

Lake groups making big splash

More than 600 associations, districts are protecting water bodies

Lake groups at the local and state level are making a big splash in helping to protect our water resources from degradation and abuse.

The number of citizens engaged in Wisconsin lake stewardship through lake organizations is the largest in the nation. More than 600 lake organizations, both lake districts and lake associations, work hard to preserve and protect Wisconsin's legacy of lakes.

All kinds of groups are lending a hand by being good stewards to their local lake. Often these groups involve a formal designation of some kind, typically working as a lake association or district.

Lake associations

According to Patrick Goggin, county conservationist for the Vilas County Land and Water Conservation Department (LWCD), the oldest organizations interested in lake management in Wisconsin are its associations.

"The first association in Wisconsin was the Lauderdale Lakes Association which formed in 1902. Today, some 600 lake associations are in existence, 65 plus here in Vilas County alone," said Goggin.

Goggin said typically lake associations are voluntary organizations with members who own land on or near the lake. They can be involved in various levels of lake management activities and vary from well-run lake management groups to loose-knit social groups.

"Lake associations operate under diverse titles like property owners, riparian owners, or other names," said Carolyn Scholl, Vilas County LWCD lake conservation specialist. "The primary purpose is normally the same - to maintain, protect, improve, or enhance the quality of the lake, its fisheries, and its watershed".

Lake associations can be formed when any numbers of individuals concerned with lake issues decide to deal with them in an organized manner. According to Scholl, associations can be comprised of all or a few of the people living on a lake and may have members not living on the lake.

"Membership in associations is rarely mandatory; people may or may not decide to participate. The one exception to this is mandatory lake associations, which are formed by developers as part of a deed restriction," she said.

Lake associations have several meetings throughout the year, commonly conducting the meeting following the Roberts Rules of Order.

"Associations use various fund-raising activities and voluntary dues to raise capital for their programs. Certain qualified associations are eligible for state lake management and protection grant funds too," said Goggin.

Lake associations are often run by officers elected by the membership. Many times one person performs several officer duties if the group is small enough.

Goggin said a lake association's power comes from its members rallying around the issues they feel are important to the future of their lake. He said lake associations can help build a sense of community and create an information network for members to share ideas".

"If you are not content with the conditions on your water body, starting a lake association can help you do something about it. Lake associations can also help you deal with bigger issues such as invasive aquatic species and water quality monitoring," said Goggin. "These are the issues that prompt many folks to consider 'organizing' with their lake neighbors. Indeed, 'problems' of one kind or another often are the reasons folks start lake organizations."

Lake districts

A lake district, on the other hand is a special-purpose unit of government that has some taxing authority.

Goggin said the first districts came into existence in 1974 with the passing of Chapter 33 of the Wisconsin State statutes. Today, there are more than 100 lake districts in Wisconsin.

The purpose of a district is to maintain, protect and improve the quality of a lake and its watershed for the mutual good of the members and the lake environment. All property owners share in the cost of management activities initiated by the district.

Goggin said residents who live within the designated boundaries of the district are eligible voters in the affairs of the district. Voting typically happens at an annual meeting of the district that must be held between May 22 and September 8 each year.

Property owners living within the district are required by law to pay the fees that, in part, can finance the district. The amount of those fees is voted on by the members at the annual meeting. This fee is usually a portion of their property tax bill.

Goggin said grant programs can also be used to raise money for the district if approved at the annual meeting.

He said daily operating activities of the district are carried out by a board of from five to seven commissioners in conjunction with other district members. One of these commissioners is appointed by the county and another by the town. The remaining commissioners are elected by the membership.

An existing district may be dissolved by a two-thirds vote of the members at an annual meeting.

Discussion scheduled

An educational presentation on the differences between lake associations and lake districts is scheduled at the Phelps School auditorium next at 6:30 p.m. next Thursday, Aug. 21.

Bob Korth, UW-Extension lakes specialist, will present an overview of lake associations, and districts followed by a question-and-answer period.

"Several area lake associations are taking a harder look at what lake districts allow a lake group to achieve over and above what a lake association can do," said Goggin. "This is especially true for lake associations wrestling with significant invasive aquatic species infestations and control programs."

He said the meeting will also be a great opportunity to get the facts on what lake districts are accomplishing statewide.

Regional groups

The purpose of the Vilas County Lakes Association (VCLA) is to educate, communicate, and promote cooperation among organizations, individuals, governmental bodies, and the general public of Vilas County in relation to the management of area lakes.

The VCLA promotes various water quality protection and lake stewardship projects such as the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Self-help Monitoring Program and the LWCD Invasive Aquatic Species Program. To become a member of the VCLA write to: PO Box 494, Eagle River, WI 54521.

The Wisconsin Association of Lakes (WAL) is a grassroots organization made up of individuals and lake groups concerned about the future of Wisconsin lakes. WAL's mission is to provide a united voice for Wisconsin's inland lakes and waterways, promote public policy, advance education, strengthen local leadership, and preserve and protect inland waterways, their watersheds and ecosystems.

