

## FISH HABITAT: A Good Lake is Hard to Find

by Lee Kernan, DNR Fish Management

A destructive summer thunderstorm swept through the area last year, and early next morning you could hear the roar of chain saws all over the neighborhood as people cleaned up their yards. It was amazing to see the progress.

By late afternoon, huge piles of brush lined the streets and even the shredded green leaves were raked up. The town was almost back to normal. Such pride in homes and property is great to see, but the same principles of neatness don't apply so well where fish and wildlife live. Let's take a closer look at an ideal shoreline as far as fish are concerned.

### A Sublime Scene

Picture a wilderness lake in your mind and what do you see? Numerous logs lie along the shore with their craggy limbs all green and mossy. Huge cedar trees lean way out over the water, defying gravity and casting a shadow on the water. Along the shore grows a bed of bulrush, their pencil-sized stems marching right up the shore. Lily pads sprawl across the water nearby, and under the surface lie unseen beds of aquatic vegetation, their bright green swirls hiding the soft mucky bottom.

The whole scene fairly radiates with fish – a large northern pike lives under the log near the cedar. A school of perch dart under

the lily pads. Farther up near the bank, about 500 newly hatched crappies, about one-inch long, live in less than three inches of water among the bulrush. A pack of six-inch largemouth bass lurks nearby waiting for one of the nearly transparent fingerlings to venture out beyond the cover of the bulrush.

All these places where fish live are called habitat. The logs, the shady spot under the cedar, the bulrush and the underwater weeds, and

a thousand other places in the lake provide food and hiding spots for two dozen different species of fish, several species of frogs and numerous kinds of aquatic insects.

Now let's take a look at many of our lakes here in Wisconsin. All the logs have been pulled out long ago because they might damage a propeller on an outboard motor. The leaning cedars are gone and replaced with docks jutting out like spikes

into the water. The aquatic vegetation has been pulled out and the mucky bottom covered with sand to make a beach. Very little of anything can live on or in sand. The bulrush is gone and a concrete wall extends two feet out into the lake. No crappies live here because they can't hide from the bass. But the bass are gone, too.

### A Call to the Wild

The lakeshore looks nice and neat, just like our pretty Wisconsin towns and cities. But nature has suffered fiercely. Many of these lakes have a seriously degraded habitat, effectively destroying fish during the first few weeks of life. Just as city wildlife needs a refuge or park to hide in, many of our lakes could use some "wild shoreline" where limbs and logs lie in the water, where mucky bottoms grow dragonfly nymphs and where calm, shallow water only inches deep warms quickly in the sunshine, providing a safe sanctuary for all kinds of fragile creatures.

That is what fish managers mean by good habitat. Please think about that the next time you have an urge to clear aquatic vegetation or alter the shoreline in front of your lakeshore home. And when the next tree falls in the lake off your property, maybe you could leave the chainsaw in the garage?



From a fish's perspective, good shoreline includes natural cover.

Jeff Strobel photo