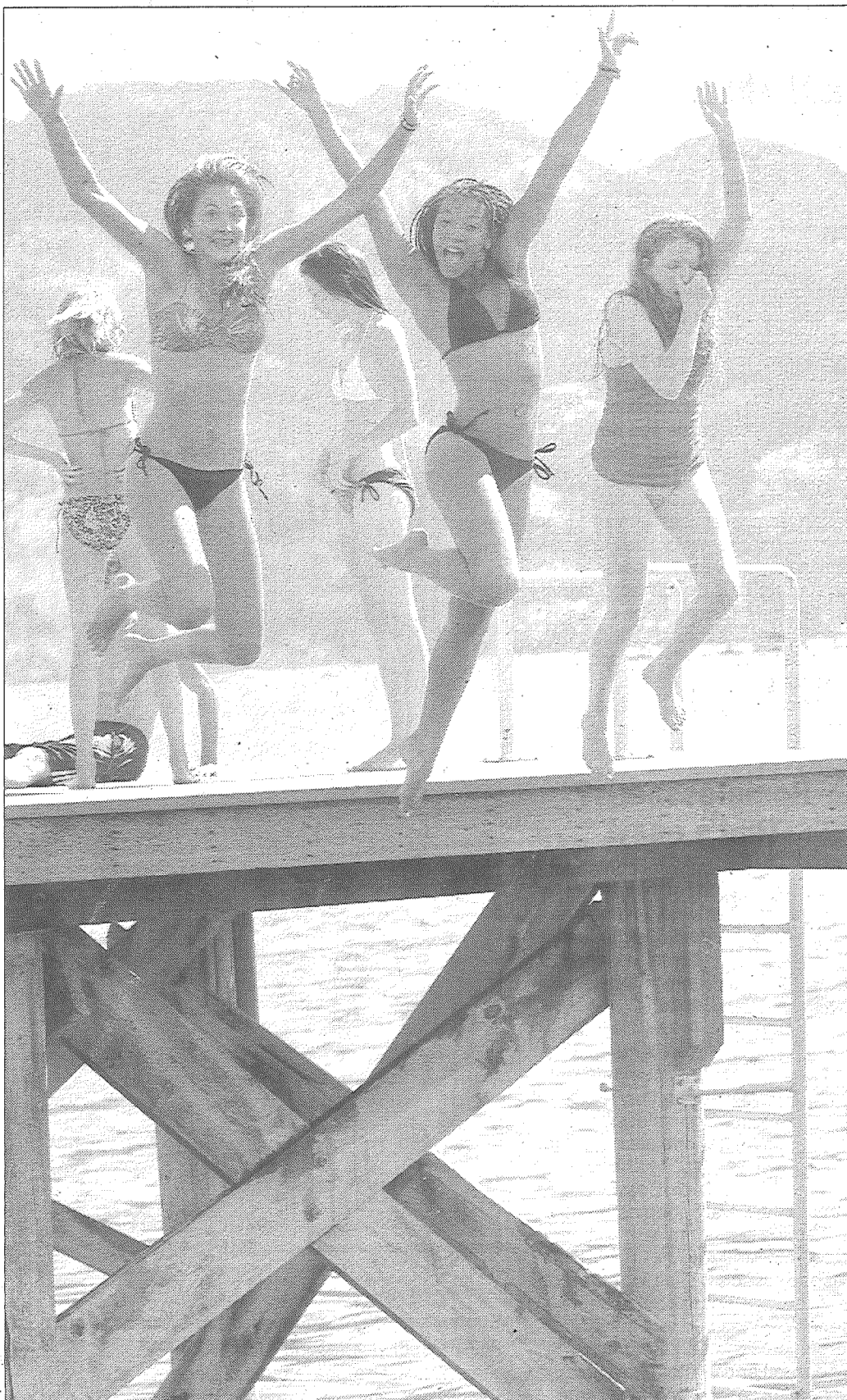
"We recognize that people love their green lawns. So can we look at making our lawns smaller, using drought-tolerant turf or native species which require less water or even xeriscaping, which is low-maintenance and uses far less water," she says.

According to the Vital Signs report, community members expressed the importance of conserving our water as well as improving curbside recycling and implementing curbside compost pickup.

Peter Rotheisler, with the Regional District of Central Okanagan's waste reduction office, says public education and outreach has gone a long way to bringing the issue of recycling to the forefront with Okanagan residents.

As well, a number of special events are held throughout the year to encourage residents to recycle or reuse materials, such as the trunk sale and composter sale.

Rotheisler says the residential recycling program has been operating since July 2000 and each year the program has seen higher



Daily Courier file photo

Being surrounded by fresh water has dulled Okanagan residents to the need for conservation.

volumes of materials collected.

In early 2007, the number of plastics accepted by the residential recycling program increased and residents overwhelmingly supported this expansion.

In 2011, 50 per cent of all curbside waste (including recycling and yard waste) collected in the Central Okanagan was diverted from the landfill. However, the most recent survey done by the Regional District of Central Okanagan found 37 per cent of the residential garbage currently sent to the landfill is recyclable — that means more than one-third of what you're putting in your garbage can be recycled.

"There is still work to do, we recognize that. But behaviour change doesn't come quickly," he adds.

So what's next? The waste reduction office recently initiated a study looking at how Okanagan residents manage kitchen waste, including fruits and vegetables, table scraps,

meat, fish, poultry, bones, dairy products, fat, bread, rice, pasta, coffee grounds, filters, tea bags, eggshells, etc. Rotheisler says other municipalities, including Vancouver, have started pilot programs to deal with kitchen waste and, depending on the results of the study, it's something that could be considered in two to three years.

"The Central Okanagan Foundation gives out grants to selected registered charities twice a year. To find out more about applying for a grant in the area of the environment, check out the grants area of our website."

The Central Okanagan Foundation provides funding for many registered charities that are crucial to the health and wellbeing of our community.

To find out more about applying for a grant, contact Cheryl Miller, grants manager with the foundation, at cheryl@centralokanaganfoundation.org