



## OPA Mission and Goals

"The Okoboji Protective Association is dedicated to preserving and enhancing the ecological health of West Okoboji Lake and the entire Great Lakes watershed."

Our Goals:

1. To prevent invasive species.
2. To preserve and protect the wetlands in the Iowa Great Lakes watershed.
3. To participate in the control of lake development to prevent environmental threats.
4. To promote sustainable urban and agricultural development that won't upset the delicate balance of the lake and its watershed.
5. To inform the community of ecological concerns and actions that must be taken to act on those ecological concerns.

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# NEWSLETTER

## Inside this Issue

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*Page number, Article*

2. President's Message - *Greg Drees*
3. Why does my lake look like pea soup? - *Mary Skopec*
4. Tall Grass Prairie - *Kiley Roth*
5. Ace Cory Conservation Award - *Steve Weisman*
6. Festival Follow-Up - *Steve Weisman*
7. Festival Collage
8. Benefits of Aquatic Plants - *Mike Hawkins*
9. Sanitary District and Wastewater Issues - *Steve Anderson*
10. The North Shore Project - *Anita O'Gara*
11. What About Those Farmers? - *John Wills*, Making Real World Connections - *Jane Shuttleworth*
12. Meneyata Park Wetland Restoration - *Bryce Origer*
13. Clean Water Panel - *Steve Weisman*
14. Export the Okoboji Clean Water to Greater Iowa - *David Thoreson*

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Dear partners in water quality,  
Summer has vanished. Autumn is slipping away. Winter looms on the horizon. The seasons come and go with such rapidity. 2019 will soon be in the books, whisked away into the calendar archives. For the Okoboji Protective Association, it has been a busy and intriguing year.

Extreme weather events continue to leave their marks on our landscape. The winter of 2018-19 was brutal and seemingly never-ending. We all watched as heavy spring rains made dock building a worrisome affair and fears of shoreline erosion prevailed. Fall has been fickle as well, with eight inches of rain in October and early blizzards ravaging our prairie neighbors to the north and west.

As a duck hunter, I have always had my eye on the weather. Even as a youngster, I would cling to my Dad's sleeve while we watched the weatherman predict the morrow's conditions, yearning for those northwest winds that would ignite the migration. Of course, those were pre-Weather Channel days, and forecasts were nothing more than unsophisticated guesses. Today's weather demands 24/7 national attention.

The point to all of this is that weather is a capricious maiden, and we are all beholden to her. We can complain and even wail about the weather, but we will never change it. What we can do, as a group like the OPA, is adapt to weather's offerings and react creatively to its scourges. Take the challenges that we face with high water events, for instance. Simply put, we can complain or comply. Complaining has no beneficial end result. Better to embrace bank stabilization and shoreline protection techniques – which the OPA has endorsed – and thus reduce erosion and other damage caused by high water and strong winds.

We are extremely fortunate here in the Iowa Great Lakes to have a brotherhood of organizations dedicated to natural resource enhancement and preservation. The list is long but includes the IGL Clean Water Alliance, the Dickinson County Water Quality Commission, the DNR and, yes, the OPA and its sister lake protective groups. Nowhere across Iowa will you find a citizenry more dedicated to clean water, soil, and air than here in Okoboji. But lest we lose focus and begin to rest on our laurels, there is much work yet to be done.

It has been an honor to serve a second term as OPA president. Thank you for the opportunity to head a group with more than a century of conservation leadership. The organization continues to be at the forefront of our most important environmental issues. We can take pride in the fact that the OPA lends a history of credibility to its endeavors.

I cannot think of a more capable person to assume the OPA presidency than Mary Skopec. She brings experience, passion and vitality to the office. Welcome, Mary, the stage is all yours.

Gregory Drees  
OPA President

# Why does my lake look like pea soup?

By Mary Skopec  
Executive Director of Iowa Lakeside Laboratory

Summer in Iowa brings many wonderful things such as long, warm days filled with ample recreation opportunities (swimming, biking or kayaking).

However, summer days often bring a less than desirable phenomena – green and scummy water. While Iowans are somewhat accustomed to this sight, they are often unaware of what causes the green water and whether or not they should be concerned about it.

The green water is most likely the result of a “blue-green algae” bloom. Technically, blue-green algae are not algae at all. The organism is really a type of photosynthetic bacteria, which means the bacteria contain pigments that allow it to capture light and conduct photosynthesis like a plant. The “blue-green” algae often contain blue or green pigments (hence the name).

Like plants, blue-green algae thrive on inputs of nutrients. They grow rapidly in the presence of excess nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen and become so abundant that they form scums or blooms.

