



# LIFE JACKET LOANERS SAVE LIVES

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By Peter R. Jensen, Wisconsin Certified Emergency Manager and Former Chairperson of Eagle Spring Lake Management District

**M**ore and more lake organizations are stepping up their water-safety measures by adding Life Jacket Loaner Stations at boat launches across the country. These stations make it easy for anyone heading out on the water to borrow a life jacket and return it when they're done. It's a simple idea with a big impact—especially since the most common boating citation in Wisconsin is the failure to carry enough life jackets on board.

Loaner stations come in all shapes and sizes, and communities can choose designs that fit their launch sites. Building them can be a great local project, too.

*(Continued on page 2)*

*The Life Jacket Loaner Station on Eagle Spring Lake offers everyone a safe way to enjoy the water.*



PETER JENSEN



CHRIS WHALEN

# LAKETIDES

The newsletter for people interested in Wisconsin's lakes.

*(Life Jacket Loaners Save Lives, continued)*

# CONTENTS

## 03

SISTERS PROTECT FISH LAKE

## 04

HEALTHY LAKES & RIVERS - LAKE HELEN, PORTAGE COUNTY

## 06

EE HELPS INSPIRE, ENGAGE AND ACTIVATE

## 08

EXPLORING THE UNDERWATER WORLD - OUR NATIVE MUSSELS

## 11

CAPACITY CORNER - CREATE A MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

## 12

WHITEFISH LAKE COMMUNITY STEPS UP TO ADDRESS AIS

## 14

LAKE TIDES SURVEY RESULTS

Schools with woodworking classes, technical colleges with carpentry programs, local construction companies, scouting groups, and handy community members often pitch in. Many hardware and building-supply stores are willing to donate materials as well.

Once a station is up, the next step is stocking it. Grants from groups like the Sea Tow Foundation can help, and sporting goods stores, big box retailers, and local businesses (think taverns and boat dealers) often make great sponsors. Infant, child, and youth life jackets tend to be borrowed the most, which makes sense given that drowning is the leading cause of death for children under age five.

And if you're wondering about theft, good news: it's very rare. In fact, many stations report that donated life jackets far outnumber any that go missing.

**Boatus.org** has step-by-step instructions and resources to help you set up a Life Jacket Loaner Station on your lake. You can also check out the "Life Jacket Loaner Program" page on the Sea Tow Foundation website under "Programs and Awards" for manuals, program information, grant opportunities, and a map of over 1,300 stations across the U.S.

[boatingsafety.com](http://boatingsafety.com)



AMY KOWALSKI

# GLACIAL SANCTUARY

## SISTERS PROTECT FISH LAKE

By Eric Olson, Director, Extension Lakes

Tucked away in the northeast corner of Lincoln County is a special collection of smaller kettle lakes known as the Harrison Hills. Shaped by the glaciers thousands of years ago, the hilly landscape was not easily farmed and as a result much of it was forfeited to the county after the clearcut era. Lincoln County entered the land into the County Forest program and a mixed hardwood forest eventually returned. The county forest land protects over a dozen lakes from development, but there are private lands interspersed in the area. Development pressure among the lakes is growing as the area is close to Wausau and only ten miles from State Highway 51.

One of the larger private holdings in the Harrison Hills is owned by The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross of Merrill. Back in 1964, the Sisters purchased nearly 200 acres as a peaceful retreat and recreation area for their members as a place to rest,

reflect, and enjoy the outdoors.

At the heart of the property is Fish Lake, a quiet 40-acre lake that's 20 feet deep. It remains largely undeveloped, with only a small collection of cabins that the Sisters use in the summer.

Over time, the Sisters began thinking of the future. They recognized that ownership can change, and with it, the possibility of development. Wanting to ensure the land and lake remained protected for generations, they started looking for ways to leave a lasting legacy.

