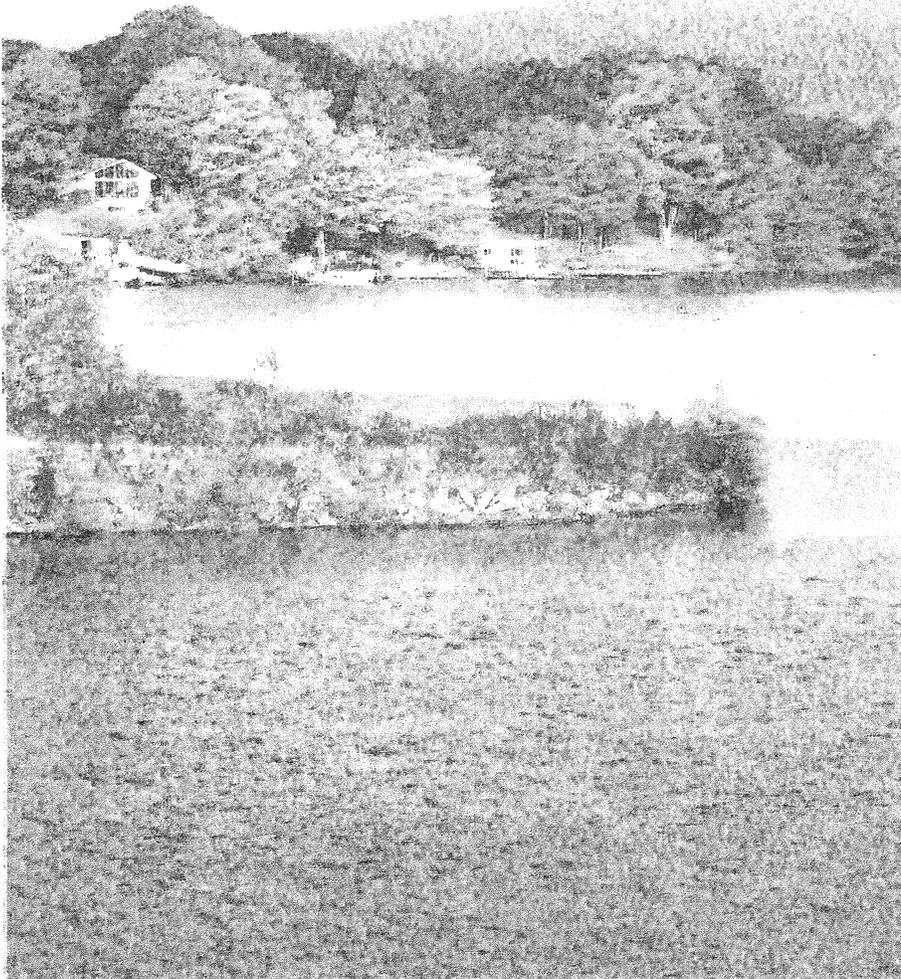


Lake Wausau: IN NEED OF SOME FRIENDS

A new effort to revive a lake association could mean much better days ahead for the weed-choked, algae-filled body of water



Rib Mountain State Park has a friends group.

The Mountain-Bay Trail has a friends group. The city and county parks have their own foundation looking out for them.

Lake Wausau has a ghost group. Lake Wausau has 83-year-old Phil Schoenfeldt, who every year faithfully mails in the annual renewal of the nonprofit status of the very much dormant Lake Wausau Association. That letter goes out once a year to the state secretary of state's office. No dues notices go out and no dues come in.

Although it's likely things are about to change, practically the only activity on Lake Wausau's behalf is that mailing.

The lake association has been so close to invisible that when Scott Provost spoke last week to the Rib Mountain Town Board about the state of Lake Wausau, he talked about what a good thing it would be if interested local people would form a lake association.

The Department of Natural Resources water resources specialist didn't know there is an organization waiting to be revived — and nobody even has to fill out all the forms. Schoenfeldt, who lives in Rib Mountain, says he kept the group on life support, despite having no meetings for perhaps a dozen years, and he is more than willing to turn it over to people who are more energized.

And having an energized group of citizens willing to flex some political and social clout could be a good thing not only for the communities around the body of water, but also for everyone interested in water quality on the Wisconsin River (which forms the lake above the Rothschild dam).

Rib Mountain resident Jim Nauta last month addressed the town board about rampant weed and algae growth, making the water unpleasant to look at and difficult to boat through. Nauta, who lives on the lake, says he would like to see fewer weeds, more cleanup efforts, more boater safety patrol and other efforts.

