



# Increasing

## THE AMOUNT OF FISH IN LAKES

By Laurie Lenten

Ninety-four percent of all lake life is born, raised and fed within 30 feet of where the water meets the land. It's a fact, uncovered and reported by researchers in Ontario, Canada, that bears repeating: 94 percent of all lake life is born, raised and fed within 30 feet of where the water meets the land.

That statistic, and that statistic alone, is enough to drive home the immense responsibility that rests in the hands of lake property owners. It's a statistic that John Kubisiak likes to set off in bold black letters in hand-outs that he shares with interested individuals. As a fisheries biologist with the Wisconsin Depart-

ment of Natural Resources (DNR), John is armed with statistics, hand-outs and PowerPoint presentations that all point back in some fashion to the fact that 94 percent of all lake life is born, raised and fed within 30 feet of the shoreline.

Shorelines, according to John, are ribbons of life supporting everything from birds and beetles to frogs and fish. "Fish do better with natural habitat," he says. It's not that fish disappear on developed waters, but as natural shorelines give way to increased development, the numbers of more adaptable species of fish such as bluegill and bass begin to increase, sizes of the fish decrease, and the prized walleye and musky become ever more elusive, perhaps even non-existent.

"Bluegill and bass are nesting species, while walleye and musky are broadcasters, which are species that tend to be more fussy about their

spawning areas," says John. "As shorelines are developed, the natural brush, shrubs and wood begin to disappear because people consider these things unsightly."

Citing data that has been collected on why people desire to buy lake property in the first place, John says scenic beauty, wildlife viewing and fishing opportunities rank as the top three reasons and yet, he says, "The first thing many people do when they buy a piece of lake property is change it to include a manicured lawn." Removal of logs and downed trees, and clearing the shoreline of unwanted brush to make way for boating and swimming often go hand-in-hand with the manicuring process.

In its efforts to retain productive shorelines, the DNR no longer issues permits allowing blankets of sand to be laid along frontages in order to create swimming beaches because, says John, "Not a lot of things do well on sand except people." Muck bottom frontages are far more beneficial for varied species,



but again aren't considered the ideal when people think of enjoying water activity. According to DNR regulations, waterfront property owners are allowed to hand-rake an area up to 30 feet wide and extending to an unspecified length into the water along their frontage, but forget about removing those trees that have fallen into the water.

"If a tree falls over the lake you can remove it, but if it falls into the water, then it's mine," says John laughingly. "Trees and logs in the water are considered a part of the lake bed and lake beds belong to the state, not the property owner." John admits, though, that many downed trees and logs are removed from area shorelines without the required DNR dredging permits.


In the natural scheme of things, trees naturally fall into the waters along shorelines, becoming valuable to the lake's ecology. Contrary to popular belief, fish do not spawn on logs, but rather use them for cover, says John, and creating fish cribs, tree-drop structures and half-log structures is permissible along shorelines. A permit is required if the waters are designated Area of Special Natural Resource Interest (ASNRI). On non-ASNRI waters a permit is not required; however, DNR guidelines must



Submitted photo

John Kubisiak holds a 45.8-inch musky. Notice the natural shoreline, which is part of the reason for the musky's hefty size.





still be followed. John says he believes cribs and structures can provide positive benefits if they're placed in large numbers to spread the fish out and distribute angler pressure, are properly constructed using lots of brush and are placed in lakes that do not have much natural vegetation.

But forget about adding cribs and structures on lakes that already have stunted pan fish, says John. According to studies done by the DNR, as more tolerant species of fish—bluegill and bass—begin to increase on highly developed lakes, the size of the fish begins to decrease. Bluegills have been found to be up to one-third smaller on highly developed lakes compared to their counterparts on less developed waters. Adding structures, says John, simply increases the number of places for the overabundant smaller fish to hide from predators.

Overall, fish numbers are good and comparable to the 1960s, but individual lakes often tell a different story. Fish surveys are not 100 percent dependable and angler effort has increased on many lakes. There are more larger bass and musky being caught these days, John explains, which

he credits to catch-and-release practices and later take dates established by the DNR.

So what's a lake property owner to do who wants to enjoy the scenic beauty as well as some fishing action? According to John, the best rule of thumb is to leave things alone. "If it's not broken, don't try to fix it," he says. "It's much harder to fix things once they've been messed up." If you move onto a lake property where the frontage has been groomed and manicured, John says it's best to let nature do her own work. "Stop mowing, leave wood in its place, let the brush grow, and slowly nature will heal itself."

John recommends *The Shoreland Stewardship Series*, a three part series on shoreland protection and restoration, which is available through the DNR and the UW-Extension, as a good starting point for lakefront property owners.

For more information, call the Department of Natural Resources Northern Region Headquarters at 365-8900, or log onto [www.dnr.wi.gov/](http://www.dnr.wi.gov/).

*Laurie Lenten is a freelance writer who lives in Rhineland.*

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