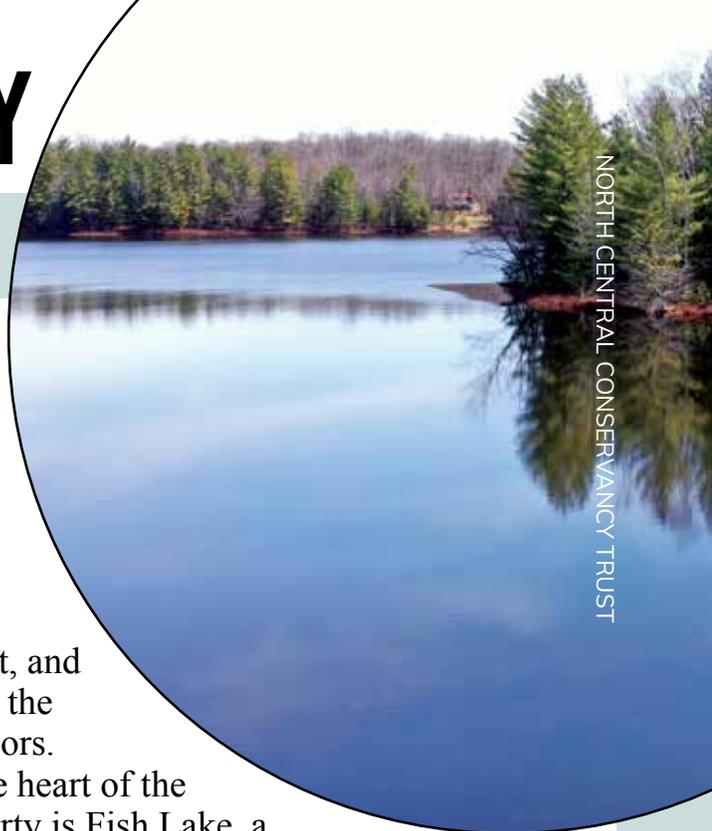
In 2019, they connected with North Central Conservancy Trust (NCCT) to discuss donating a conservation easement for their land.

### What is a conservation easement?

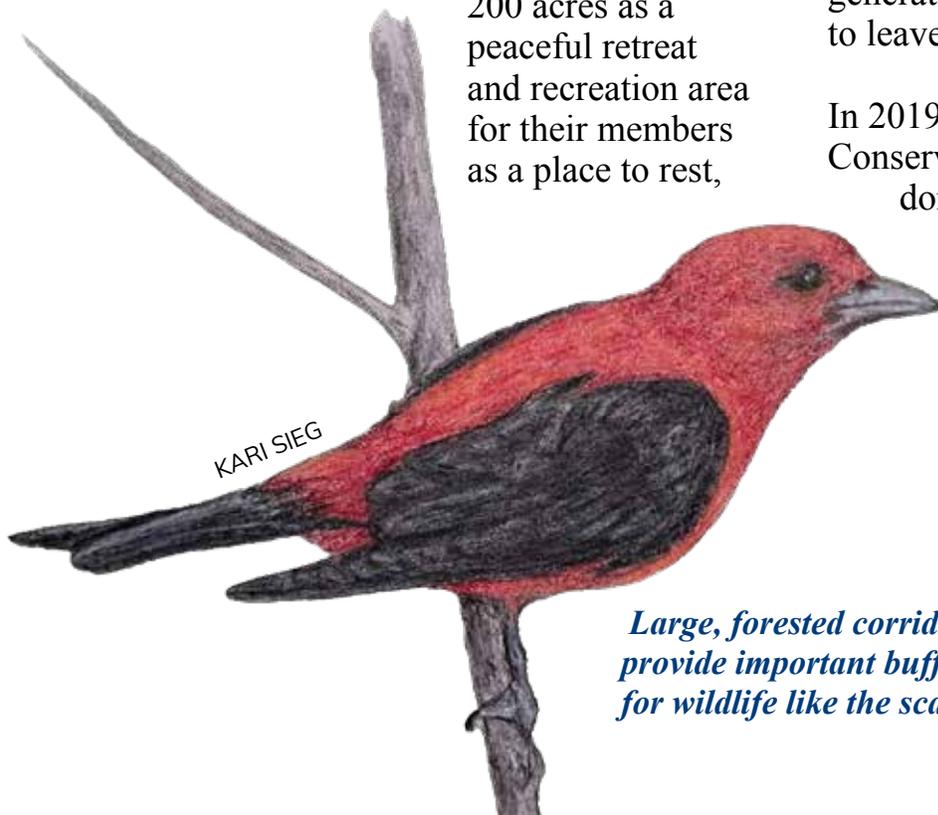
In simple terms, it's a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a land trust like NCCT.

