

Courtesy on the water

Congestion can impact boating enjoyment, harm aquatic resources

One of the top three lake issues in Wisconsin involves increased recreational use on our state's waterways. With an increase in use comes a growing concern about the quality of that watery recreational experience. Recreational use is growing not just in the number of people taking to lakes and rivers, but also in the variety of ways in which they use them once they get there.

Boom of activity

The recreational boating "fleet" has boomed over the last few decades. According to the United States Coast Guard (USCG), in 1961 there was more than 7 million watercraft registered in the country; by 2000, that number spiraled up to nearly 12.7 million.

"In 2000 the National Marine Manufacturer's Association put Wisconsin sixth in the nation with over 573,000 registered boats," says Patrick Goggin, county conservationist for the Vilas County Land and Water Conservation Department.

A Department of Natural Resources (DNR) survey of boater use completed in 1990, reported that fishing was the major incentive for boat ownership.

Other water recreational uses included sailing, canoeing and kayaking, personal watercraft, scuba, water skiing, seaplanes, and swimmers. At the same time, the use of water toys, such as trampolines and water slides is growing in popularity.

Some lake users seek a passive form of water recreation use, such as the scenic viewing of waterfowl, other wildlife, or just soaking in a lake's atmosphere on a house boat cruise. On-ice recreational opportunities exist as well including ice boating, fishing, and snowmobiling.

"Many people sail Wisconsin lakes in all manner of craft, especially on bigger lakes over 1,000 acres," said Goggin. "Several of the first lake associations that developed around the state were organized around sailing enthusiasts,"

He said paddlers are another user group that has grown in Wisconsin over the years, sliding their canoes and kayaks into some of the more than 15,000 lakes and 43,000 miles of rivers.

"We have some of the best paddling this side of the Rocky Mountains in Wisconsin, with many local water bodies providing exceptional on-water experiences like those found on the headwaters of the Wisconsin River and area wilderness lakes," noted Goggin.

He said the newest phenomenon related to Wisconsin paddlers is water trails. A water trail is a designated route on a lake, river, or stream.

"Water trails promote tourism and recreation, cultural features, increase awareness of the environment, and provide opportunities for environmental education," said Goggin and

For more information on water trails see the Lakes Partnership web site at <

<http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexplakes/publications/watertrails/> >.

Personal watercraft (PWC) users have also grown over the years, with the USCG estimating some 1.1 million PWC were on the water during the 1998 boating season.

"Scuba and snorkeling have become more common over the years too," says Goggin. "The cold water in Wisconsin lakes often requires a wet suit for longer exposures by the scuba or snorkeling enthusiasts."

Waterskiing, initiated by Minnesota native Ralph Samuelson in 1922, is another water recreation activity that has flourished alongside the growing interest in power boating.

According to a 1999-2000 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, the most popular water activity remains swimming. The study estimates that 134 million people participated in some form of swimming activity, with 104 million of those people swimming in "natural" waters; lakes, streams, ponds and oceans.

Aquatic impacts

Goggin said the story of water recreation is a tale of access, which often times is unlimited and can lead to congestion. Not only are more people using lakes and rivers, but they are doing so in more diverse ways.

"The congestion that often results from this demand compels us to consider a basic question: Is the quality of the recreational experience we envision when visiting the lakeshore being compromised?" said Goggin.

According to the DNR research limnologist Tim Asplund, what water recreationists do to the lake ecosystem under the surface can be cause for concern.

"For example, boat propellers create turbulence which can resuspend sediments and cause water clarity problems that can contribute to eutrophication," says Asplund. "This can be especially problematic for shallow lakes or in shallow areas of lakes".

Other studies have investigated impacts of recreational use on shoreline erosion, emergent and aquatic plants, fish and wildlife, and water pollution.

"No-wake zones can help alleviate some of the impacts of recreational use on littoral zone and shoreline habitat," suggests Asplund. "However, it is sometimes difficult to enforce no-wake ordinances. In addition, even if most people comply with the ordinance, a few violations can have a significant impact. Also, no-wake zones do not prevent impacts from boat wake or turbidity generated from outside the no-wake area."

Goggin said recreational users need to carry on their strong advocacy for healthy aquatic ecosystems and continue to assist in addressing water pollution concerns and other issues like the spread of exotic species.

"The key is striking a balance between lake resource user groups such that each can get the experiences they want from their lake yet water quality and habitat are maintained," said Goggin.

'How's the Water'

Conservationists are always looking for new ways to educate the public about lake etiquette, good stewardship ideas, and universal lake regulations that help to maintain the water quality of our lakes and conserve shorelines and wildlife habitat.

Goggin said a new manual from UW-Extension titled "How's the Water?: Planning for Recreational Use on Wisconsin's Lakes and Rivers," can help lake groups and others accomplish these goals while sustaining reasonable settings for water recreation activities to prevent degradation.

"Our manual was created to assist those who believe that recreational experiences on our waters should be enjoyable" said Bob Korth, UW-Extension Lakes specialist and co-editor of the book.

"It is intended for people who believe that working towards limiting frustration and disappointment during a water recreational outing is a worthwhile goal," said Korth.

"The book is intended to be used by elected officials, citizens, property owners and others having an interest in water-based recreation. This manual is a tool to assist in the process of building a healthy lake and river ecosystem and strong lake community."

He said the book is structured into five chapters, each of which lays out techniques, facts and ideas to limit user conflicts and build community.

"It provides practical advice, guidance and the insight needed to design an effective recreational use plan for your lake or river," said Goggin.

The text is available by calling the UW-EX Lakes Program at (715)-346-2116.

Courtesy codes

Minimizing the impacts of recreational use can be as simple as posting courtesy code reminders at boat landings or other access points.

"These signs provide sound reminders that can curb conflict on our area lakes and streams," says Carolyn Scholl, lake conservation specialist with the Vilas County Land and Water Conservation Department. She said copies of Vilas County courtesy codes are available to lake groups, citizens, and others through the Land and Water Conservation Department or via the Vilas County Lakes Association.

"Accommodating the increasing variety and amount of recreational uses on our finite number of water bodies will be an important challenge we face in lake management for years to come," said Goggin. "If folks can be considerate, respectful, polite and understanding to each other while enjoying our water resources, that is a sound first step".