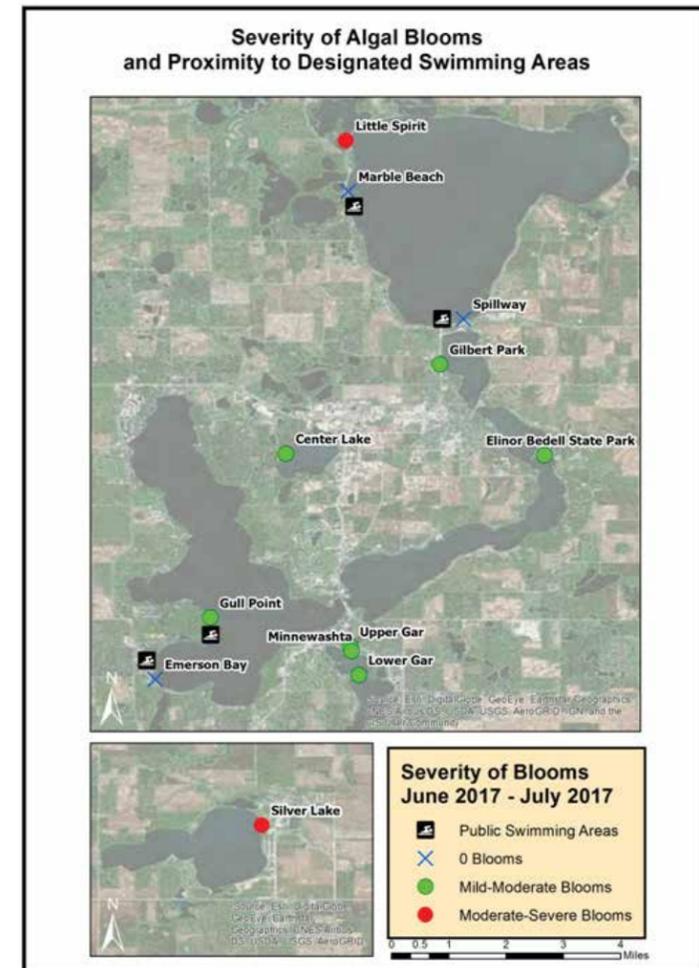
While blooms are unappealing visually, they can also create other problems. Many blue-green algae species produce toxins that can be harmful to pets, wildlife, and humans. Ingestion of toxins during swimming is of concern to public health officials, and the Department of Natural Resources has been measuring the levels of the microcystin toxin at state-owned beaches for 15 years. However, the DNR monitoring does not include many popular swimming areas in the Iowa Great Lakes.

To assess the potential exposure to blue-green algae toxins in the IGL, Lakeside Laboratory began a research project in 2017 to document the existence of blooms near swimming areas. The map at the right shows the presence of moderate to severe blooms in areas not traditionally monitored (Little Spirit Lake and Silver Lake). As a result, Lakeside added microcystin testing to its long-running Cooperative Lakes Area Monitoring Program (CLAMP) in 2018.

Sample data showed relatively low levels of microcystin with a maximum concentration of 5 micrograms per liter in Silver Lake. Action levels used by the DNR use 20 micrograms per liter to alert the public against swimming in a waterbody. These low levels are good news; however, Lakeside Lab will continue to collect samples in the future to document the status and trends of microcystin in the Iowa Great Lakes.



Blue-green algae bloom on Little Spirit Lake 2019.  
Photo by CLAMP volunteer, Tom Gronstal



Visual assessment of blue-green algae bloom severity.

## Tall Grass Prairie

By Kiley Roth  
DCCB Community Relations Coordinator

Iowa was one of the first states to establish an Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management program. Since its inception in the 1970s, more than 50,000 acres of federal, state, county and city roadsides have been planted to native grasses and wildflowers. Dickinson County began its IRVM program in 2015, and additional staff have been hired in 2019 to expand the program.

But why? Your taxpayer dollars support this program, and Dickinson County Conservation thinks it's important that you know why we're making the changes that we're making.

### 1. Native plants help the Iowa Great Lakes.

The Iowa Great Lakes are the lifeblood of Dickinson County, and it's important that we all work hard to preserve them. By planting native species in the county rights-of-way, we're creating natural landscape sponges. Prairie plant roots grow anywhere from 6-9 feet below the surface — compare that to the 4-inch root system of Kentucky bluegrass — and those roots can absorb 9 inches of rainfall per hour before any kind of runoff occurs. That means that instead of runoff going into the storm sewer and directly into our lakes, taking with it pesticides, fertilizer, and sediment, the water then moves through the natural watershed. As it does, the water is decontaminated and cleaned, making the water that ends up in our lakes pure.

**2. Roadside plantings are a long-term plan for cost savings.** Although the first few years of implementing native plantings can be time-consuming, after three-five years, native roadsides provide low maintenance weed and erosion control. The amount of time needed to care for these areas, once established, will decrease through the years, saving the taxpayers money in the long-term.



