

Volunteer naturalists help lakes, themselves

They can monitor, adopt a lake, or just learn

Waterfront property owners probably live on or near a lake or stream because you value the environment of water. They like to see bald eagles and ospreys flying above, darting down from the sky for fish. Their ears perk up at night when they hear a loon yodeling to its partner across the lake. As a proud parent or grandparent, they marvel at the joy a child gets from catching their first bluegill all by themselves!

"Folks can enjoy their shoreline home and lake more by enhancing their learning about lake or stream ecosystems," said Patrick Goggin, county conservationist for the Vilas County Land and Water Conservation Department.

Lake front home owners can learn more about aquatic systems by participating in the Self-Help Monitoring Program, a cooperative effort between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Wisconsin Lakes Partnership, and citizens statewide. "Lake enthusiasts assist in getting real numbers and data on water quality conditions for their lake," said Goggin.

He said the program involves over 1,000 citizen volunteer monitors statewide to "collect high quality data to educate and empower volunteers, and to share this data and knowledge."

There are more than 180 lakes are participating from Vilas County and on more than 90 lakes in Oneida County.

"Volunteers measure water clarity, using the Secchi disk method, as an indicator of water quality," says Carolyn Scholl, lake conservation specialist for Vilas County Land and Water Conservation Department. "This information is then used to determine the lake trophic state or nutrient amounts".

She said volunteers may also collect chemistry, temperature, and dissolved oxygen data, as well as identify and map plants, watch for the first appearance of Eurasian water milfoil near boat landings, or alert officials about zebra mussel invasions on Wisconsin lakes.

For more information on the program go to the Web site:

www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/fhp/lakes/selfhelp/index.htm

The DNR provides all equipment to the volunteer. Training of the volunteers is provided by either DNR or by Carolyn Scholl and other natural resource professionals from the local area.

"Volunteers provide their time, expertise, energy and a willingness to share information with their lake association or other lake residents," said Scholl. "The information gathered by the volunteers is used by DNR lake biologists, fisheries experts and water regulation and zoning staff, as well as by UW-Extension, Land and Water Conservation Departments, lake associations and other interested individuals".

Water Action Volunteers

Goggin said a second program, Water Action Volunteers (WAV), is a statewide effort of citizens who want to learn about and improve the quality of the states waterways. It is coordinated through a partnership between the DNR and the University of Wisconsin - Cooperative Extension.

"Citizens, civic groups, 4-H clubs, students and other volunteer groups are participating in WAV programs across the state," said Kris Stepenuck, WAV Coordinator.

"WAV currently offers informational materials and support for citizen stream monitoring, as well as storm drain stenciling, river cleanups and other action-oriented water resource protection projects," Stepenuck said.

For more information about the WAV program, contact Kris Stepenuck, Water Action Volunteers' Coordinator at (608)-264-8948 or email her at kris.stepenuck@ces.uwex.edu.

Adopt-A-Lake

Another program that helps people learn more about their lake is the Adopt-A-Lake Program.

Laura Felda, program coordinator for Adopt-A-Lake said it is designed to give both youth and adults a better understanding of inland lakes.

She said hands-on activities help participants investigate how lakes were used in the past, as well as look at current social and ecological issues.

"Youth and adults in their community can cooperate as leaders in lake protection and examine key issues of concern on their lake," she said.

The Adopt-A-Lake program will provide direction and resources to teachers and youth leaders interested in adopting a lake. If interested contact Laura Felda at (715)-346-3366 or email her at lfelda@uwsp.edu.

Other organizations such as the DNR (www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/fhp/lakes/), the Wisconsin Association of Lakes (wisconsinlakes.org) and the UW-EX's Water Resources Programs (www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexplakes/) offer introductory lake biology brochures, pamphlets and other resources designed for non-biologists interested in learning more about lakes and streams. Check out their web sites for more information.

LoonWatch

For bird lovers out there, Goggin suggests getting involved with LoonWatch.

"LoonWatch, a program of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, protects common loons and their aquatic habitats through education, monitoring, and research," said Cory Counard MacNulty, the LoonWatch Coordinator.

"We coordinate a network of volunteers who watch and record the activities of loons on Wisconsin lakes."

Volunteers are needed to monitor and protect loons on northern lakes and to provide public programs throughout the region.

"You can be an active voice for the loon and help ensure that loon music will be heard on our northern lakes in the future," he said.

For more information on the program contact Cory Counard MacNulty at (715)-682-1220 or loonwatch@northland.edu.

When observing nature and watching any wildlife, Goggin said there are some simple steps and tools of the trade that can enhance your encounter on the water, making the experience positive for you *and* the critters.

"Binoculars and camera with long lenses safely bring you close to wildlife without disturbing them," said Goggin.

"Tools like field guides and hand lenses open up new vistas of knowledge and ways of seeing nature. Watch at sunrise and sunset and check edges of habitats for the best views of wildlife."

He suggests people try to observe wildlife behaving naturally, saying that feeding human food to wild animals can harm them and endanger you.

"Savor watching fish in their natural habitat; move quietly and slowly and avoid repeated visits. Celebrate a wildflower on the stem, not in the hand. Stay on trails, walk with a careful step and flowers will flourish," said Goggin.

Another fun way to learn more about lake and stream environments is to track the phenology for wildlife in your area.

"Phenology is the study of changes in plants and animals as they respond to weather, climate, and the seasons," said Goggin. "Each spring we anxiously await the first returning robin in the hope of warmer weather. That is a phenological event".

It happens every year but the return date depends a lot on the weather. Migration and flowering are two more examples of phenological events. For lakes, turnover is one example, as is when loons return to the lake from their wintering grounds.

"Starting a phenological record for your lake is as easy as jotting down information in a log book or journal," stated Goggin. "Track when your favorite flowers begin blooming, the day the ice is formed across your entire lake, or when you first see a black bear stagger out from their winter den".

He said people who learn more about the lake or stream they live on will heighten their appreciation for nature as well as reaffirm their commitment to conserving water quality and protecting lakes for future generations.