

Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association

Susan McLeod

Celebrating our shared passion for lake life

The sun is up, information kits are stowed, sunscreen's applied, and the ropes cast off for another day on the water for the Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association's (LOWDPOA) *LakeSmart* Team. It's a perfect morning for their work, with the lake surface like a mirror reflecting the colours of summer in cottage country.

Lake of the Woods alone has an area of 3,826 km² (1,477 mi² or 945,425 acres). It spans the Canadian and U.S. border from Ontario and Manitoba into Minnesota. It has 105,000 km (65,000 mi) of shoreline and contains 14,522 islands. LOWDPOA welcomes nearby lakes into its membership.

The *LakeSmart* team's goal today is to head down to the Sioux Narrows/ Nestor Falls (SNNF) area on Lake of the Woods, more than a 30-minute boat ride in calm weather. They'll first spend a few hours stopping at docks along the shoreline, meeting with waterfront property owners and tourist camp operators to talk about the importance and benefits of healthy shorelines. Then it's on to dry land and over to the SNNF Community Services Showcase to set up their display where they'll inform area residents, cottagers, and visitors on issues of importance to the health of our waterways and overall environment.

LakeSmart is just one of the outreach and education programs offered by the Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association. Now hiring university students for its fourth summer season, it is also one of the most successful. Originating with an idea from the Association's Environment Committee, and launched in the summer of 2011 (Figure 1), *LakeSmart* offered the opportunity to directly reach waterfront property owners with an environmental message, raise the profile of LOWDPOA as leaders in lake stewardship, and positively impact waterfront development in the area.

Thanks are due for the help and guidance from the Muskoka Lakes



Figure 1. LakeSmart launches in 2011: team members Laura Shore and Sam Warden with LOWDPOA President Barry Baltessen and Kenora Mayor Dave Canfield.

Association, who has operated a similar “dock-to-dock” outreach program focused on boating safety. In addition to our member donations, community support also helps as businesses and organizations continue to step up with both cash and in-kind sponsorships that allow us to carry on.

Since its launch, *LakeSmart* has connected personally with more than 500 cottagers, helping to improve their shorelines and educating them on the important ecosystems they support along the way. More than 1,500 information kits have been dropped off to docks (that’s a lot of boat bumps) and countless presentations have been made at public events throughout the district.

As the profile of the program continues to increase, smaller lake associations are now requesting full-day appointments for group presentations and individual property assessments. Margaret McKenty, president of the Trout Lake cottagers’ association organized the day for her members and said, “*Laura & Luke came yesterday as planned & connected with even more cottagers than I expected. Hurray! I’m looking forward to seeing whether & how it influences lake stewardship around Trout Lake.*”

LakeSmart’s profile and healthy shoreline message also led to the creation of an important partnership between LOWDPOA, the City of Kenora, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Lake Winnipeg Basin Stewardship Fund to build an interpretive Model Shoreline at the Lake of the Woods Discovery Centre. Officially opening in the summer of 2014, this naturally “landscaped” area on the Kenora waterfront will allow visitors to learn the importance of shorelines to water quality and lakeshore ecosystems, identify appropriate plants and structures to help protect the water’s edge, along with general to-dos and not-to-dos when considering shoreline development.

The Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2012. What started as a small group of localized cottage owners coming together to fight against proposed education taxes (Figure 2) has grown into the largest association of its kind in Ontario; with a membership of close to 4,000 seasonal and permanent



Kenora Board of Education here we come to cast our vote — and our Trustees won.

Figure 2. LOWDPOA members bus to Kenora in 1962 to fight proposed education taxes to seasonal residents.

residents from across the entire Lake of the Woods watershed. President Robert Bulman states, “*We are all joined by our passion for lake life and this gives us strong voice when responding to issues that impact us. This can include water quality, forestry, mining, invasive species, land development, and taxation issues, just to name a few.*” Although issues related to taxes, utility costs, and succession planning will always be important to cottagers; the common thread running through LOWDPOA’s 50-year history has always been related to environmental concerns, particularly water quality.

“We swim, we sail and generally relax in this environment. Winters take a heavy toll on the spirit, but rejuvenation is rapid at the lake.”

*~ LOWDPOA member Ian MacDonald,
January 1971*

Few people have a better opportunity to observe the effects of human activities in the wilderness than cottagers, many of whom return each year to the same location, and whose knowledge of the local area may have been passed down for generations. As a group, we can have quite a positive or negative – our choice – impact on the environment.

Cottagers from as far back as the late 1800s have been coming to Lake of the Woods and the surrounding areas to get away from the cities, breathe the fresh air, and splash about in the crystal clear lakes and rivers. We may not live here year-round, but as a group we have often been the first line of defence when it comes to protecting a lifestyle and ensuring a balance between Mother Nature and development.

Each of us has a different idea of what it means to be “at the lake”; the kayakers may not understand the power boaters, and the cross-country skiers can’t imagine snowmobiling, but we all have one thing in common. We come to our very favourite place to enjoy, in our own way, friends, family time, and the great outdoors.