Ralph Merwin, another resident, was at last week's meeting for a different reason, but ended up joining Nauta in volunteering to look into the possibility of a lake association that would work to improve the lake for all its users. Merwin says the lake is beautiful in May before aquatic weed growth has taken off, but by August, the body of water — one of the area's defining natural features — is not an inviting body of water.

Town Supervisor Fred Schaefer said he thought there might be a remnant group out there somewhere and he was right.

Led by example

Not only is there a group that can be dusted off and enlivened, there's also the Big Eau Pleine Citizens Organization (BEPCO) whose leaders are willing to advise a rejuvenated Lake Wausau Association on what has worked for them.

BEPCO became much more active after a massive and ugly fish kill in February 2009. Low water and low oxygen combined to essentially suffocate about two-thirds of the fish in the main part of the flowage, which joins the Wisconsin River well south of Lake Wausau, below Mosinee.

Michael Paul, who lives on the flowage and is president of BEPCO, says the group achieved an early goal of getting the aerator shaped up to improve the water's oxygen content during months of ice cover. Now they want to improve things upstream to the point where nutrient levels are low enough and oxygen levels high enough so the aerator can be relegated to standby status.

Though BEPCO's name does not reflect it, the group is organized as a lake association. Like the group in Wausau that might be getting new life, it's essentially a service club for anybody who cares about the body of water. There are a few guidelines for forming the association, but the group has almost no power other than persuasion.

Wisconsin law also allows for the formation of a lake district. The board of a lake district has the authority to levy a small tax on properties within its boundaries to pay for things that might include mechanical aquatic weed harvesting, navigational aids and boat landings.

Provost says a lake association can run its own fundraising events or it can apply for grants to help with projects, but it cannot levy a tax like a lake district can. The group's clout comes more from its membership numbers.

If one guy complains to a town board about aquatic weeds, little is likely to happen. If a group with 100 or so members makes noise, associations and communities start to listen.

The DNR welcomes the involvement of locally focused lake associations, says Carroll Schaal, who works for the department's lake management section out of Madison. The state has matching grant funds, Schaal says, and the associations help to make sure that money is spent on a need that has been identified as important. "People think we're a huge agency, but we can't be on all lakes and it's easier for us to speak with people who are familiar with those lakes."

The single issue behind the impetus for forming most lake associations, Schaal says, is excessive weed growth. Also right up there are water quality concerns and worries about invasive species of plants and non-native creatures. Lake associations in the southern part of the state work on existing problems. Associations in the northern tier of counties work mostly on preventing problems.

Past practices

Solutions such as bringing in a mechanical weed harvester can quickly cost a lot of money, according to Schofield resident Jeff Jackson. He remembers back when he was a member of the Lake Wausau Association and looked into hiring a harvester and operator. The price then was \$150 an hour and, when the harvested weeds are brought ashore, they become a disposal problem. Schaal says some lake associations that really wanted harvesting services banded together and jointly purchased a harvester to share.

Schaal also has seen lake associations raise money to buy islands and sections of shoreline to preserve them from development. Other associations have installed fish cribs to provide underwater nursery areas that increase fish numbers. Associations have also helped to pay for fish stocking, secured fix-up help for failing dams and brought pressure to reduce pollution and excessive nutrients coming in from tributaries.

If Lake Wausau really was a lake instead of a flowage between the hydroelectric dam in Wausau and to the paper mill dam in Rothschild, Schaal would have another option to consider. If the chemical alum is

sprinkled in a lake, it settles to the bottom where it combines with phosphorous. The phosphorous — the principal contributor to excessive algae and plant growth — is locked up and unavailable to plants, so water clarity improves, making the lake more attractive and pleasant.

As a flowage, though, Lake Wausau receives additional phosphorous nearly continually. Any alum treatments would need to be repeated with the steady arrival of what is essentially fresh fertilizer.

A study done in 1987 concluded that Lake Wausau receives 700,000 pounds of phosphorous per year from upstream sources. Provost says one pound of phosphorous is enough to grow five pounds of algae, so that's 3.5 million pounds of algae.

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There are some real success stories. Big Muskego Lake had degenerated into a shallow, weed-choked expanse full of carp. After a lake association-led cleanup and dredging, fishing and recreation increased so much they're adding boat ramps

Some of that algae and weed growth washes up on Jackson's shoreline off of Radtke Street in Schofield. His property faces west and south, so the prevailing winds blow the plant material up on the shore starting in August, piling up to the point where it begins to decay. It looks crummy and it stinks. He tries to shovel it up and dispose of it, but, "It's a losing battle. There's so much of it and it's so heavy."

