

40 years of Life with the Lake – Lisa Conley talk at LLBMD 2012 Annual Meeting

How long have you lived here? 5 years? 10? 15? 20? 30? More?

My history: Bob and I moved here 1971 – there was an outhouse in back of our new home, and also a gravel underground route from the indoor plumbing straight to lake. At that time, Lac la Belle Drive was a line of similar bungalows – we were the new young family in a retirement community. We remodeled, added on, and put in a septic system. What drew us was the beauty of the lake and Lac La Belle Yacht club – we loved the competitive sailing, and the many fellow sailors we already knew.

I remember then that the lake was very clear. You could see a dime on the bottom from the end of the pier. We and our two toddlers really enjoyed playing in the lake - never worried about the water quality.

Ten years later, there was lots of remodeling and rebuilding in the neighborhood that continues to this day. Younger families replaced the retired couples; natural shorelines were replaced by well-kept lawns. People had bigger boats, bigger piers, and some were building seawalls. The lake was not looking so good. I remember thinking I could lose a toddler in 6 feet of water. Large schools of carp mouths were seen cruising offshore. Eurasian milfoil invaded the lake – the beds were thick enough to stop sailboats in mid race out in the middle of the lake.

I asked a lot of questions, and was lucky enough to have Jeff Bode – DNR Water specialist – as friend and nearby neighbor. I found out that there was a study of our lake being done by the SE Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission as to what the problems were on the lake, and what needed to be done to improve it, but with three municipalities around the lake with lots of other priorities, and not a good working relationship, we needed some sort of organization to focus on the lake and lead the discussion. Worked with a number of great volunteers, including Jacky Morgan – We passed a petition around the lake to form a Lake Management District.

In 1983 the Lac la Belle Management District was formed. Here are some of the things we have worked on in the early years:

- We sat down with our DNR Water quality expert and Fish Manager and our lake management report and started planning
- We tackled the need for carp removal – got 68 thousand pounds of carp the first year, more the next year – the water showed a clear improvement.
- We ran a UWEX Well Water screening program that showed pockets of nitrate contamination. This awareness of threats to both the lake and peoples drinking water resulted in the formation of three sanitary districts and the installation of sewers around the lake. Again, Jacky Morgan was a key player in the Mary Lane side of the town.
- An aquatic plant survey showed the need for more plant diversity, and better game fish habitat. This was a strategy to keep carp numbers in check by promoting a stronger predator population of walleyes and northern pike. We stocked flathead catfish to eat carp too, and established protective fishing regulation to help keep the fishery in better balance. We planted large leaf pondweed in certain areas to create better fish habitat and clearer water, off Islandale and near the Islandale causeway, with uncertain results.
- Volunteers (me, Harry Hancock and Marsha Camitta did water quality monitoring. Marsha and I continue to do clarity readings – I do dissolved oxygen and temperature profiles during the summer at the deep hole – off Blackhawk Reports on DNR website – looking for long term trends and red flags. You can view the reports [Here](#).
- Many lake residents were frustrated to observe considerable mud and fertilizer running into the lake from farm fields over the years. Rivers of mud have poured into the lake from golf course creek after a good downpour. I took pictures, talked to our county staff and DNR and this is still going on.

- Communities around Oconomowoc and finally the state banned the display of lawn fertilizer containing phosphorus.
- The Lac La Belle Environmental Foundation was formed as a partner non-profit to acquire land and easements on land important to protect the lake.

