WaterWays

Lakes Winnebago, Butte des Morts, Winneconne & Poygan

WINNEBAGO LAKES COUNCIL

Newsletter
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The Winnebago Lakes Council promotes the long-term sustainability of Lakes Winnebago, Butte des Morts, Winneconne, and Poygan and their connecting rivers.

The Council's mission is to protect and improve the ecological health and scenic beauty of the Winnebago lakes through citizen involvement in research, education, communication and cooperation.

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Inside This Issue

Aquatic Invasive Species Project Approved

The Winnebago Lakes Council is about to embark on a large lakes protection project involving area citizens.

A $75,000 Wisconsin Aquatic Invasive Species Control Grant for education, prevention and planning on the Winnebago Pool Lakes has just been awarded to the Winnebago County UW- Extension, partnering with the Lakes Council and UW- Oshkosh.

Detrimental invasive species have been repeatedly introduced to these lakes--carp, zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil, and others--and hundreds of potential aquatic invasive species inhabit the Great Lakes, a short distance downstream or via trailer.

Specific project activities will include strategic planning on prevention and control measures, initiation of proven public education programs, scientific studies of current infestations and risk from potential invaders; and outreach activities to distribute educational materials and work with teachers.

The grant will make it possible for the Lakes Council to hire a coordinator for strategic planning with groups, businesses, government and citizens. The Lakes Council will also be involved in recruiting and training volunteers for the Clean Boats, Clean Waters watercraft inspection program and for AIS monitoring of our lakes, and will play the lead role in outreach and communication.

Events, Membership Attract Area Residents

Two events and a membership drive successfully kicked off the Lakes Council's first major effort to create an effective citizen voice for our lakes.

At the Lakes Gathering in Winneconne on February 9, more than 70 people heard reports on state and local citizen lake monitoring.

Jeff Bode, DNR Section Chief for Lakes and Wetlands, in his overview of the monitoring program, said the state now has quality data from satellite imagery and citizen monitoring on 8,000 of Wisconsin's largest lakes. "Lake data is important in planning and decision-making," he said. "It's also used when assembling the state's Water Quality Report to Congress, which helps determine the level of funding needed for clean lakes in Wisconsin."

Dr. Mike Lizotte presented results from the first year of citizen monitoring on the Winnebago Pool Lakes (see p. 2). Not surprisingly, questions and comments from the mixed group of lake users veered away from lake monitoring, covering numerous issues ranging from mega-farms to the Fox Locks.

The second event, held in Menasha on March 8 in cooperation with the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, focused on northern Lake Winnebago and attracted an interested group of local officials and Lakes Council members. Dr.Lizotte reported on citizen monitoring on the north end of the lake and Eric Fowle, East Central's Director, described the status of the 2030 Regional Smart Growth Plan.

Tim Badke, East Central staff, presented results of a computer-based modeling project estimating sediment and pollutant loadings to the Lake Winnebago North and West Watershed based on proposed changes in land use. Communities can use this model as a planning tool to address impacts of development on water quality. To learn more about the L-Thia project, contact Tim Badke at 920-751-4770.

Membership Triples

Thanks to those of you who responded to our recent membership appeal. Members now include individuals, communities and organizations. Geographically, we have representation from all around the lakes. Our rapid growth proves that people understand the importance of protecting and improving our lakes. We have much work to do.

Around the Lakes

- **April 19**, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m. is Aquatic Invasive Species Day at UW-O. Check out displays and booths, a demo on "Clean Boats, Clean Water" watercraft inspection, and a panel discussion from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. All events take place in Reeve Memorial Union and are free.
- **April 21-May 28**. Main St. Art Works in Hilbert and the Niagara Escarpment Resource Network present "Living on the Edge of Our Common Ground" — art and science events on history, geology, biology and the fragile beauty of the ancient stony ledge forming the east side of Lake Winnebago. For schedule www.mainstreetartworks.com/
- **April 20-22** is the annual Wisconsin Lakes Convention in Green Bay. Emphasis is on healthy lakes. Our lakes are usually under-represented at this event. Register at www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/conventions/
- **April 27**, 8:30 a.m.-noon, another opportunity to learn about Invasive Species Management. Holiday Inn, 123 Wisconsin, Neenah. Sponsored by East Central Regional Planning and UW-Extension. No pre-registration or fee.
- **May 20-21** at Menominee Park are Fishing Has No Boundaries days, a chance for people with disabilities to experience the fun of fishing. More information at 920-424-1389.