*(Continued on page 15)*

*Large, forested corridors such as these provide important buffers and are needed for wildlife like the scarlet tanager.*



NORTH CENTRAL CONSERVANCY TRUST



KARI SEIG

# WATERBODY SPOTLIGHT

## LAKE HELEN, PORTAGE COUNTY

By Tracy Arnold, County Conservationist, Portage County



TRACY ARNOLD

**“Fantastic program that is so simple and easy to use.”**

*~ Fred and Erica Stoeger*

**L**ake Helen Protection and Rehabilitation District is a standout in Portage County when it comes to community involvement. Powered by dedicated lakeshore property owners, this group has updated management plans, collected water quality data, and installed many Healthy Lakes & Rivers practices.

Back in 2019, County staff began spreading the word about the Healthy Lakes & Rivers grant program to folks on lakes in Portage County. Two Lake Helen residents jumped at the opportunity to install native plantings. Once those practices were in and the Healthy Lakes & Rivers signs popped up along the shoreline, interest really took off.

Neighbors saw how easy the projects were to complete, and more importantly, the

difference they made. The native plantings added beauty, improved habitat, and supported water quality. Before long, more folks were adding their name to the grant application each year.

Today, Lake Helen Protection and Rehabilitation District has successfully installed over 30 Healthy Lakes & Rivers practices, mostly native plantings and fish sticks structures. These projects don't just benefit the property owners and Lake Helen. They've become demonstration sites that inspire lake residents throughout Portage County and into neighboring counties.

Fred and Erica Stoeger, Lake Helen residents remarked, “The program was wonderful! Tracy assisted us in the design, selecting the best plants, filling out the paperwork

for reimbursement and even showed up on planting day. The entire process was so easy we did it a second time and love the beautiful lakefront we created. Fantastic program that is so simple and easy to use.”

Rebecca and Dylan Abler didn’t just talk about protecting Lake Helen, they got to work.

“We have been incredibly fortunate to receive three Healthy Lakes and Rivers grants—for a native planting, fish sticks, and a rain garden—and the application process was truly painless.”

They began with a native shoreline planting, then helped connect it with a neighbor’s project. Dylan later teamed up with other property owners to install 13 fish sticks projects, creating a hotspot for birds, turtles, and fish.

Their newest addition is a rain garden that captures runoff from their pole shed before it reaches the lake.

“These projects have not only protected water quality, but they’ve transformed our



TRACY ARNOLD

property into a thriving habitat. It feels good knowing we’re doing our part to keep the lake healthy.”

“The Healthy Lakes & Rivers grant program made it easy for us to take meaningful action to protect Lake Helen.” 💧



TRACY ARNOLD

**“These projects have not only protected water quality, but they’ve transformed our property into a thriving habitat.”**

*~ Rebecca and Dylan Abler*



# ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

## HELPS INSPIRE, ENGAGE AND ACTIVATE

By Dr. Becca Franzen, Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education, College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point



SHANNON KEARNEY

**Spark curiosity, get people involved, and motivate your community to care about local waterways.**

If you care about Wisconsin's lakes, you're probably hoping others will feel that same connection. But how do you spark that interest? How do you get people inspired, engaged, and ready to take action for our waters?

That's where environmental education comes in. It's all about helping people build a deeper understanding of the environment—what's happening, why it matters, and how their choices make a difference. One program or activity alone won't shift attitudes or inspire long-term change. The end goal of environmental education is environmental literacy: giving people the knowledge, context, and motivation to act on the issues they care about. So how do we nurture that kind of literacy across all ages? Environmental educators often follow five core tenets or guiding principles that help shape meaningful, lasting learning experiences.