The beauty of a mature tall grass prairie and forbes.  
Photo by Kiley Roth

### 3. Native plants help drivers in the winter.

Native vegetation acts as a snow break in the winter, the longer grasses and wildflowers stopping the snow from constantly blowing over roadways and providing better visibility to drivers. In Iowa's wide-open spaces, this is incredibly important and also helps landowners by reducing the need for natural or plastic snow fences.

### 4. Native plants are important to pollinators and other wildlife.

Monarch butterfly populations have decreased by more than 90 percent in the last three decades, and native bee populations are also struggling due to many factors, including a lack of native habitat and food sources. Native roadways offer habitat and food sources for pollinators and are important way that we can help bring pollinator populations back. In addition to pollinators, native

plantings are important habitat for voles, turkeys, rabbits, ground squirrels, hawks, foxes and other Iowa wildlife.

### 5. Roadside plantings beautify the landscape.

Tallgrass prairie is a beautiful landscape that blooms in different colors throughout the season. You will see the purple of spiderwort and pink of wild roses in June, the vibrant orange of butterfly milkweed in July and August, the cheery yellow of goldenrod and the blue-violet of big bluestem in the fall. Roadside plantings offer a beautiful view along your commute in different seasons.

### 6. Native plants resist the spread of invasive species.

The highly diverse ecosystem provided by IRVM programs are more resistant to invasive species, because it is hard for invasive species to take root in an area that is full of healthy, diverse natives. Controlling invasive species is always a positive for the environment.

### 7. Native plantings preserve our natural heritage.

Less than one-tenth of one percent of Iowa's tallgrass prairies remain today, and Iowa is the most developed state in the entire country. By planting sections of native tallgrass prairie in Iowa's roadsides, we help to preserve some of the natural heritage of our beautiful state for future generations.

## Ace Cory Conservation Award

By Steve Weisman  
OPA Publicity Director

Jeff Wallace/Elizabeth Wallace and John Boettcher were co-recipients of the 2019 Ace Cory Conservation Award presented at the annual Okoboji Protective Association's (OPA) annual meeting on Saturday, August 10.

The prestigious award, which has been bestowed since 2006 by the Okoboji Protective Association, goes to an individual whose work in the Iowa Great Lakes area, voluntary or professional, reflects the principles of the late Ace Cory, one of the region's pioneer environmentalists.

John Wills, who presented Wallace and Boettcher with the award, noted he was proud of their efforts. "Congratulations to Jeff for his tremendous gift that enabled the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to purchase the Wallace and Bowers Nature Area on the north shore of Big Spirit Lake. Congratulations to John for his leadership as a true conservation minded farmer."

In reflecting on the award, Wallace says, "This comes as a total surprise. I just feel inspired to know all the people here working so hard on these important issues. I am honored and grateful to receive this award."

For Wallace, the Iowa Great Lakes has been his home away from home since his childhood. "It always feels like our home away from home. The Iowa Great Lakes is an important place to our family. When I come back from California, it's just so refreshing! The air is clear, the sky, the weather...I can breathe here. I guess I have deep prairie roots here myself, and I don't ever want to try to pull them up."

Wallace continued, "I've never done anything like this. My wife, Elizabeth and I work with conservation at home in California, but this is by far the most important change that we come home to do."

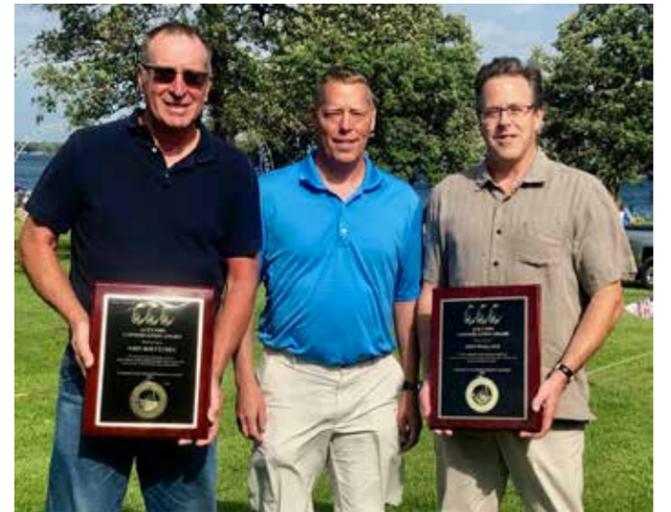
Wills expressed his appreciation for Boettcher's efforts as a lifelong farmer, who is a leader in agricultural conservation practices. "Congratulations to John for all of his efforts to do what is right. He has been conducting his operation in a more sustainable manner over the years and has made the point to promote and educate others as to what he is doing to show fellow farmers that you can make a living along with being conservation minded."

For Boettcher, conservation, farming, and land stewardship go hand in hand. He has found a way to be profitable in his operation while at the same time reducing his impact on the lakes. Boettcher says, "I do it because it's the right thing to do."