Volunteers Wanted

Lake Monitoring. A motorboat and GPS are helpful. More volunteers are needed, especially for the east side of Lake Winnebago. If you or your group want to know more about training opportunities, contact Mike Lizotte at 920-424-0448 or email winnebagopool@yahoo.com.

Stream Monitoring. Be one of 40 volunteers trained and equipped to monitor streams entering the Winnebago Pool Lakes. Training sessions will be held on Saturdays during May from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at several locations around the area. Contact Chad Cook at 920-232-1990 or email chad.cook@ces.uwex.edu.

Sturgeon Watch. Join a dedicated group guarding sites along the Wolf River where spawning sturgeon come close to shore. Volunteers are needed in late April and May. Email sturgeon@dnr.state.wi.us or call 920-303-5444.

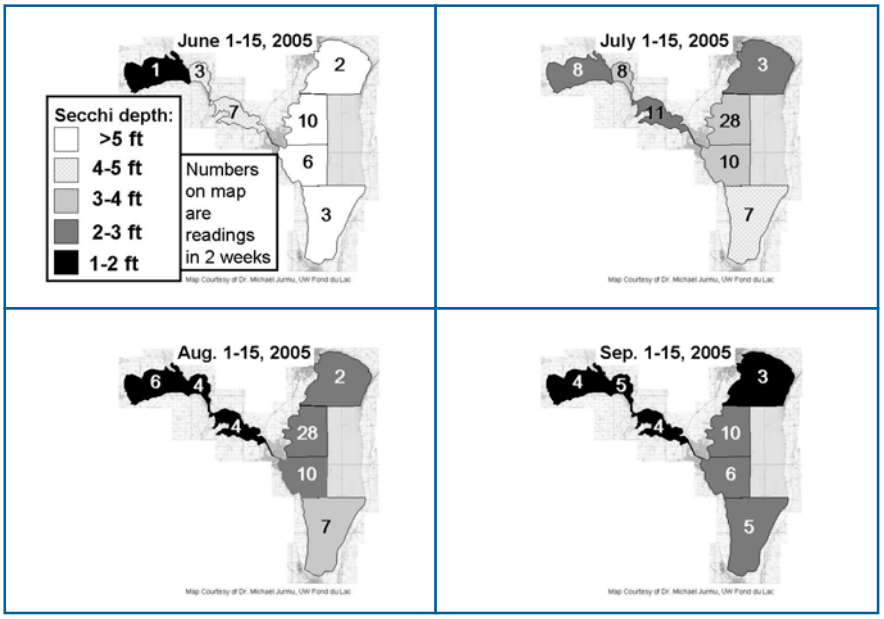
Volunteer Monitors Make a Difference

We've had a chance to examine the data collected on our lakes by volunteers in the first year after starting the training network. What a difference a year makes:

2004: **1** monitor, **3** stations, **1** day = **3** measurements
2005: **59** monitors, **53** stations, **131** days = **434** measurements

This data comes much closer to what's needed to monitor four large lakes. We can now make maps of the lakes throughout the year to give us a picture of how the water clarity changes in different parts of the lakes. This isn't a simple picture that could be gathered from a few measurements on a few days. Last year the blooms seem to be more intense in the upriver lakes and north end of Lake Winnebago. The blooms extended long into the fall. Some volunteers made measurements right through November!

Plans are being made to hold training sessions for new volunteers this spring. The numbers on the lake maps (recordings in a 2-week period) show that we have no monitoring on the east shore of Lake Winnebago, and could use more volunteers in other areas. Over 30 new volunteers have expressed interest in training, and there have been inquiries from boating and fishing groups. Contact Mike Lizotte 920-424-0448 or email winnebagopool@yahoo.com



Maps show depth of water clarity as measured by volunteer monitors who lower a Secchi Disk into the lake until it disappears.