The *Five Tenets of Environmental Education* are a great compass as you collaborate with others and explore the possibilities. The Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education can also lend support with resources like hands-on kits that can be checked out for free. [uwsp.edu/wcee](http://uwsp.edu/wcee)

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point K-12 Aquatic Education Collaborative can connect you with other water education opportunities. [uwsp.edu/wcee/wcee/aquatic-collaborative/](http://uwsp.edu/wcee/wcee/aquatic-collaborative/)

Curious and want to dig deeper into environmental education? Check out the North American Association for Environmental Education website. [naee.org/about/ee](http://naee.org/about/ee)



AMY KOWALSKI

# FIVE TENETS OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

## 1 Raise Awareness (Awareness)

Awareness deepens when people slow down, engage their senses, and experience the environment firsthand. For example, have participants sit along the shoreline and journal about what they see, smell, hear, and touch.

## 2 Increase Knowledge (Knowledge)

What do participants need to understand about the lake? Invite them to explore food webs, lake ecosystem relationships, and key issues such as native and invasive species, runoff, and shoreline erosion. While building knowledge is essential, it's only a starting point. It's important to move beyond information to a deeper understanding and, eventually, action.

## 3 Identify Values (Values)

Consider your own values related to lakes. What do you value the most? Environmental education supports participants exploring their own values, role playing to learn about the values of others, and listening to others. For example, try a value-continuum activity, where participants respond to statements (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and discuss why they chose their position (seeking diverse answers). Start with a statement such as, "Water is the most valuable element on the planet." Then, move to a statement like, "Silent sports are the best way to recreate on the lake." Keep your audience and learning goals in mind.

## 4 Develop Skills (Action Skills)

Here's where you provide experiences to help your audience develop skills. For example, you might teach people to take various measurements of water quality—anything from collecting macroinvertebrates to measuring the clarity of water using a Secchi disk to identifying invasive species.

## 5 Take Action (Action Experiences)

Provide participants with the opportunity to take action that positively impacts the environment, such as talking to neighbors, giving local presentations, organizing volunteer groups, or developing and implementing a plan to improve water quality. If your lake group is small or you don't have time to develop a plan, there are several "ready-to-go" programs like Clean Boats, Clean Waters, Citizen Lake Monitoring Network, or Healthy Lakes & Rivers. Find out more about these on the Extension Lakes website.

[uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes](http://uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes)



# Our Native Mussels

By Lisie Kitchel and Jesse Weinzinger, Wisconsin DNR

One of the unsung heroes in the lakes, rivers, and streams of Wisconsin are our native mussels (often referred to as clams). Living on the bottom, these creatures are often overlooked but contribute significantly to the health of our waters. Each mussel can filter gallons of water a day, removing suspended sediment and contaminants from the water column; they are nature's power houses.

These underappreciated filter factories are important to improving water quality, but

that is not all they do; they provide food for raccoons, muskrats, otters, and wading birds. Freshwater mussels also provide food for aquatic insects and crayfish when they expel what they do not consume into a gelatinous mass (called pseudo-feces) that the other aquatic invertebrates gobble up. This might seem minor, but when a mussel die-off occurs the aquatic insect and crayfish populations also decline and not from the source of the die-off. These aquatic invertebrates need mussels to make food from the water column that is otherwise unavailable to them and other creatures living on the bottom.

People often ask if you can eat mussels, and although technically you can, we do not recommend it. Also, it is illegal to harvest native mussels from Wisconsin waters. First, they are not at all palatable (based on what folks have told us), and more importantly, they are full of contaminants. Native Americans consumed mussels in large numbers, as evidenced by the shell piles near

*This pocketbook mussel, one of 52 native species, is filtering contaminants and suspended sediments from its underwater home.*



AMY KOWALSKI

**Community members used buckets to move mussels to deeper water and let them live another day when dam work on the Wisconsin River caused low water near Stevens Point.**

the old fish camps, but that was before modern pollutants entered our waters. Today, tribes no longer eat mussels, though the shells are still used for ceremonial purposes. The shells, with their shiny mother-of-pearl and sometimes other color interiors, are more commonly found in the water along the shoreline than live mussels. Sometimes live mussels are observed moving amongst the sand in shallow water, but most of the time these important creatures go unnoticed.

