

Upper Saranac Lake Foundation

An Evolution of Environmental Consciousness

By CURT STILES

To those who visited Upper Saranac Lake in the early part of the last century, water quality and miles of undeveloped shoreline must have seemed limitless and inexhaustible by humankind. Upper Saranac Lake was part of the early history of discovery of the Adirondacks as a recreational and vacation destination. There were two hotels on the lake as early as 1854, and a third opened in 1864.

The Great Camp era (1880–1930) began the development of Upper Saranac Lake. A relatively quiet period unfolded throughout the World War II years and shortly after. In the 1950s and 1960s, prior to any real land use regulations, subdivision of major parcels began with the creation of small lots (less than one-third of an acre, without regard to setbacks). Even the Adirondack Park Agency Land Use Regulations of the early 1970s grandfathered existing subdivisions whether built upon or not. As a result, the shoreline was irretrievably changed. In fact, the nature of the ensuing regulations actually encouraged shoreline development. Towns and villages did little or nothing to improve or strengthen land use regulations during this period.

The cost of shoreline property has grown more than hundredfold from the 1950s until today (\$25 per foot to well over \$2500). Land once deemed a useless lot can now be “improved upon” by creative developers and builders with \$100,000 to \$200,000 in site work, often without obtaining the necessary permits prior to construction or exhibiting concern for wetlands and shoreline

integrity.

The two townships comprising Upper Saranac Lake could not be more different in their approach to local building and zoning codes. One has an almost zero variance policy, while the other would appear more focused on tax revenue. One has a 500 square foot limitation on boathouses, while the other requires them to be no bigger than a percentage of the owned shoreline, creating a preference for larger boathouses on larger properties. One might conclude

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the administration’s motto to be, “If we can tax it, you can probably build it.”

The lake is approximately 5000 acres in size and has over 40 miles of shoreline. There are now approximately 525 “camps” or seasonal and year-round homes, two year-round resort hotels, six private or university camps, and over 600 public use campsites on connected Fish Creek and Rollins ponds. A New York State Fish Hatchery discharges through a State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit into a stream that feeds Upper Saranac Lake. There are two public and six private boat launching sites, not including access from the public campgrounds and marina on Fish Creek Pond. In reality, the demographics and diversity of use by shore owners, campers, and the public has not changed

much in the last 50 years, but the intensity of use and magnitude of development has.

The good news is the State of New York owns roughly 50 percent of the shoreline, which is “Forever Wild” and preserves some ecological balance. As a result of limited land availability and unspoiled shoreline, the value of available land and resale of existing properties continues to escalate unabated. With the additional demands on our natural resources, our regulatory and enforcement processes become overworked, understaffed, and less than effective in managing growth and the corresponding degradation of water quality and integrity of shoreline habitats, wetlands, and scenic aesthetics.

The Upper Saranac Lake Association was founded in 1901 and has been in existence ever since. Early challenges were buoys and charting the safe launch routes around the lake, sailing, and social events. It has progressed to what could effectively be called a homeowners association

representing the interests and concerns of the shore owners. The focus over the last 50 years has been on environmental and water quality issues and the premise that the private sector must take more responsibility for its destiny. The association is an active group, publishing quarterly newsletters and holding two membership meetings each summer. Standing committees focus on government relations, communications, cultural and social affairs, environmental issues, and boating safety. Shore owners well appreciate the information exchange, visibility of key issues, coordination, and working relationships with town and state administrations.

Upper Saranac Lake has one of the most robust data sets on water quality within the Adirondack Park. The New

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York State Fish Hatchery had a long history of high phosphorus discharge into a tributary of the lake. Lake Association litigation against the NYSDEC resulted in a 90 percent reduction of the flow of nutrients from the hatchery into the lake and the improvement of many of the management practices associated with raising fish. Water quality monitoring is still an ongoing effort involving four tributary stations and two lake surface and deep water stations for continued monitoring and sampling. All locations are monitored twice monthly from May

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to October for pH, alkalinity, conductivity, total phosphorus, and nitrite and nitrate nitrogen. Additional sites and testing protocols are added and deleted depending on observation and need.

In the mid-1980s, the issues facing Upper Saranac Lake began to expand beyond the normal summer concerns over water quality, water safety, fishing reports, and the increased use of the lake. The issues became more focused and defined by factors that, if not addressed, would have long-term environmental impacts. Water quality, increased development, septic systems, invasive plants and pests, concerns with the New York State Fish Hatchery, and the broken dam at Bartlett Carry, all became of greater consequence to a concerned lake community.

As the issues emerged and became better defined, it became clear that in order to effect meaningful change, it would be necessary to have a vehicle to raise significant funds. In 1989 the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation was created as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation to build a "war chest" to deal with the aforementioned issues. The foundation is a separate, arm's length organization, which works in concert with

the Lake Association. It provides financial support through grant requests for specific programs and activities the association would be unable to fund through membership dues. Since 1989 the foundation has raised over \$3 million and directly manages those programs that are associated with large financial or operational risks. More than 95 percent of all funding comes from the private sector.

In the late 1990s Eurasian water milfoil was discovered on the lake. Initial efforts quickly became ineffective as the voracious plant grew faster than the ability to remove it. By 2003 it became clear that Eurasian water milfoil was winning the battle and a dramatically different approach was required.

