

## ‘The worst I’ve seen it’: Flooding forces city to shut down popular Toronto Islands

The popular tourist destination and home to hundreds of residents is a soggy mess where carp are spawning on flooded roadways and public attractions are shuttered



Workers stack sand bags along the Toronto Islands which are threatened by rising water levels

The Toronto Islands, a popular tourist destination and home to hundreds of city residents, are a soggy mess where carp are spawning on flooded roadways, public attractions are shuttered and large areas are under water. Rising water levels in Lake Ontario, brought on in part by heavy rains in recent weeks, have led the city to close the islands to the general public and cancel permits for scheduled events until June 30. More than half the buildings on the Toronto Islands — which sit a short ferry ride from the city’s downtown core — are threatened by water levels that are expected to keep rising for several weeks even if there’s no more rain. Yet island residents — who dub themselves islanders — appear zen about it all, even those whose businesses face plummeting revenues.



**Peter Freeman, part owner of the Island Cafe, said he’s just hoping to survive the flood, and will be open for business this weekend despite the entire patio being underwater. “Our dance floor has actually floated upward,” Freeman said, noting he’s had to lay off some staff. “We’re hoping the stage will not float away. I think it’s going to be OK.” Freeman, like many others who live on the island, has marvelled at the effect the rising water has had. “Every day you walk the dog is a different experience cause the landscape is completely different,” he said. “There are carp swimming around all over the island and all the wildlife is much more ... revitalized.” A peacock from the Far Away Farm on the island has flown the coop and is in front of Freeman’s house, he said, more than three kilometres from its home. “It’s bizarre, the whole thing. Just a surreal situation.”**



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**Susan Roy, who has lived in the community for decades, echoed Freeman’s attitude. “We’re islanders and we’re pretty resilient,” she said. “It is incredible to see nature taking back the island. You know, the island comes from nature and now it’s like it’s going back to nature.” Roy, who is chair of a Toronto Island community group, noted that most**

homes haven't been heavily damaged but a lot of uncertainty remains over when full access to the islands will resume. "We're not sure when the island will be open to the public again, so that's hard to take," she said. "But all things considered, it could be much worse."



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But Ralph McQuinn, who runs Toronto Harbour Water Taxi, is less optimistic, noting that his business is already suffering. "I'm gonna take a big hit — I already have," said Quinn, who just bought two new boats for his operation. "If I would have known I wouldn't have bought those boats. But how would I have known?"



Thousands of sandbags have been set up along the shoreline of the islands and industrial pumps are currently removing 500,000 litres of water per hour from the communities. Claire Bohdan, an arborist who was watching several carp spawn on a flooded roadway, said she's been helping fill sandbags and checking on the health of island trees. "A big willow tree went

down the other day,” she said. “There’s so much water that the ground becomes too soft to support these big trees, so some of them are just popping out and coming down.”



Officials have said parts of the islands could remain closed through to August. The public school on the island was closed earlier this week, with students relocated to a school on the mainland for the rest of the term.

The city has said 261 buildings, or about 52 per cent of the structures on the islands, are at risk of damage from flooding. “We can’t have people even where it appears to be dry walking around because there are buildings that are at risk,” Toronto Mayor John Tory said after touring parts of the islands on Friday morning.



**Coun. Pam McConnell, who also visited the islands, said several beaches are underwater and will likely be damaged permanently, maybe destroyed. The popular Centreville Amusement Park is also underwater, she said. Some weddings booked at island venues for the coming weeks have been cancelled, she said.**

**“This is, I think, the worst I’ve seen it,” she said. “Life has been disrupted dramatically, but we’ll survive.”**

**Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press**