Recent droughts have also left many mussels exposed, and thousands of mussels left high and dry have been reported by concerned citizens. These mussels were often trying to reach deeper water but could not find it. If you see a freshwater mussel “stranded” out of the water that is not already desiccated and dead, you can simply throw them in deeper water.

Unfortunately, we lost far more mussels than could be saved and can only hope there are enough

*(Continued on page 10)*



LISIE KITCHEL

***A stranded pocketbook mussel (Lampsilis cardium) trying to find deeper water during drought conditions.***

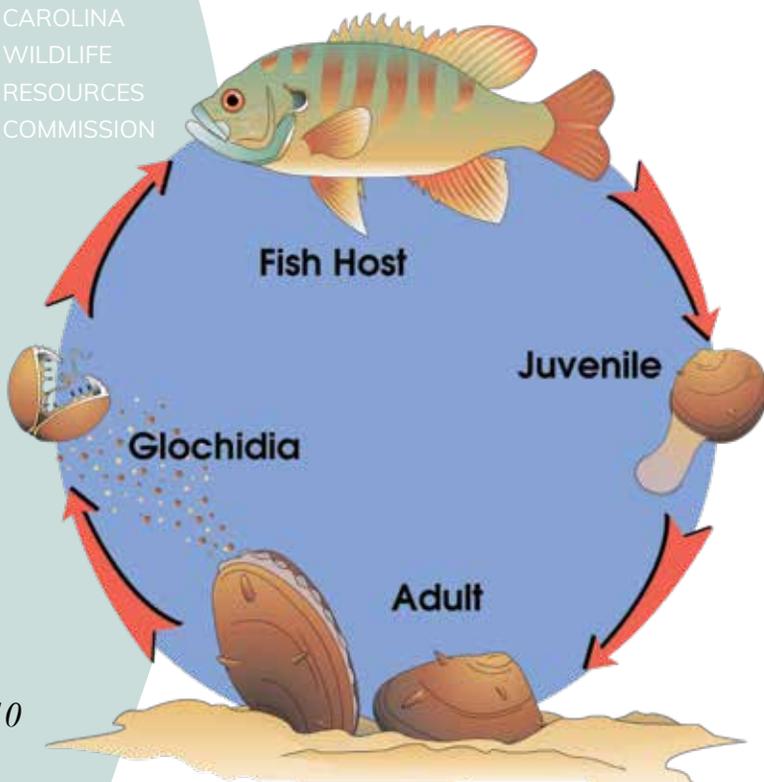
*(Our Native Mussels, continued)*

remaining mussels to restore those populations. The Friends of the Lower Wisconsin River set up a mussel rescue notification system to let folks know when water levels drop and mussels are at risk of being stranded. While the effort is mostly focused on the lower Wisconsin River, alerts may also include other riverways in the region.

Mussels can become stranded any time of year, but it happens most often in late summer when water levels run low. That said, sudden reservoir drawdowns, dam maintenance, or even unexpected dam failures can leave mussels high and dry at other times of the year, too.

Another underappreciated and unique aspect of our native mussels is their complicated life cycle. There are both male and female mussels and you can tell the gender in some species by their shell shape. The males release sperm into the water column in ‘sperm balls’ which amazingly make it to a female of that same species. The fertilized eggs develop into

NORTH  
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## Want to hear more about mussels?

Come listen to Bre Klockzien’s presentation “Mussel Monitoring in Chippewa County” at the 2026 WI Lakes and Rivers Convention in Stevens Point on April 17 at 8:00 AM.

a miniature mussel called a glochidia that is a snappy little bivalve that looks like Pac-Man®. The sole purpose of this glochidia is to get onto the gills of a fish. It needs the fish blood to complete its development. However, not just any fish will do! Some mussels have many fish ‘hosts’ that can complete their life cycle, but other mussel species only use one fish species. One particular mussel only uses the mudpuppy as a host and that’s not even a fish!

To ensure the glochidia get on the required host fish, mussels have adapted different strategies designed to attract the right fish. Many with a predatory host have developed a ‘fish lure’ as part of their soft tissues to lure the fish close enough to spit the glochidia into its mouth and subsequently onto the gills. Others release the glochidia in a kind of egg mass that looks like worms or aquatic insects and the fish eat them, allowing the glochidia to pass onto the gills. One species grabs the head of the fish and won’t let go until it has pumped all its glochidia onto the gills! These are a few of the many methods used by Wisconsin’s 52 species of native mussels. After the glochidia complete their development in the presence of the fish blood they drop off the fish and continue their existence for the next 10-60+ years, depending on the species.