Spring Sturgeon Run

You may not have had an opportunity to see a sturgeon this winter, with only 225 harvested from Lake Winnebago during the spearing season. There's still time, however, to catch sight of this magnificent fish during the spawning run from late April to early May. Best places for observation are County Hwy X (west of New London), Pfeifer Park (in New London), Bamboo Bend (west of Shiocton), and the Shawano Dam (in Shawano).

Why so few sturgeon during spearing season? Doug Rinzel, DNR fisheries biologist, said cloudy water limited visibility to around six feet, hampering spearers' ability to see the giant fish down their spearing holes. This slowed the daily harvest rate, but provided for a full 16-day season. Harvest caps set for this year were 500 juvenile females, 500 adult females or 2000 males. The largest speared was a 102-pound fish taken by Timothy Eldred from Menasha.

People inquire about the Lakes Council's position on water levels in the Winnebago Pool. We don't have a position, so we asked Art Techlow, DNR lakes biologist, to explain how the Army Corps sets the levels. Is he saying something controversial? Let us know if you think so. We'll discuss your comments in a later issue.

Water Level Management: A Compromise Among Lake Users

"This is the lowest I've ever seen it, and I've lived here forever" says the caller; "it" being the early spring water level of any of the four Winnebago Pool Lakes, and "forever" meaning at least five years. I have heard this comment, or near identical versions, virtually every year for the 25 years I have been with the Department of Natural Resources. You'd think we would be out of water by now. So why do the lakes of the Winnebago Pool look so low in early spring? Answer: because they are, but there is a reason for this.

The Winnebago Pool consists of Lakes Winnebago, Butte des Morts, Winneconne and Poygan. The pool is part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Fox River Project, which was created for commercial navigation in the latter half of the 19th century. (Today the Corps of Engineers manages the water level of the Winnebago Pool for numerous purposes, including recreational navigation, environmental protection, hydropower, and flood control.) One of the consequences of the Fox River Project was the raising of water levels on the pool lakes by 2.5 feet via the Neenah and Menasha dams. Raising the level of the pool initiated wetland losses that continue to this day because of high and stable late spring and summer water levels. Prolonged periods of excessively high water, i.e. above the normal spring and summer levels, are especially devastating.

To that end, flood control is a big concern in spring. To alleviate this concern, the Corps slowly draws down the pool during winter to provide adequate storage capacity for snowmelt and spring rains. The low point of the drawdown is typically reached in late winter or early spring, and is held there until the threat of damage to shoreline property from shoving ice is no longer a serious concern. The Corps then starts refilling the pool according to previously set water level targets.

In recognition of continuing wetland losses on the pool, the Corps has, since the late 1990's, modified their water level targets to reflect growing concerns about the impact these losses are having on the environmental quality and health of the pool. For the past two years, the Corps has further modified their targets in order to more realistically regulate water levels within a fairly narrow range in spring. Specifically, the Corps is refilling the pool in spring at a slower pace than in the past. This means it takes longer to reach the normal summer water level.

What are the benefits of doing this? Well, for one thing, a slower refill keeps water levels rising in pace with the new growth of aquatic vegetation. Lower water means more available sunlight for aquatic plants, and sunlight is, of course, what all photosynthesizing plants need. And the pool needs aquatic vegetation, (i.e. wetlands), to maintain water quality, buffer shorelines against the forces of erosion, and provide food, shelter and breeding areas for fish and wildlife.

The Army Corps considers healthy aquatic vegetation among other factors when setting spring water level targets.

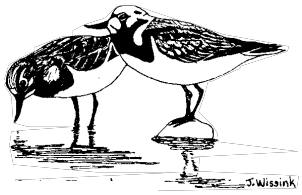
Bear in mind that a slightly reduced pace of the spring refill is the very least that can be done with water levels to maintain water quality and healthy fish and wildlife populations. Water level management of the Winnebago Pool is, and always has been, almost the exact opposite of natural water level fluctuations.