Jackson quit the previous association when it struck him that the membership had become more interested in periodic picnics than in tackling cleanup efforts. He predicts broad support if a new group gets going. "I would welcome some effort at a cleanup where the property owners have some stake in the improvements. It's basically their backyards."

Jackson still enjoys getting out on the lake and says it is a valuable resource. Early last week — before the flooding began — he had a fish on for 30 seconds or so that broke his line and left him to imagine a large, toothy muskie. Memories like that convince Jackson that another organized effort would be worthwhile. He recalls the earlier association did lake cleanups that resulted in truckloads of trash being hauled away.

Schoenfeldt says they also put up markers to show the location of the main channel and established, with the DNR's approval, some slow no-wake zones. They brought in speakers on regulations dealing with docks and shoreline protection. They even furnished ice anglers with trash bags printed with the association's name in the hope that trash would not be left on the ice when shanties are removed. That practice stopped when they found many of the bags left out on the ice.

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Marathon County Public Library

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..... **Events & Activities**

Nov Kids, Plant Your Own Mini-Garden (grades K-2) / Mon, 10/4, 1:00-2:00pm; (grades 3-5) / Mon, 10/4, 2:30-3:30pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Market Gardener Karen Schmitt / Mon, 10/4, 4:00-5:30 pm. (@MCPL Edgar)
 Organic Farming & Buying Local Through a CSA / Tues, 10/5, 6:30-8:00pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 How the Yolk Your Garden? / Tues, 10/5, 9:00-10:00am. (MCPL Spencer)
 Illustration: Yong Lee / Sat, 10/9, 1:00-3:00pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Seeds, Seeds, everywhere a Seed / Mon, 10/11, 7:00-8:00pm. (@MCPL Athens)
 Neighbors' Place Community Garden Program / Tues, 10/12, 6:30-8:00pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Learn About Plants & Make a Dirt Spider / Wed, 10/13, 4:00-5:30pm. (@MCPL Edgar)
 Fall Gardening Program / Wed, 10/13, 6:30-8:00pm (held at Stratford Community Hall, 300 E. Larch Street). (@MCPL Stratford)
 Harvest Paper Crafts / Thurs, 10/14, 1:30-2:30pm (held at the Stratford Library). (@MCPL Stratford)
 Introducing the Robert W. Mott Gardens / Thurs, 10/14, 6:30-8:00pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Make Mama Family Concert / Sat, 10/16, 10:30-11:30am. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Craft's Market, Ribbers, Picking Zoo / Thurs, 10/28, 1:00-3:00pm. (@MCPL Wausau)
 Marathon County Reads and Garden Seeds Craft Day / Thurs, 10/28, 1:00-4:00pm. (@MCPL Rothschild)

For more details on these Seedfolks programs, check with your local branch or visit our website at mcpl.us.

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 Tues, 10/12, 2:00pm (@MCPL Hatley)
 Thurs, 10/14, 6:30pm (@MCPL Athens)
 Mon, 10/18, 1:00pm (@MCPL Mosinee)
 Mon, 10/18, 1:00pm (@MCPL Stratford)
 Sat, 10/23, 1:00pm (@MCPL Marathon City)
 Wed, 10/27, 11:00am (@MCPL Rothschild)

Haven't read the book yet?
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You may also request the book online at mcpl.us.

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Membership was \$10 a year, and many of the members pitched in with their boats to clean up shorelines and shallows. Schoenfeldt says if area residents are convinced there's a pressing need to improve the lake and that their involvement can help, they will show up again.

A little clout yield results

Rib Mountain town officials had offered to help any lake association, but there will have to be buy-in from all the other municipalities that touch its shores — Wausau, Schofield and Rothschild. "This is not just a Rib Mountain issue," Nauta says. The startup might take awhile, he says, because municipal leaders at this time of year are dealing with budget issues, but something should be done. "You can't just sit on your hands."

There is a cleanup each year organized with DNR assistance, but that is usually a one-day event that harvests a lot of student energy and then is not seen again for 364 days.

Michael Paul of BEPCO says he and other group leaders on the Big Eau Pleine would come to an organizational meeting to discuss how to get going. Issues won't be the same, but a similar organizational structure could work. BEPCO has a board of directors that meets monthly and holds quarterly meetings for the entire membership.

A big concern on the Eau Pleine has been water levels that are drawn down in periods of light rainfalls to levels that make boating difficult or dangerous, but the ongoing issue is the nutrient contribution from the watershed comprised of 16 towns in three counties.