All this goes on underwater, unbeknownst to most folks, so if you see a mussel, pick it up and thank it for working so hard and surviving its amazingly complicated life cycle. Then, toss it into deeper water. 💧

# LAKE ORGANIZATION CAPACITY

*In each issue, we share ideas and resources to help your organization build its capacity to care for Wisconsin's lakes. This time, we're circling back to membership capacity—essentially, the value your organization brings to its current and possible future supporters. One tool that can strengthen that connection is a membership survey.*



## CREATE A MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

By Sara Windjue, Leadership and Capacity Development Specialist, Extension Lakes

A survey gives members a chance to share their thoughts anonymously, including those who do not attend meetings. Most groups hear from a few voices over and over, while many others stay silent. A survey levels the playing field and invites everyone to weigh in. Developing a good survey takes time. We are happy to work with you to ensure your survey gets you the information you need. Steps for a successful membership survey:

### 1. Determine your audience.

Decide if you'll survey only paying members or if you want to hear from all potential members.

### 2. Set clear objectives.

Know what you want to learn and how you will use the results. Don't ask for feedback you won't use.

### 3. Choose how you will distribute the survey and protect anonymity.

- Direct mail works well for people without internet access, but you'll need to print, mail, and manually analyze responses.
- Email is efficient if you have members' email addresses, and online tools make data analysis very easy.
- Phone calls allow follow-up questions and personal connection, but they aren't anonymous; however, you can keep their responses confidential by detaching their name.
- Door-to-door outreach builds relationships and inspires conversation, but is time consuming and not anonymous.

### 4. Consider offering an incentive.

Free memberships, gift cards, or lake-themed merchandise can boost response rates. Remember, incentives will require you to know

who completed the survey, but these names don't have to be linked to responses.

### 5. Write clear, unbiased questions.

Keep your survey short (no more than 10 questions) and make sure it's clear and impartial by running it by a few reviewers. You can use open-ended or multiple-choice questions, or a mix of both.

### 6. Test your survey.

Try it out with a small focus group to catch confusing wording and technical or logistical issues.

### 7. Send it with a clear deadline.

Two weeks is usually enough time. A reminder as the deadline approaches can help increase responses.

### 8. Analyze and share the results.

Provide graphs and short summaries to make the findings understandable. Discuss results at an open meeting so members can see that their input matters and is being taken seriously.

Start with an example membership survey on the Extension Lakes website under "Lake Organizations." Open "Capacity Corner", then "Membership." 💧

# A United Effort

## WHITEFISH LAKE COMMUNITY STEPS UP TO ADDRESS AIS

By Eric Olson, Director, Extension Lakes

**Lake residents didn't panic when EWM was found in Whitefish Lake, instead they rallied.**

**W**hitefish Lake in Douglas County has long been a destination for people seeking the perfect lake from nearby Duluth and the Twin Cities. Whitefish is both deep (over 100 feet) and clear (Secchi depths between 20 and 30 feet). The cold deep waters of the lake support a healthy population of cisco as well as several rare and endangered plants. The Whitefish Lake Conservation Organization (WILCO) has been working for over 50 years to protect the lake and its unique plant and fish communities.

### **Protecting What Matters Most**

WILCO was among the “early adopters” of the Clean Boats, Clean Waters watercraft inspection program. In a typical summer, volunteers and hired students connect with over 1,000 boaters and anglers, sharing AIS prevention steps as they come and go. Thanks to such diligence, Whitefish Lake has been largely free of aquatic invasive species (AIS)—with the exception of the 2019 discovery of mystery snails. While mystery snails have less extreme impacts on waters than other AIS, WILCO has proactively worked to manage their population by removing 13,000 pounds of snails in the last three years!