In 2004, the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation, with the help of the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College, initiated a three-year, \$1.5 million program to control Eurasian water milfoil, and 2007 represents year four in the continuing effort to ensure control of this aggressive invasive species. The Upper Saranac Lake Foundation funds and manages the milfoil project by setting overall program direction and goals, and it operates together with several members of the Upper Saranac Lake Association executive committee to provide experienced volunteer management capability for oversight and support. Day-to-day operations are contracted through the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College and managed by a crew chief. The college hires and administers payroll and insurance functions for the crew chief, divers, and top-water support people. Complete details of the operational plan and results can be found at the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation website (<http://uslf.org/>). Under the Fundraising tab, there is a complete project plan, and in the Information Archive section readers find a thorough scientific assessment of the three-year effort by Dr. Dan Kelting. By scrolling through the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation Today section, pictures and descriptions of day-to-day operations can be accessed.

Eurasian water milfoil will be aggressively managed through the end of 2011. While the first two years utilized a crew of 20 divers and 10 support people, 16 divers and 8 top-water people were used in 2006, and the plan for 2007 called for eight divers and four support people. The plan is to gradually decrease the resources deployed to a sustainable maintenance level with supporting scientific measurement. Concentrating on early detection, rapid response, and maintenance of troublesome areas will ensure long-term success. Interaction with shore owners continues to be critically important. The Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College produces all scientific plans, data, and physical measurements. For three years in a row, the milfoil project was completed ahead of schedule and under budget. The entire lake was harvested three times in 2005 and 2006, but even more significantly, 18 tons of wet milfoil was removed in 2004, 4.5 tons in 2005, and less than 500 pounds in 2006.

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With increased pressures on development and use, it became increasingly apparent that full-time environmental advocacy and attention to the myriad issues facing Upper Saranac was necessary to protect water quality. Observing the success Lake George has enjoyed with Chris Navitsky as the Waterkeeper, the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation contacted the Waterkeeper Alliance to pursue a similar concept for Upper Saranac Lake. The Waterkeeper Alliance was formed in 1966 by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., to stop the pollution of Hudson River, making

it, today, one of the richest water bodies in the United States. Since then, the alliance has grown to over 150 Waterkeepers on six continents.

The mission of the Waterkeeper Alliance is to “connect and support local Waterkeeper programs to provide a voice for waterways and communities worldwide.” An extensive application and licensing process ensures applicants’ dedication to maintaining the alliance’s rigorous standards and serving both public and private needs for high water quality.

The Upper Saranac Lake Foundation was licensed to create a Saranac Waterkeeper and hired Jill Reymore in December of 2006. The Saranac Waterkeeper will advocate for enforcement and compliance with local ordinances and environmental laws, respond to citizen complaints, and identify problems that affect the lake and its use for the common good. Protecting the water quality of Upper Saranac Lake and the watershed from pollution of all kinds, habitat and wetlands degradation, and invasive species by directly investigating, confronting, and seeking resolution through documentation and follow-up of all identified issues is the primary responsibility of the Saranac Waterkeeper. The Waterkeeper will provide a single point of focus for all issues that negatively impact the lake or watershed. She will act as a spokesperson for the lake, working closely with the environmental committee, executive committee, and zone chairs of the Upper Saranac Lake Association and local code enforcement officers. The Upper Saranac Lake Foundation provides funding and oversight as the licensee. Once success is modeled on Upper Saranac Lake, the expectation is for the Waterkeeper to expand her responsibility to the Saranac chain of lakes. Waterkeepers believe everyone has the right to clean water and no one may diminish water quality at the expense of the public.

In January of 2007 the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation published “A Com-

mitment to the Environment,” which sets forth a seven-point set of goals and specific objectives that will ensure the protection of Upper Saranac Lake for future generations. The introduction to the document, which can be found in

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“2007 January USLF Update #1” under the Information Archive section of the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation website, states in part:

Upper Saranac Lake and its neighboring water bodies attract a large and diverse population. The many and varied values of our region attract ever increasing numbers of visitors, as well as more who want to stay. Pressures on nature’s resources, and man’s aging infrastructures and governance, call for pro-active steps to protect our future.

The Upper Saranac Lake Foundation is committed to protecting the water quality of Upper Saranac Lake, its neighboring water bodies and its watershed. Our challenge must be to minimize man-made pollution and to stabilize or improve our water quality into the next century, by encouraging and ensuring the establishment of effective and enduring protocols and procedures.

To this end the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation will aggressively:

> Advocate and seek cooperation for water quality issues among all

stakeholders (municipalities, owners, neighbors, realtors, contractors, architects and agencies—all users, private and public);

- > Build consensus to address land use issues of site planning, vegetation removal, run-off prevention, septic and drainage systems and wetlands disturbance;
- > Challenge abuse, and fully support the intent and scope of all applicable government laws, codes and regulations;
- > Advocate for more up-to-date, and continuing review, of Land Use regulations at all levels; and
- > Provide advice and support concerning development and maintenance issues related to the health of our environment.

Our large and diverse population of users will agree that our water bodies enjoy nearly unique advantages when it comes to natural beauty.

Watershed is forested, largely natural. Vistas are mostly clean and natural. Boating is often vintage and relatively calm. At night, it is quiet and dark. Courtesy on the Lakes is deeply traditional. Shoreline integrity is largely intact.

All ages, all users, experience an uncommon resource. The quality of the water is consistently ranked as the highest in value and common concern.

The Upper Saranac Lake Foundation believes it is essential to maintain and preserve these attributes of the Lake, and its watershed, for future generations.

Environmental awareness and improved stewardship of our natural resources is imperative to protect water quality. One only has to understand the magnitude and severity of current global warming arguments to appreciate the urgency.

The Upper Saranac Lake Association, Upper Saranac Lake Foundation, and the Saranac Waterkeeper believe that, over time, we can forge a partnership of shared values and active stewardship with shore owners, the public, and regulatory agencies, both state and local, to continue to improve and protect the water quality and environmental beauty of Upper Saranac Lake for everyone.