What I see today – challenges still

- Much bigger houses, less natural shoreline as new residents “ Clean up and manicure their shorelines: one result is more geese – goose poop on lawns and in lake. – Lake district has a goose control program.
- Bigger piers, patios on the lakeshore – less near shore habitat.
- Exotics have come, exploded, and diminished: Eurasian milfoil, rusty crayfish, purple loosestrife, zebra mussels, More could be on the way – quagga mussels, jumping Asian carp, clean you boat if you move from lake to lake.
- Farm runoff – the farm on the South side of the lake is stabilized, storm water retention ponds are installed along highway 16 West to slow and filter the stormwater entering the lake through the Shorehaven culvert.
- New rules have just been approved regarding sediment and phosphorus – possible funding from nutrient trading – read article but currently the problem remains. Talks are ongoing between the farmer to the north and the Village and Lake District, and the runoff continues.
- The lawn fertilizer law was weakened to allow the display of phosphorus containing fertilizer if it is labeled starter fertilizer – but it’s back on the shelves.
- Storm water washes all pollutants from roads and lawns into lake. Some good news - the city is sweeping it’s streets and cleaning it’s storm sewer catch basins and there are doggy doo bags on the walk around Fowler lake.
- There is still a serious lack of aquatic plants. There is not enough fish habitat, habitat –but a good sign is that there is more plant diversity. Good fish habitat is the key to keeping a balanced fish population to keep carp from dominating. If that happens, and the carp get the upper hand again, we will have even less plants, more algae blooms, and more phosphorus stirred up from the sediments.
- There is a great need to educate boaters to clean their boats before entering or leaving Lac La Belle.
- We are seeing less winter ice cover – whatever you think the cause is, lakes in Wisconsin are having much shorter periods of ice cover during the winter months. Ice fishing, ice boating and skating are not as much a sure thing as they were in past decades.

I see good signs:

- I am seeing more aquatic plant diversity along shores – Illinois, sago and large leafed pondweeds, spiny naiad.
- The Lac La Belle Lake District is encouraging people to restore natural shorelines, and a number have been in place long enough to look healthy and beautiful.
- The fishing is better – and I see more minnows along the shore – nibbling our toes.
- This year there is clearer water along shore thanks to the drought –this shows lake can improve if we can better control runoff. This year I was not afraid to let my grandson play in the water on our shoreline. Last year, with all the rain we had, I feared the toxicity of algae blooms for children and pets. Watch out for soupy looking water.
- Talks are proceeding with the farm to the north, and the Lake District has a fund saved up to cost share practices needed to improve that situation if the farmer will cooperate.
- The City of Oconomowoc is a new [Water Star](#) community – this new program recognizes communities making an outstanding commitment to take better care of our lakes, river, wetlands and groundwater.

And still there is Magic - We love to watch the shimmering moonlight over the water, hearing the loons call in the spring, skating on black ice and seeing fish move beneath our feet – paddling in the morning mist. Our children and

many others learned to sail here - also learning courage, responsibility, sportsmanship, and how to become teachers themselves. Overall we love the beauty and ever-changing panorama of our beautiful lake.

We are always learning something new – the latest is the [wonderful world of mussels](#) . Our native mussels are threatened by the invading zebra mussels, but they are still here.

Also new – Joe Weix’s book about life on the lake is available at the Oconomowoc library and the historical society.

With the pleasure of living here, we also have the responsibility to learn how to care for it – and your lake management district is dedicated to leading the way for preserving and restoring, where possible, the beautiful lake we all enjoy.

What you can do:

- [Natural shorelines](#) - Lake District has grants and demo sites - to restore the most productive and sensitive (and the most impacted by development) part of the lake ‘s biology. You can volunteer to help plant them next year, or restore your own.
- If a tree falls into the lake, leave that tree in the water – it’s great fish habitat and you can enjoy watching the fish and wildlife it supports.
- Natural lawns – keep fertilizer and pesticides out of the lake
- Appreciate your lake plants – invite them to live along the shore. Plant floaters - Notice minnows
- Get to know your river basin – The Oconomowoc River flows to the Rock River and on to the Mississippi
- Watch the [Waterstar webinars](#) to learn how your community can help our lake and river system be healthier
- If you’d like a project - Grow some beetles – control loosestrife in our wetlands

More information:

[Lake Tides – free newsletter](#) from the UW Extension Lakes TEam

[Lac La Belle Management Plan](#)

Join [Wisconsin Lakes](#) to support citizen lake management organizations across the state.

Join the [Rock River Coalition](#) - newsletter & Events about our great river basin

Attend the [Wisconsin Lakes Convention](#) April 9 – 11 2013

[Lake Leaders institute](#) – a chance to learn all about getting involved with lakes and lake issues in your community and statewide.