*See video of Whitefish Lake's snail removal efforts on diver Ryan Marshik's YouTube channel.*

With such a major focus on preventing and managing AIS, WILCO leadership was disheartened when Department of Natural Resources (DNR) biologists discovered populations of Eurasian watermilfoil (EWM) near the public boat launch late last summer. The DNR's plant survey was part of a directed lakes study, building on an extensive history of ecological monitoring at Whitefish Lake. Rather than resignation or panic, WILCO leadership is drawing on what is known about EWM to develop a strategic response.

### **Community Strong**

In their recent newsletter, WILCO reports they will use their mystery snails experience to focus on manual removal of EWM by SCUBA divers this spring, when the plants are more easily identified and handled. They also encourage landowners to maintain the healthy native plants already found in the lake, as EWM can more easily spread on a disturbed lake bottom. WILCO leaders cautioned their members that complete eradication of the invasive plant is not a realistic expectation, but that monitoring and manual removal can help minimize the plant's impact on the lake. 💧

*Whitefish Lake is one of just a few lakes in the state with redhead pondweed (*Potamogeton perfoliatus*). >*

*Small purple bladderwort is another rare and beautiful native aquatic plant that makes its home in Whitefish Lake. >>*



# LAKE TIDES SURVEY RESULTS

## THANKS FOR SPEAKING UP!

By Shannon Kearney, Student Outreach Intern, Extension Lakes

About every 10 years, Extension Lakes checks in with *Lake Tides* readers to better understand who you are, how you engage with the newsletter, and what matters most when it comes to Wisconsin's lakes. This year, we used a multi-pronged approach. We mailed 1,000 postcards to randomly selected readers, shared the survey on social media, and included it in the most recent issue of *Lake Tides*. Together, these efforts helped us hear from voices across the state.

### Who reads *Lake Tides*?

According to the survey, half of our readers own lakefront property, 28% live near a lake, and 19% do not live near a lake but visit lakes often. This tells us *Lake Tides* continues to reach people who care deeply about lakes, whether they live on them or simply love spending time there.

One encouraging finding was how often *Lake Tides* is shared. Many readers share their copy with at least one other person, with 12% passing it along to four or more people! Thanks for helping us reach more folks!

When it comes to receiving lake-related information, traditional mail (36%) and email (30%) came out on top. These insights reinforce this newsletter remains an important and valued resource.

### What worries readers most?

When asked about the biggest threats to lakes, responses varied, with aquatic invasive species (31%) and habitat loss (20%) rising to the top. This feedback underscores the importance of continuing to share science-based research and providing clear, practical steps you can take to protect and preserve Wisconsin's lakes.

When asked about barriers to protecting lakes in Wisconsin, respondents ranked lack of support and information as highest. This motivates us to keep providing the tools, knowledge, and updates you need about lake ecology, lake laws and regulations, and water resource opportunities.

**“We live on a lake, and this newsletter is important to us!”**

~ *Lake Tides* reader

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share feedback.

Your input helps guide the future of *Lake Tides* and the work we do to support healthy lakes across Wisconsin.

You don't have to wait for our next survey to share your thoughts. Reach out anytime with story ideas, questions, or feedback. We're always glad to hear from you. 💧

## NEW AND IMPROVED

Based on feedback from this survey and other research, we have upgraded your *Lake Tides* newsletter. We still offer easy-to-read, generally non-technical articles in a conversational tone, but have incorporated larger font and colorful photos to make it more accessible to everyone.