Boettcher truly appreciates the Ace Cory award because "it verifies that people appreciate conservation efforts from the agriculture community supporting water quality."

### About the Award

Wallace and Boettcher are the 12th and 13th recipients of the Ace Cory Conservation Award. A lifelong conservationist, Cory was one of the leaders in the late 1990's to seek a steady stream of money to fund clean water projects in Dickinson County. He was instrumental in the formation of the Dickinson County Water Quality Commission, the first and only organization of its kind in Iowa.



John Wills (C) with John Boettcher (L) and Jeff Wallace (R) co-recipients of the 2019 Ace Cory Conservation Award.  
Photo by Steve Weisman



The end of a perfect day on the shores of beautiful West Lake Okoboji.

## Okoboji Blue Water Festival: a Huge Success

By Steve Weisman, OPA Publicity Director

The fourth annual Okoboji Blue Water Festival has been in the books for over three months, yet it's still difficult to put into words the great success of this day. Simply put, it was the CLEAN WATER EVENT in the state of Iowa! There was literally something for everybody, and thousands of residents and visitors alike spent the day reveling in activities and events surrounding clean water. From sidewalk art murals, to family/kids' activities, to 33 clean water groups/businesses lined along the promenade, to a fishing seminar, to a touring group of actors presenting "Nature," to a panel on clean water issues and to an evening of great music highlighted by the music icon Bruce Hornsby...what more could you ask for?

On a day when the weather forecast was for rain (as much as 85 percent at times), the rain stayed away! Greg Drees, organizer of the Okoboji Blue Water Festival, was ecstatic about the way things went. "I consider it a perfect day. There was a great crowd, and people had a great time experiencing everything about clean water. I want to thank all of the volunteers who worked so hard to make this event happen, all of the donors and sponsors whose donations made this an 'ALL DAY-ALL FREE' event for everybody and finally, the thousands of individuals and families who attended the Festival. Our goal is to showcase all of the great clean water efforts, while at the same time letting folks know there is so much more work to do. We all need to work together to make clean water a top priority."

Even with the forecast of rain, artists were at Preservation Plaza early turning the sidewalk into a huge colorful mural of clean water themes. The artists worked diligently, and their efforts were on display the rest of the day and into the evening.

From the top of the promenade and down the hill, clean water businesses and individuals lined the sidewalk under white tents offering a fair-type atmosphere. By 10 a.m., visitors began to arrive, stopping and chatting with the clean water experts. At the same time, sounds of laughter and the delighted squeals of youngsters proved that the Family/Kids' activities were a great success. Nine stations kept kids involved in seeing what's in the water, catching "fish", T-shirt printing, printing arts... all having to do with clean water.

At 11:30 a.m., over 100 fishing enthusiasts entered the Big Tent to hear Dan Spengler, senior bait development engineer with Pure Fishing, share the bait making process from concept to reaching the public. In addition, Spengler showed those in attendance a variety of presentation tactics perfected through

countless hours of practice and catching. Finally, each person received two hard baits, the Berkley Shallow Cutter 90 and the Digger 8.5, while youngsters in attendance also received packages of Powerbaits.

As the fishing seminar ended, music and singing began to occur to the south of the Big Tent and Tiger Lion Arts, a troupe of actors, presented a portion of "Nature," a walking play centering around the lives of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. As I watched, I felt myself mesmerized by the story and the acting/singing abilities of the troupe. Although only a 45-minute segment, it was well received. Tiger Lion Arts performed the entire play three times over the weekend at the Lakeside Lab.

If there was a potential glitch to the day, it occurred two days before when Drees learned that keynote speaker Alexandra Cousteau had encountered a medical emergency and had to cancel her speaking engagement. Drees says, "It's life and unfortunately, things like this happen. We regret any inconvenience this might have caused."

Resiliency is the name of the game, and in a matter of hours Drees had organized a panel of outstanding clean water experts to offer their insight to people who would attend the 3 p.m., panel under the Big Tent. Panelists included Mike Hawkins, Fisheries Biologist; John Wills, Director Dickinson County Clean Water Alliance; Joe McGovern, President Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation; David Thoreson, explorer and environmental/clean water advocate; John Lundell, Mayor of Coralville; Mary Skopec, Director of Lakeside Lab. Well over 100 people came to hear their thoughts, and the fact that the discussions went well over the allotted hour time period and the resulting applause from the appreciative audience, showed that the panel had done its job. A separate story will appear on the panel discussion in a future story.

It was 4:30 p.m., and the day's activities had concluded... but not the finale. There was still the music. Oh, yes, the music. As my wife and I relaxed until the music began, we sat along the shores of West Okoboji and marveled at the jewel we have right here. There is a reason why people come to the Iowa Great Lakes!

