



Did You Know? What is a Healthy Lake?

By Jim Bakken



The eleven lakes in the [Eau Claire Chain of Lakes](#) make up the headwaters of the Eau Claire River. These headwaters flow into the St. Croix River and ultimately into the Mississippi River. The St. Croix River is designated a National Scenic Riverway because of its outstanding natural, cultural and recreation value. The watershed in Bayfield and Douglas Counties supplies clean pure water feeding the Eau Claire, St. Croix, and Mississippi Rivers. If you were so inclined, you could paddle a canoe from Sweet Lake all the way to the Mississippi River Delta at New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico. That is a good reason to keep our lakes healthy.



What is a healthy lake? The lakes in the Eau Claire Chain have outstanding water quality, a key component to healthy lakes. The definition of a healthy lake varies, depending upon one's point of view. To a purist, a healthy lake may be one that is natural, untouched by human development. To a tourist, it may be clean water to swim and boat in. To a fisherman, it may be a lake with a plentiful and diverse fish population. To a biologist, it is a lake where physical, biological and chemical characteristics are in equilibrium, and human impact is minimal.

Most lakes have been impacted by human intervention. Our love of living at the lake has resulted in unintentional impacts on our lakes and river habitats, through introduction of chemicals, land-based or aquatic invasive species, and artificial light. Shorelines have been cleared, lawns have replaced natural shoreline vegetation, docks and piers have displaced aquatic habitat, and homes have been built to the pleasure of shoreline owners. Ninety percent of the "life" in lakes resides in the nearshore zone, or littoral zone, where water is typically shallow, and sunlight is able to penetrate to the lake bottom. Fish spawn in the shallows, frogs, snails and bugs live along the shores. Great blue herons, kingfishers, swallows and other birds live and feed here. It is in this shoreline zone that human intervention has had the greatest impact.



A healthy lake has a balance of plant and algae growth. Fish need abundant weed beds to find shelter from predators so they can grow, even while predator fish ply the weed beds to find a meal. Aquatic plants are an important component of a healthy lake, but when the water experiences an influx of nutrients, such as phosphorus from fertilized lawns or if non-native plants are unintentionally introduced, it can throw the lake out of balance. The non-native plants become invasive and crowd out the native plants, degrading the lake ecosystem. Eurasian water milfoil, curly leaf pondweed, and yellow iris are

examples of invasive plants that have taken up residence in area lakes. These plants hitchhike on boats and trailers from lake to lake and become problematic. Treating or removing the invasive plants is costly and requires consistent efforts from the public, while competition for grants to support these efforts is outpacing available funding. The [Clean Boats, Clean Waters](#) boat landing inspections are designed to prevent transport and introduction of invasive species, but more inspectors are needed at our area boat landings.



Many creatures such as frogs, turtles, amphibians, bats and night birds are active at night and thrive in darkness. Night lighting along shorelines interferes with wildlife habits and can draw and disorient, or even repel these creatures from their natural habitats. Lighting also interferes with your neighbors' stargazing or view of northern lights. Minimizing night lighting or shielding lamps to direct light to the ground where it is desired for safety helps keep a lake healthy.

What Can I Do to Make a Healthy Lake?

The Eau Claire Lakes mean so much to our community. They provide us cherished memories and a place to call home whether year-round or when we're lucky enough to spend time here. There are many steps you can take to keep our lakes healthy for our enjoyment and that of future generations of lakes enthusiasts.

1. Exercise caution when launching and retrieving your boat to make sure plants don't hitch a ride with you. Drain your livewell, boat, or other tanks, and remove plants clinging to your boat and trailer before leaving the landing. Dispose of live bait safely.
2. Observe navigation rules. Go slow in shallow areas, avoid areas of known invasive plant patches, keep a safe distance from shore (100' for boats, 200' for jet skis, 700' recommended for wake boats.) Be cognizant of your wake so you don't interfere with other recreationists enjoying the lake.
3. Light your shoreline carefully to keep the light rays on the ground where you need it most. Install timers or motion lights to provide light only when you most need it.
4. Leave woody vegetation in the water as habitat and consider installing wood vegetation or "fish sticks."
5. Clear minimal area for a dock or lift.
6. Use phosphorus-free fertilizer if you decide to fertilize your plants or lawn.
7. Plant native plants along your waterfront to filter rainfall runoff and provide cover for wildlife.
8. Build a rain garden to catch and retain rainfall runoff from your dwelling and yard, preventing pollutants from entering the lake.
9. Divert rainwater or build a rock infiltration trench or pit to direct runoff underground rather than directly into the lake.

10. Volunteer to be a [shoreline monitor, boat landing monitor, or deck-hand on the BAISS \(Barnes Area Invasive Species Suction\) boat.](#)



Today's author, Jim Bakken is the current president of the Friends of the Eau Claire Lakes Area. He and his wife, Twyla, reside near Chippewa Falls and spend lake time at their cabin on Upper. Jim oversees the lake gauging project, acts as a liaison for the Healthy Lakes Grants, and volunteers on the LEEP program team. As the Loon Ranger on Upper, you might find him counting and checking on the loon population on Upper Eau Claire Lake. Closer to home, he serves as president of the Lake Hallie Lake Association.



If you'd like to learn more, here are additional resources to explore.

- Wisconsin DNR has online guidance for [healthy lake practices](#).
- Bayfield County offers [Shoreline Protection Resources](#) to learn how you can protect, enhance and restore your waterfront property.
- The Douglas County [Surface Waters Program](#) serves the area by working to keep our lakes and rivers healthy.
- Conservation information and resources are available from [Wisconsin Land + Water](#).
- Get insight and find resources for protecting the night sky at [Dark Skies International](#).

[Join or Renew](#) your Friends of Eau Claire Lakes Area membership for 2024.

Mission: To protect, preserve and improve the environmental and aesthetic qualities of the Eau Claire Lakes Area watershed, including the lakes, rivers, shore lands, wetlands, forests and attendant wildlife resources.

BAYFIELD AND DOUGLAS COUNTIES, WI

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