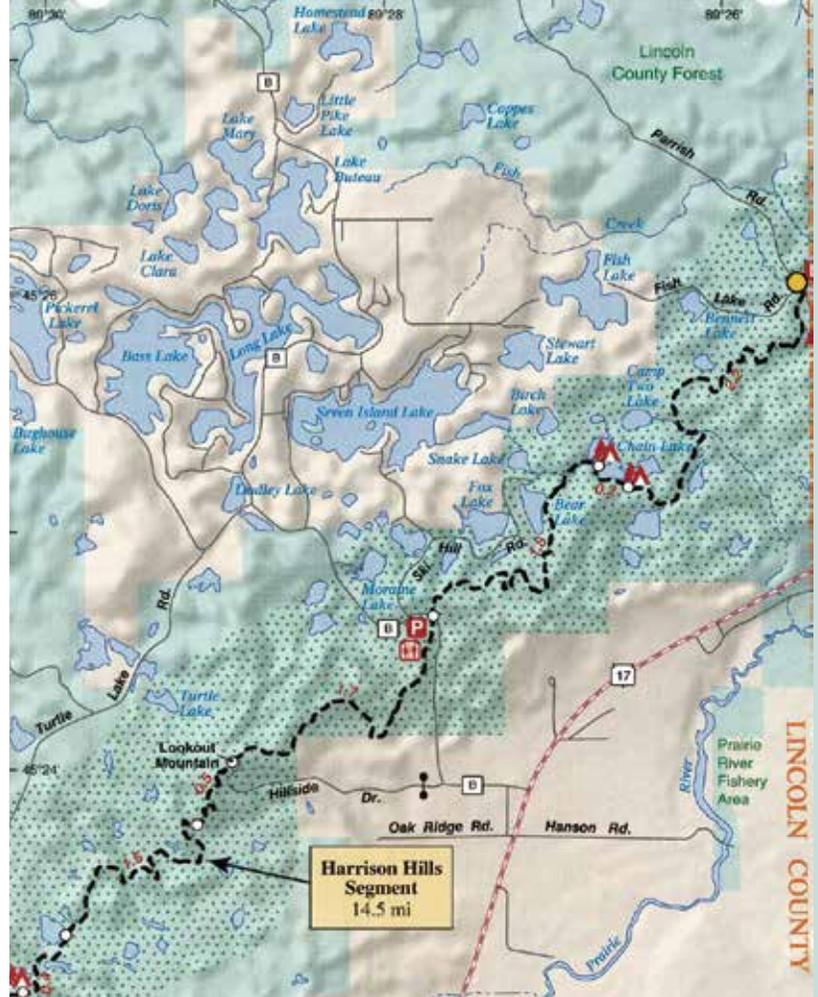
*(Sisters Protect Fish Lake, continued)*

Together they outline how the land can be used in the future, with a focus on protecting its natural features for the benefit of the plants and animals who call it home. These easements are permanent and can provide significant peace of mind for property owners who know the land will continue to be protected by future owners.

The process is collaborative. The Sisters and NCCT worked together to shape the terms of the easement until everyone felt satisfied and the document was filed with the local Register of Deeds. NCCT is then legally responsible for ensuring the terms of the easement are permanently honored by current and future owners of the property.

To guide the development of their conservation easement, a committee of Sisters and Associates crafted a Land Ethic Statement.

The Sisters' easement complements the thousands of acres of Lincoln County forestland in the Harrison Hills. It's a powerful example of how thoughtful



*A group of undeveloped glacial lakes, like those in Harrison Hills, is becoming increasingly rare in Wisconsin. A segment of the Ice Age Trail skirts the edge of this lake-rich area.*

planning today can help keep our inland lakes and surrounding lands protected for future generations. 💧

## LAND ETHIC STATEMENT

“As Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, our Franciscan heritage urges us to embrace all of creation and its possibilities for the future. We know that creation, connected from the smallest particle to the most complex, is interdependent for survival. As stewards of the gift of creation known by us as Lake Florentini, we support that this sanctuary remain peace-filled and treated with respect and care.

Our founder, Father Theodosius Florentini, taught us that the need of the time is the will of God. And so, we endeavor to address climate change and care for the earth. We commit to safeguard this land as a healthy and sustainable environment.”



## Lake Tides

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# LAST ISSUE!

**If you've updated your mailing address with us in the last few years—THANK YOU! You'll continue receiving *Lake Tides*.** If not, we'll remove you from our list for now. Don't worry, you can resubscribe anytime on our website or by contacting us.

Want to keep getting *Lake Tides*, but haven't reached out yet? Do it today!

- Fill out the super-quick form using this QR code or this URL: <https://forms.gle/3hhAtCBb2BN7dwqS6>
- Or, contact us with your ID#, name, and address as they appear above



# Reflections

“**W**ater is the most critical resource issue of our lifetime and our children's lifetime. The health of our waters is the principal measure of how we live on the land.”

~ Luna Leopold

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