First the Firm, then Dave Mason (great entertainers) and as darkness enveloped Preservation Plaza, a break came with a meaningful video about clean water and our challenges sponsored by the Okoboji Blue Water Festival. Then the headliner, Bruce Hornsby and the Noisemakers... and the 2019 Okoboji Blue Water Festival was complete!

## Photos from the Festival



# Benefits of Aquatic Plants

By Mike Hawkins  
Iowa DNR Fisheries Biologist

Early settlers found an ocean of prairie when they arrived in the Midwest. Looking out over our countryside today, it is hard to imagine how this landscape would have looked. By some accounts, this tall grass wilderness and its unending expanse was so vast it was overwhelming for some. Although the prairie extended through many states



in the central US, the prairie pothole region was unique within it. The prairie pothole region includes north central and portions of northwest Iowa, extends through western Minnesota, much of the Dakotas and stretches into south central Canada.

This region was carved out by massive continental glaciers that left the area only 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, making it one of the youngest landforms in North America. From the land's perspective, only a blink of an eye had passed from the time these mountains of ice melted and the earliest settlers arrived. The land was new and erosion from streams and rivers had yet to leave its mark. Instead, most water was held in the 25 million wetlands and prairie lakes dotting the landscape.

Hundreds of prairie plant species thrived on this new land. That diversity of plant life didn't end at the water's edge. Along the shorelines of the millions of lakes and wetlands a transition of plant life unfolded. The prairie gave way to the wet meadow. Semi-aquatic plants like sedges and more tolerant grasses grew in soils too wet for other plants. As the water depth increased, rushes and floating leaf plants like lilies would take over. In deeper water, dozens of species of underwater plants would grow from the bottom of the lake or wetland, only breaking the surface in the summer to flower. In the deepest lakes, sunlight could reach down 40 feet allowing these underwater forests to extend well beyond the shoreline.



These waters teemed with aquatic life from this diversity of plants. Thousands of species of animals lived in these lakes and wetlands, from the smallest plankton to top predators like northern pike. Hundreds of semi-aquatic and terrestrial animals like turtles, amphibians, muskrats, mink, and numerous species of birds, also relied on these important resources. Early accounts describe the skies of the region turning dark with migrating waterfowl in the fall.



Today, only tiny remnants of this native landscape remain. Millions of wetlands and even some lakes were drained shortly after settlement as the land was made suitable for development and agriculture. The remaining lakes are no longer buffered by these important wetlands, prairie plants, and porous soils. Many water bodies in the region now contain invasive animals like common carp and zebra mussels or plants like curlyleaf pondweed and Eurasian watermilfoil.

The native shorelines that transitioned from terrestrial to aquatic plants are now lined with rock or concrete and steel retaining walls. The wet meadow has been replaced by turf grass or overgrown with trees that were historically absent from this area. Soil and nutrients enter our lakes as rain falls across land that lays bare for much of the year. All of it is accelerated by artificial drainage tiles, storm sewers, and roof tops.

These stresses have been too much for many prairie lakes. They no longer have the diversity and habitat once so rich. Their water has turned soupy green with algae, as they finally succumb to too many nutrients and massive soil buildup. Every creature, except those tolerant few, have dwindled and faded into the murky water. Recent efforts to lessen these impacts have been

successful. By cutting the inputs from lands draining to the water and altering the troubled fisheries, we can push hard enough in some cases to see these lakes recover slightly and resemble their former days. Decades of abuse have mounted a challenge we can only partially overcome.



Because aquatic plants form such a cornerstone of health for our lakes and wetlands, they are a strategic CenterPoint of many lake improvement projects. They take up nutrients otherwise used by algae, absorb wind and waves along shorelines creating protected pockets of life and a calm water that doesn't turn to mud with every crashing wave. Most importantly, they provide an underwater jungle that harbors a complex food web critical to the base of life. Without these plants our lake bottoms are barren, a desert with simple lists of plankton, plants, and animals - the only ones hardy enough to survive.

Because so many of our lakes and wetlands were lost or deteriorated so quickly after settlement, entire generations of Iowans do not know how a healthy lake should look. We mostly know green waters with fisheries maintained through stocking; a necessary practice when young fish can't survive. When we see something different, we can be shocked by the change. When conditions improve enough for plants to come back, we cringe at their

sight and treat them as if they are weeds on an unkempt lawn. They sometimes get in the way of our boat props and docks, creating an inconvenience for our lake use traditions. But most of all, we say it just doesn't look right.

Many voices shout for clean water and healthy lakes and wetlands. But when given the choice between soupy green water and clean water with plants, the voices for our lakes can dwindle and fade. Many hope for a fix that gives us a lake with no stinky slime, but without all the plants. Our geology and history, however, set our lake's fate. That past provides us with productive soils that are simply reflected in our water. That productivity only comes in two forms, as green toxic algae or clear water with plants.