A slower paced spring refill also helps avoid, or at least mitigate, flooding similar to that which occurred in May and June of 2004 when parts of the waterway were closed to navigation because of high water. Flooding would have been much worse that year if the Corps had refilled the pool immediately after ice-out.

On the other hand, don't blame low water in the summer of 2005 on the slower spring refill. The normal summer water level was reached in mid-June last year, but subsequent drought caused lake levels to fall even though all gates on the Neenah and Menasha dams remained closed throughout the summer.

The Corps of Engineers considers the needs of all Winnebago Pool and Lower Fox River users. Therefore, management of the pool's water level is almost always a compromise. It's our collective choice that makes this compromise, but keep in mind that this choice also affects the Winnebago Pool's fish, wildlife, and water quality. - *Art Techlow*

Ruddy Turnstones Love Lake Flies



Lake flies aren't fun, but Ruddy Turnstones are. Generally a coastal bird, these orange-legged shore birds with russet brown, white and black plumage turn up during migrating time in the Menominee Park area. Look for these unusual birds feasting on the May lake fly hatch. They are on their way to the tundra in the Canadian Artic where they breed. Bird experts Stan Temple and John Cary in "Wisconsin Birds" claim the probability of seeing Ruddy Turnstones in Wisconsin is only about 1 percent. Yet year after year we have reports of Ruddy Turnstones appearing in Oshkosh during lake fly season. They winter along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and down to South America. - *Katherine D. Rill*

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At a recent Lakes Council workshop, Catherine Neiswender, UW-Extension Community Development Educator for Winnebago County and an Appleton resident, was asked if she lived on the waterfront. Here's her reply, and more.

Everyone's Property is Waterfront

I live in a neighborhood with small urban lots. The 'waterfront' (the Fox River) is about a mile away. I don't really live 'on the water'. But I don't have to look far to see how my front yard connects to the Fox River. Just past the parkway is a curb, gutter, and a storm drain, all of which direct rain and snowmelt straight to the Fox River.

We all, technically, live 'on the water'. Each property some how connects to the water directly, or has some other conduit to it, either through a storm drain, curb and gutter, or larger drainage pond. The lessons are simple, really, and stem from our first exposure to the water cycle in grade school. Rain hits the ground. It can either soak in or run off. What doesn't soak in runs downhill picking up all sorts of stuff along the way.

Our urban environments are tailor made to make rainwater flow 'off' as quickly as possible. Unfortunately our human activities tend to put things on the landscape that rainwater picks up, and that can end up polluting our lakes and streams…things such as grass clippings, trash, cigarette butts, fertilizer, oil, dirt from construction sites, and all the grit and heavy metals that we wash off of our cars or come off the brake pads.

The Northeast Wisconsin Stormwater Consortium (www.newsc.org) recently completed a survey of residents in northeast Wisconsin. About half of them didn't know stormwater flows untreated into our lakes and streams. A larger percentage felt industry and agriculture were still the big polluters to our water bodies. While industry and agriculture do contribute to water pollution, we must also look into the mirror to see how we, as individuals, also contribute to water pollution.

Our mere presence on this planet has an impact on our environment. We can have a positive impact or a negative one. All of us live on 'waterfront property' and how we take care of our property and our yards can impact the Lake Winnebago System positively or negatively.

Is it sometimes a hassle to sweep up grass clippings? Is it easier to hose your driveway off into the street? Do you feel pressured to fertilize to have a green lawn to keep up with your neighbors? I know there are barriers and benefits to the personal choices we make. The larger benefits of a healthy Winnebago Lakes ecosystem may, in the end, be something you feel is worth factoring into the choices you make. - *Catherine Neiswender*

10 Things You Can Do To Prevent Stormwater Runoff Pollution

- Use fertilizers sparingly and sweep up driveways, sidewalks and roads
- Never dump anything down storm drains
- Vegetate bare spots in your yard
- Compost your yard waste
- Avoid pesticides
- Direct downspouts away from paved surfaces
- Take your car to the car wash instead of washing it in the driveway
- Check car for leaks, and recycle motor oil
- Pick up after your pet
- Inspect and pump your septic tank regularly

Source: EPA