



## WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

### **Enjoy a Safe and Responsible Summer of Fun on the Water!**

*by Kathy Bartilson of the Wisconsin Conference Creation Care Team and member of Namekagon Congregational UCC*

Spring has arrived and it's time to get out on our favorite streams, rivers and lakes! My husband Kevin and I had our first vesper paddle down the river last week. It was wonderful to greet all our usual creature friends and welcome them either back up north or back up out of the riverbed. We are blessed to live where there are superlative river and lake paddling opportunities within an hour of home, and beautiful woods and wetlands to explore.

However, we spend part of every trip picking litter and wondering why our shared resources, both land and water, aren't respected, cherished and cared for by *everyone* gathering at, by, on, or in the river. While we are fortunate in Wisconsin that our rivers, lakes, and streams are public waters and in a sense "belong" to all of us, I believe they have their own integrity and worth, separate from their value and utility to humans. We need to behave as gentle guests when recreating, as the waters are home to so many awesome creatures, all dependent on clean water and secure habitat.

What are some ways to be responsible stewards when out boating or even just having a picnic by the water? How can we protect our waters by the practices we use in our homes, communities, businesses, and churches? The Wisconsin UCC Creation Care Team compiled [an Earth Day service and bulletin insert](#) on things to do for clean water and healthy aquatic habitat. Here are some of those thoughts and advice for ways to enjoy our beautiful waterways responsibly and be good water stewards:

#### ***At the beach or on the water:***

- Get to know the fascinating plants creatures that live in the water (wild rice, water lilies, stoneflies, mayflies, fish, clams, snails) and their life cycles and habitat needs – this will help in understanding how to protect them!
- Visit a wetland to see what amazing "cradles of life" they are! Wetlands do so much in the landscape, from filtering runoff; to providing waterfowl, bird, and furbearer habitat; to being safe havens for native and rare plant species. The Wisconsin Wetlands Association has identified [100 "Wetland Gems"](#) across the state that can be toured to learn more about them. The community of Stone Lake

in the northwest part of the state has a Wetland Educational Park right on the edge of town – stop by for a visit.

- Public waters are not public baths. Shower before going to the lake (and after to prevent getting swimmers' itch!). The amazing insects that populate our streams and shorelines (especially water striders) shouldn't have to cope with soaps and surfactants from people who think the lake is a convenient bathtub (or good place to bathe the dog). Even "biodegradable" soaps and other products should not be washed off in our streams and lakes. In our waters, oxygen is needed to break down these products – oxygen which should be available for stream life (like aquatic insects and fish) to "breathe."
- Use slow-no wake speeds by shore, and in shallow areas and narrow channels. Boat wakes pound our shores and contribute to erosion, damage important near-shore habitat and plants (especially wild rice), and even cause safety issues to other boaters, waders, swimmers and wildlife.
- Stay quiet on and by the water. You'll have a better chance of seeing wildlife, and the other folks on the water and in the neighborhood will appreciate it. Noise can be considered a type of pollution.
- Please don't litter! Bait boxes, beverage containers, dirty diapers, cigarette butts, spent shotgun shells and fish line are litter. Take used containers and other trash home for appropriate disposal or recycling.
- Help stop the spread of invasive plants and animals by cleaning sporting equipment, boat trailers, live wells, minnow buckets, boots, gear, bike tires treads, etc. between uses.
- **Use non-lead tackle when fishing** to protect waterfowl, loons, eagles, and osprey.

### ***At home, work, and in our communities:***

- Understand the water cycle – water in the air forms clouds and clouds drop rain on the land and water. Rain either seeps in the ground (to replenish our groundwater supply) or flows across the land (as runoff) into puddles, drainageways, storm drains, and eventually reaches our rivers, lakes, wetlands and streams. Shallow groundwater in turn replenishes the base flow into our headwater lakes and streams. Eventually water vapor from the surface of the land, lakes and rivers returns to the air to start the process over again. Are there points in this cycle where pollutants can enter the water, to cause problems in the next stages of the cycle, or downstream?
- **What we do to the land affects the water.** Land use, cropping practices, yard and pet wastes, animal housing and grazing, construction runoff, and stormwater are all potential sources of pollutants. These contaminants include turbidity (dirt!), organic matter, petroleum residue, fertilizers, pesticides, nitrogen, phosphorus, and oxygen demand. Are there changes you can make that will help protect the watershed of the stream, lake, river, wetland or groundwater receiving runoff or infiltration from your property? Taking a walk after a rain is a good way to find the problems areas. There are many options to consider, like capturing roof runoff, composting yard waste, restoring shoreline and streambank vegetative buffers,

reducing the size and number of impervious surfaces, and improving forestry and agricultural practices, for a start. If you live on the shoreline, always use appropriate erosion control around areas of exposed soil and construction activities. Restoring a shoreline vegetative buffer of native grasses, flowers and trees is good for wildlife, bank integrity, and water quality.

- We need to make good choices about the products we use in our homes and communities. Every year we hear of more unforeseen consequences from what seemed to be useful and harmless products. Skin scrubbing microbeads and antibacterial compounds are a couple of examples. It pays to check the product labels and buy simple products without these “enhancements” that can later affect our waters, especially groundwater.
- Stay informed on local, state, and federal laws, ordinances, and zoning standards, especially if changes are proposed. When reviewing any changes, use your critical thinking skills to decide if you feel there will be either positive or adverse impacts on our waterways. Share your position with your government representatives to make them aware of either your support or concern. Our Wisconsin Lake and River Associations (state and local) are excellent contacts on rule and law changes, and provide information on whether these changes are likely to either improve protection or launch new threats to our waters.
- *Our waterways need friends and protectors.* Pass on your good example of stewardship to the next generation. One of my best friends and mentors made it a point to take people paddling and share his views on wilderness to be sure people coming after him would take a stand for wild places. How about sharing an evening paddle with someone new to awaken their senses to the joy of time spent on the water? Join a lake or river group to share information, paddle together, watch for wildlife, perform citizen monitoring surveys, etc.
- Consider hosting a cleanup day to pick litter from a popular section of stream or lake shoreline. Every day on the water is litter picking day for our family – it’s as much an expected part of the trip as bringing our life jackets, paddles, and water bottles. As always, if you notice a questionable activity or potential violation, please make note of your location, take a photo if possible, and notify the appropriate Department of Natural Resources or County staff.

I hope you have the chance soon to be “led by the still waters” and restore your soul. Have a safe and enjoyable summer!