We must find a way to overcome some of the challenges associated with plants because their connection to clean water is intertwined in a way we cannot pull apart. Iowa's healthiest lakes have lots of aquatic plants that only grow in clear water. That water can only be clear because of the plants.



## Sanitary District and Wastewater Issues

By Steve Anderson  
District Superintendent, Iowa Great Lakes Sanitary District

For the last two years, the Iowa Great Lakes Sanitary District like everyone in the area has been dealing with high water issues. When the lake water levels are high, that leads to high ground water levels around the lakes. High ground water levels around the Lakes area means more water trying to get into private and public sanitary sewer systems.

The ground water getting into the public sewer system creates unnecessary cost for treatment of the ground water and takes capacity away from the sewer system. This is compounded by illegal connections of exterior surface drainage and sump pumps to the public sanitary sewer system. Over the last two years, the high-water levels and repeat rainfall events have led to sewer backups into private property and bypasses out of the public sewer system onto the ground and sometimes into the local lakes.

When ground water and surface water get into the public sanitary sewer system, no matter how diluted it is, the water all must be treated as wastewater. Bypasses get reported to the Iowa DNR and all the drinking water

facilities are notified of the bypass. The wastewater during high water events is very diluted and most of it is non-wastewater being mixed with wastewater. The Sanitary District takes these situations very seriously and works to prevent bypasses or sewer backup by using trucks to pump excess water out of the sewer system and transporting it to larger sewer pipes in the sewer system.

During these high-water issues, the District staff also looks to pinpoint the cause of the highwater in the sewer system. When the high water goes down, the District will look at the public sewer system for issues with the public sewer. If few or no issues are found, then the District will start to look at the private sewer systems. A private sewer system is the pipe between a structure and the public sewer system and all the piping inside the structure. This last year the District took the private inspections a step further and started inspecting for illegal connections to the public sewer system through the private sewer system.

Sump pumps don't seem to be that big of an issue until you look at the numbers. An average sump pump that can pump 40 gallons a minute, and when running for 30 minutes, will equal the same amount of water produced from a single-family house for an entire day. If that sump pump runs for 4 hours a day, it will pump about enough water to fill a semi-trailer. Currently, the District believes about 7 percent of all properties connected to the public sewer system have at least one illegal connection.

These illegal connections are obvious during rain events, such as last March when the wastewater treatment plant went from receiving 3 million gallons per day to 12 million gallons per day in 24 hours. Also, last May during a rain event, the wastewater treatment plant went from receiving 6 million gallons per day to 12 million gallons per day in less than a 24-hour period. The District believes that most of the increased flow is due to illegal connections such as sump pumps.

Around West Okoboji last year, there were three spots that the District was aware of that had bypasses or backups of wastewater into private property. Those sites were Triboji, the North Bay area and the Haywards Bay area. The District has not completed full inspections on the District infrastructure in these areas yet but will be looking to do so next spring and summer. This may lead to repairs on the public system and looking for illegal connections or broken services from private sewers. In the end, it's about keeping the sanitary sewer for wastewater, keeping the wastewater out of private homes and out of the lakes.

The District hopes you will work to help protect public health, private property and the water quality of the Iowa Great Lakes by removing illegal connections from the public sewer system.

# The North Shore “Conservation Zone” Project

By Anita O’Gara  
Vice President, Iowa Natural Heritage  
Foundation

The north shore of Big Spirit Lake may seem remote from classic images of Okoboji fun. But in the past two years, it’s been the focus of important, lasting conservation action to benefit the Iowa Great Lakes.

This summer, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) purchased three land parcels adjacent to the Iowa DNR’s McClelland Beach Wildlife Management Area. The west parcel adjoins Mini-Wakan State Park, and the east parcel is nearly adjacent to land INHF owns. All 48 acres adjoin the highway along the Minnesota/Iowa border. We’re grateful that family members involved in the Bartels Bartels & Fox LP chose to sell this land for conservation.

In what’s now known as the North Shore Project, we’re considering options for restoration, future ownership for this land, and the best ways to fund this project. Donations will be important and appreciated!

What’s so important about the opportunity to shape this land into the future?

1. All the parcels lie within a quarter-mile of Big Spirit Lake. They’re part of the ‘last line of defense’ where water might be cleansed before it enters the lake, the drinking water supply for Spirit Lake, and ultimately all the other Iowa Great Lakes. There is potential for wetland and prairie restoration to help filter water, conservation farming and recreational trail connections.

2. This project allows us all to re-imagine a “conservation zone” for nearly the entire stretch of the North shore of Big Spirit Lake—from its ring of shoreline homes to the highway that marks the Minnesota border! Mini-Wakan State Park, Trickle Slough and all the lands in between them will be managed with conservation as the #1 priority. This creates one of the largest contiguous stretches of protected land along any of the Iowa Great Lakes, with lasting benefits for water, soil, wildlife, outdoor recreation and the community.