All the activities undertaken by the Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association over the years revolve around our stated long term vision: *To preserve one of the most beautiful places on earth as a high-quality environment for future generations to enjoy.*

That common bond is what has driven all the environment related programs, education, political actions, and various events undertaken by the Association over the years. Environmental concerns are usually stated as one of the

primary issues of members, and often their main reason for joining LOWDPOA. When the very first Environmental Control Committee came together in the early '70s, the message from the membership was clear: Cottagers had a vested interest in sustaining their environment (Figure 3).

Today's association includes not just cottagers, but people who live and work in the region, so the balance between outright protection and economic development can be challenging.

In today's social and political climate, it's more important than ever for cottagers, permanent residents, and interest groups to find their common concerns and respect their positions, then work together toward ultimate solutions acceptable to all. By doing that, LOWDPOA has earned a seat at the table when local, regional, provincial, and even federal discussions take place. "Earned" is the correct term, as years of hard work by our board, staff, and volunteers, sometimes a seemingly uphill battle, have brought us to where we are today. "Projects build partnerships. Our collaborations with LOWDPOA over the years have helped both parties recognize our shared passion for all things 'at the Lake'," said Jennifer Findlay, Economic Development Officer, City of Kenora.

There is no doubt that the resource-based communities in northwestern Ontario cottage country have faced their share of bad news over the past 20 years. Closing industries and job losses have been felt across the entire region, creating the need for reinvention and to look for alternate sources of economic development. Thankfully, LOWDPOA's strong voice is recognized as a partner in the process, and our contribution is valued through this reinvention. While we realize the need for increased development and economic diversification, we also try to ensure that it is always balanced with a view towards environmental sustainability.

One of LOWDPOA's greatest achievements was initiated back in 2004, and after ten years its legacy continues to impact water quality related efforts on an international scale. That year the association organized the first Lake of the Woods Water Quality Forum; a conference of scientists and stakeholders related to the health of our waters. It brought together participants from both Canada and the United States who shared their projects and data. This annual event continues today with attendance by some of the most highly regarded specialists in the field.

All those LOWDPOA directors and volunteers deserve our thanks as this

was one of the proudest moments in our history; one that will leave a legacy for generations to come.

This first Water Quality Forum also proved to be a catalyst for a new, coordinated approach to water quality research. Realizing that LOWDPOA didn't have the scientific "legs" to undertake the work required, The Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation was launched at the 2005 Forum and announced at our Annual Meeting in May that same year. The sole focus of the Foundation is the preservation of water quality in the watershed, on both sides of the border through heightened awareness and the provision of support and funding of related research projects. Todd Sellers, Past President of LOWDPOA, was appointed Executive Director in 2006 and remains in the position.

Six years later, after a tremendous amount of work by the Foundation, the International Joint Commission released its *Report to the Governments of the United States and Canada on Bi-National Water Management of the Lake of the Woods and Rainy River Watershed*.

LOWDPOA was an active member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee during a full year of consultation prior to the report being released, and today remains on the working committee as a stakeholder in watershed plans.

In 2013, as a result of the International Joint Commission support a Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed board is in place, a Water Quality Plan of Study is in the works to identify priority issues and understand what research and support is required, and the International State of the Basin Report is almost ready for publication of its second edition.

When we look back, there is no doubt that as the organizer of that first water quality forum, we could never have imagined the results.

LOWDKids in the Wild Looks to the Future

As with many not-for-profit organizations, our membership is made up of a high percentage of older folks, not surprising as they are the bulk of the property owners in lake country today, although we can see the generational shift to the next generation slowly



Figure 3. Board members and volunteers help out at the sale of potted blister rust resistant White Pines.

taking place. For us to succeed into the future and engage this next generation and their families, LOWDPOA recently launched its *LOWDKids in the Wild* program. LOWDKids (Lake of the Woods District) focuses on motivating this group to “take the reins” from their parents and grandparents; contributing to the well-being of the lakes areas in general and specifically through support of LOWDPOA.

LOWDPOA’s youth education goal goes to the very heart of what most cottage and land owners deeply hope – that their children and grandchildren will value and enjoy the woods and waters as much as they have, and for most of the same reasons (Figure 4).

Through targeted activities and outdoor education LOWDKids in the Wild aims to have young people feel a sense of ownership in our woods and waters. Likewise, we would wish that they came to feel ownership in LOWDPOA as a major factor in maintaining and preserving those wild and natural places for themselves, and indeed for *their* children and grandchildren.

A Shared Passion for Lake Life

LOWDPOA is only one of the cottage and lake associations across North America doing incredible things at a grass-roots level. Together we’ve planted millions of trees, cleared miles of trails, educated thousands of people, fought back when our favorite places are under threat, and undertaken countless programs and projects with those who share our passion for lake life.

Here’s to our Lake of the Woods Property Owners Association and here’s to all those like us.

Now sit down, relax on the dock and enjoy the sunset. You’ve earned it!


Susan McLeod is executive director of the Lake of the Woods District Property Owners Association. She lives and works “on the lake,” sharing her passion for lake life through the membership of the Association, and the communities in the watershed. 



Figure 4. LOWDPOA: preserving the lake life experience for future generations.

We'd like to hear from you! Tell us what you think of *LakeLine*. We welcome your comments about specific articles and about the magazine in general. What would you like to see in *LakeLine*?

Send comments by letter or e-mail to editor Bill Jones (see page 7 for contact information).



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