"Their board and members are folks just like you -- people concerned about today's lake issues," said Goggin.

For more information about the Wisconsin Association of Lakes check out their web site at <

<http://www.wisconsinlakes.org/> >.

Active in Vilas

Area lake groups are involved with numerous issues and projects, most revolving around maintaining or enhancing a lakes water quality or focused on helping to build a community atmosphere among lake property owners.

"In Vilas County, many lake groups are currently dealing with the invasive aquatic species problem in one way or another, from educational campaigns to boat launch monitoring to control programs," said Goggin. Examples of lake groups working on this issue abound, with strong programs existing in the Big Sand Lake Property Owners Association, Eagle River Chain of Lakes Association, the Little St. Germain Lake Protection and Rehabilitation District, and the North and South Twin Lakes Riparian Association.

"Another common goal of lake groups is enhancing the fishery of the lake. These lake groups center their energies on projects like fish population monitoring, fish crib building, stocking efforts, aerator procurement and operation, and assisting with DNR creel surveys," noted Goggin.

Vilas County lake groups with active fishery programs include Bills, Birch, Black Oak, Found, Lost, Kentuck, and Muskellunge lakes.

Shoreland restoration of buffer areas is an additional focus for some lake groups. For example, the Three Lakes Waterfront Association (TLWA) in Oneida County participates in several shoreland restorations each year connected with the Three Lakes chain.

Volunteers from the lake group assist in various pieces of the restoration process, including the design and planting of native species. To date, six such projects revegetating shoreland properties have been completed by the TLWA.

"Lake groups are also involved with getting information from their membership to share with each other," said Goggin.

For example, he said the residents of Nelson Lake recently completed a survey of its membership to get at questions about lake use.

Supporting lake research efforts is also a priority for many lake groups in the area. Anvil Lake Association just received a lake planning grant to investigate water quality and research historical events relating to their watershed.

He said another example is the teamwork of the Carpenter Lake Association and 13 other Vilas County lakes teaming up with the UW- Center for Limnology Trout Lake Field Station.

Research data is being collected on these lakes as part of a large biodiversity study investigating such things as coarse wood in relation to the shoreline, fisheries, and lake productivity.

Another example of active research in Vilas County is the beach monitoring program being supported by UW-Oshkosh researchers, the VCLA and several area lake associations.

Study findings

A recent study of lake associations was conducted by Cynthia Lancaster of the DNR's Oshkosh field office and professor Anthony Gabriel, formerly with UW-Oshkosh.

The researchers found that lake association and districts differ greatly in their sources of revenue and expenditures, with lake districts reporting significantly higher amounts for both.

"The study found a positive correlation between the total number of lake management activities undertaken by lake management organizations and the number of homes, percentage of permanent residents, and property values found on the lake," said Lancaster. "There was also a definitive link between total membership and annual membership fees."

According to Lancaster, when asked what factors motivated the lake group's initial formation, organizations in Wisconsin indicated that they were primarily established to enhance environmental quality (84 %), as well as maintain or enhance fisheries (42 %).

"Higher proportions of lake associations than lake districts were formed to educate lake property owners (43 % compared to 29 %), protect the lake from over development (27 % compared to 9 %), and promote social activity (25 % compared to 4 %).

Conversely, she said lake districts were more likely formed to improve access to funding (48 % compared to 11 %) or operate a water control structure like a dam (21 % compared to 8 %).

"In addition, 13 percent of lake organizations have actively supported or campaigned for candidates in town or county governments, 81 % of which resulted in the election of their preferred candidate," she said.

Are they effective?

The study showed 16 % of the lake associations reported that aquatic vegetation and personal watercraft issues had been effectively addressed, while 24 % of the lake districts reported that aquatic vegetation and dam control/maintenance were effectively tackled.

"Besides the latter issue, a significantly higher proportion of lake districts reported having effectively addressed government representation (20 %) and boating congestion (14 %), while a significantly higher proportion of lake associations reported having effectively addressed noise pollution (15 %)," said Lancaster.

Lancaster said the majority of lake associations and districts are well organized, with incorporation and written by-laws and regular newsletters and meetings.

The top lake management activities of lake organizations include water quality monitoring (78 %), newsletters (72 %), fish stocking (69 %), educational meetings (63 %), and volunteer water monitoring (63 %).

The researchers found that lake organizations affiliated with the Wisconsin Association of Lakes (WAL) are engaged in a significantly higher number of lake management activities and actions and can show effective solutions to lake issues.

According to Goggin, people are fortunate to have so many active lake organizations.

"Lake associations and districts continue their roles as important and vital stakeholders in lake management efforts locally and statewide, advancing over the years in their sophistication as well as in the number of issues targeted and lake activities pursued." he said.

"Lake organizations help us set up proactive policies and rules to protect a lake by providing a way to develop a consensus among lake owners. Lake groups basically help you develop a plan and consider ways to get the resources for carrying out that plan," said Goggin.

If you are interested in starting a lake group, contact the Vilas County LWCD at (715)-479-3747.