The North Shore Project comes just a year after the neighboring Wallace & Bowers Nature Area was purchased by INHF, so its 160

acres can be restored and managed primarily for water quality benefits. INHF intends to own and steward this property long-term. The generosity of two families made this possible: Jeff & Elizabeth Wallace, and the children of Clifford and Sheila Bowers [Barbara Mendenhall, Abby Adams and Bert Bowers]. It’s a joy to see the new, diverse prairie buffer taking hold and the 50-acre alfalfa buffer building soil and absorbing water. Iowa Lakeside Laboratory has gathered a year’s worth of water monitoring data so far, to help us all learn how changes on the land impact the water, soil and wildlife over time.

These projects are a huge step in the right direction—and yet just a small step toward safeguarding a healthy Lakes region and a stronger legacy of natural resources for our children and other future Iowans. So, here’s a gentle reminder: Please continue OPA’s creative, consistent actions for conservation—and remember to speak up for nature over the winter with your elected officials.

Your love for the Lakes makes you more keenly attuned to the importance of natural lands, water quality and soil health. You see daily how public places for outdoor recreation benefit your community, so I encourage you to speak up effectively for Iowa nature, trails, and public lands—and for conservation funding and policies that support them. To make this easier, a Nature’s Advocate pamphlet is available online at [inhf.org/policy2019](http://inhf.org/policy2019). Some facts will be updated between now and January, while the heart of the message is unchanged: We Iowans need a healthy Iowa.

Thank you for all you do! Please contact us if you’d like to consider ways to take action for this home we all love!



# What About Those Farmers? What are They Doing?

By John H. Wills  
Clean Water Alliance Coordinator

As the Dickinson County Clean Water Alliance Coordinator, I have talked to a lot of people over the course of the years and often I hear something to the effect of, “Our water quality would be better if those other guys would just do something”. If I am talking to an urban person, I sometimes hear, “If those farmers did something”. If I am talking to a farmer, I sometimes hear, “If those city guys would do something”.

I almost always respond and say, “Everyone must do something because everyone who lives, works and plays in a watershed causes some impact on that watershed.” Most people don’t know what is happening in the Iowa Great Lakes watershed because they don’t see it on a day-to-day basis. So, I thought I would give you an idea of the great work that is occurring in our watershed to improve our water quality. I could very quickly overwhelm you with statistics, so instead I thought I would just give you examples using dump truck loads of soil.

The dump truck that I will use in my example can hold 25 tons of soil, which is a pollutant to our lakes and impacts our water quality in a negative way. With that being said, I will just talk about the work that I know of that was done in the Iowa Great Lakes this year from October 2018 to September 2019.

Farmers typically can have the most impact on a watershed because they deal with the most acres. When we deal with urban pollutants, we are typically looking at a very small area. However, that small area is a very important one.

Farmers utilize various conservation practices to prevent pollutants and runoff: reduced tillage, cover crops, and reduced nutrient to grassed waterways, sediment basins and wetland construction. In just this last year, farmers were able to prevent 19 dump truck loads from being delivered to a lake in the Iowa Great Lakes. That is a significant amount of sediment. If you can imagine one dump truck loaded with soil and then multiply that by 19 times. That is the amount of sediment that could have been delivered to a lake.

Urban people do things like lakeshore protection, rain gardens and critical seeding to prevent soil from reaching a lake. In the past year, urban people stopped a little over 3 dump truck loads of soil from reaching the lake and becoming a pollutant. That sounds like a small amount when compared to agricultural land, but that is still a large amount of sediment.

Some side benefits that the urban practices are responsible for as they slow water down and cool it. Other side benefits of urban practices include removing oil, heavy metals, antifreeze and lead. In fact, the urban practices installed this year treated over two million gallons of rain water and if properly maintained, will continue to treat that amount for many years to come.

The sediment that has been prevented from reaching the lakes is enough to grow over 800,000 pounds of toxic algae. So, not only can sediment fill our lakes and make them cloudy, there can be tons of smelly and toxic blue-green algae that grow because of it.

I have reported in the past that our water quality has been steadily improving over the last 18 years. The data that has been collected by CLAMP has shown us that what we are doing in the Iowa Great Lakes watershed is working. We must remember that it isn’t just one group or the other that needs to do something, but that all of us working together will keep our lakes beautiful!

# Making Real World Connections

By Jane Shuttleworth  
Education Coordinator.

Thanks to the Okoboji Protective Association for supporting Iowa Lakeside Lab’s scholarship, water quality monitoring and education programs!

Lakeside’s outreach programs include family events, summer camps, school year and volunteer programs, and much, much more. Just as Lakeside’s academic courses and research are based on field-based, authentic learning, so Lakeside’s outreach education programs are about making real world connections that link learning with our lives, backyards, families and communities.