Paul says a lake association lacks for legal authority, but can push for action. "Whenever you have the public involved, you can be heard and you have leverage. You don't have power to do a lot, but you

can bring things to the table and make some noise." Power comes from the group.

Lots of help is available. UW-Stevens Point hosts a UW-Extension lakes group that advises associations. At that office, Eric Olson says there are hundreds of lake associations in the state, some with more than 100 members and some that are dormant until a specific issue arises. The DNR has a manual for lake associations and there is a state group of associations that has informational meetings.

Conditions are so bad in the flowages below Wisconsin Rapids — Castle Rock and Petenwell — that owner associations got legislative action after simply inviting their lawmakers out to take a whiff of the air along the shoreline where weeds and algae accumulate.

Olson explained a new law Provost mentioned at the Rib Mountain meeting. He says the new phosphorous regulation is aimed at reducing phosphorous in Wisconsin waters. For the first time, there can

be a ruling that a flowage or lake is "non-conforming." With that ruling, the DNR is forced to come up with a plan to improve the situation.

Toxic algae and other nasties

Water quality issues can become health concerns, says Bill Duncanson, head of the Wausau/Marathon County parks department. Blue-green algae, like that which "blooms" on the Big Eau Pleine in some late summers, are actually somewhat toxic. Duncanson says, in the past year, that 35 people across the state have complained of being sickened and two dogs have died from ingesting the algae.

Lake Wausau's water is not tested for swimming safety because there are no municipal beaches. And there may never be any. There are several reasons Wausau has preferred pools to beaches. One reason is water clarity. With all the tannin in the river water, a lifeguard wouldn't see a swimmer more than 2 feet below the surface. Any swimming area established would soon have a muddy bottom, he says, and water currents add danger and can result in the bottom changing from year to year.

Duncanson recalls when the Wausau Lake Association was active and says he would welcome its return. Part of the challenge will be the expanses of shallow areas, he says. Water has to be about 12 feet deep before light penetration diminishes to the point where rooted aquatic plants will not grow. He hands a visitor a map of the lake showing nearly half of the lake acreage being less than 5 feet deep.

There are some real success stories out there, Schaal says. Big Muskego Lake in Waukesha County, for example, had degenerated into a shallow, weed-choked expanse full of carp and excess nutrients. Those nutrients cycle through the lake system, he says, combining with sunlight to aid plant growth that dies in the fall and settles to the bottom to add to the next year's nutrient load. On Big Muskego, after study, planning and fundraising, they drew down water levels, killed off the carp, reduced the flow of sewer discharge into the lake and dredged soil from the bottom to create islands and deeper holes. The fishing, duck hunting, boating and other recreation grew so much they now are having to add boat ramps.

Lake Wausau could provide a similar success story, but first somebody has to wake up that lake association. Nauta forecasts that organizational and planning meetings will start in a few months and those will result in a general membership drive and visible action. He suggests that anyone wanting to be involved right away call the Rib Mountain town hall at 842-0983.

Provost says one of the virtues of lake associations is that they provide for local guidance and control. A first step for an association is usually a community survey to see what is important to area residents. "You've got to see what the people want and not just the people who live on it. The lake belongs to the people of Wisconsin." ☐

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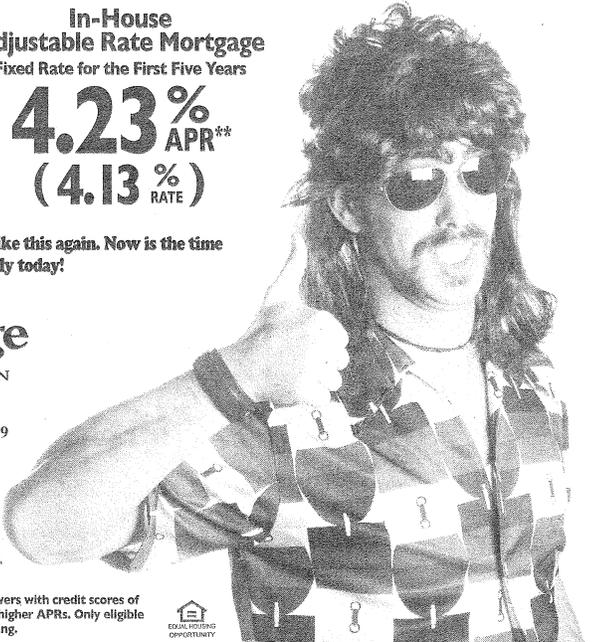
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