For example, volunteers with the Cooperative Lakes Area Monitoring Project gain a better understanding of water quality issues by participation in the monitoring of Dickinson County lakes. This fall, the study of erosion suddenly became more relevant and exciting for Okoboji Milford Elementary School 4th graders when they connected their study of shoreline erosion on Lakeside grounds with higher rainfall in recent years, especially the 4th of July “No Boat Wake” emergency rule by the Iowa DNR in 2018.

From summer camps to family programs, Lakeside outreach programs also encourage budding scientists. The popular Wild Wednesdays introduce children and families to local natural history topics they can continue to explore and investigate in their backyards and communities. Another goal of Lakeside outreach is to connect schools and community members with Lakeside research to understand how science can inform public policy and improve our lives. For example, middle school students have been analyzing data from the STRIPs (Science-Based Trials of Row crops Integrated with Prairies Strips) on the Hoiem property to learn how prairie combined with cropland can significantly reduce soil and nitrogen from agricultural runoff while also providing habitat for pollinators and wildlife.

These rich and relevant learning opportunities would not be available without the support of community partners like the OPA, and the Friends of Lakeside Lab, Lakeside’s nonprofit support organization. Thanks to the OPA for putting the Friends mission in action to “support Lakeside Lab as a community resource for environmental education, water quality monitoring and research!”

# Meneyata Park Wetland Restoration

By Bryce Origer  
Green Iowa AmeriCorps member

Green Iowa AmeriCorps and Iowa Lakeside Laboratory's staff teamed up with the Meneyata Park Lot Owner's Association (MPLOA) this summer to complete a wetland restoration project after two wet springs in a row left Meneyata Park looking like a mudflat.

What sprouted from that mudflat from 2018 was a beautiful naturally growing sedge meadow rounded out with rushes and other common wetland flowers. After previously teaming up with Lakeside Lab's staff for seeding a native grass and forb buffer along some shores and canals, Barb Ralston approached Iowa Lakeside Laboratory for assistance in direction with the wetland portion of the project. The staff were amazed at the completely unique habitat that occurred from simply leaving the parcel of land alone for two years.

The initial plan was to do a shallow excavation to create what most people think of as a "wetland". However, this area was already a low spot that allowed water to collect and infiltrate into the ground, cleaning it by functioning as an effective wetland.

Summer interns, AmeriCorps members, Coffee and Grounds volunteers and volunteers from MPLOA utilized grant funds from the City of Wahpeton, Dickinson County Water Quality Commission, and MPLOA Inc., to plant nearly 1000 plugs. The plants were supplied by a native seed and plant distributor (The Prairie Flower in Fostoria, IA), and the team spent approximately 12-16 hours to plant all the new plant species, diversifying the sedge meadow habitat and inviting pollinators and other animals to enjoy the space along with residents. Moving forward, the homeowner's association is planning to create a walkway across the wetland area to the dock, which is going in this fall, and will eventually include signage educating people about the functions of a wetland and the diversity of plants and animals that inhabit them.

Education is a very important step in reestablishing these natural areas so that people understand the ecosystem services or benefits that they themselves and the lake gain from what may seem to them as a messy, unkept park. The deep roots of native plants help secure soil and slow water, allowing it to pool and infiltrate slowly, decreasing contaminants released into the lake. Along with the water quality benefits, the flowering plants will invite pollinators and the lack of disturbance to the area will make a great habitat for amphibians and many other animals and insects. Education, along with the beautiful mural of flowers we expect to see in the next few years, will help people appreciate beauty in the most natural form.



Meneyata Park 2018



Meneyata Park 2019 Summer



Meneyata Park 2019 Fall (October)



## Clean Water Panel

By Steve Weisman, OPA Publicity Director

One of the many successful and well attended activities at the 2019 Okoboji Blue Water Festival (OBWF) was the clean water panel put together by OBWF organizer Greg Drees, after learning two days before that keynote speaker Alexandra Cousteau had encountered a medical emergency and had to cancel her speaking engagement.

Panelists included Mike Hawkins, Fisheries Biologist; John Wills, Dickinson County Clean Water Coordinator; Joe McGovern, President Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation; David Thoreson, explorer and environmental/clean water advocate; John Lundell, Mayor of Coralville; Mary Skopec, Director of Lakeside Lab. Bill Maas, President of the East Okoboji Lakes Improvement Corporation served as moderator. Well over 100 people came to hear their thoughts, and the fact that the discussions went well over the allotted hour time period and the resulting applause from the appreciative audience, showed that the panel had done its job.

Each panelist was given a specific question that revolved around their position. Mike Hawkins was asked about concern over invasive species and clean water efforts. "There are a lot of challenges with invasive species not only in the water but also on land. Our lakes now have zebra mussels, and at this point we have no answer for them. We are monitoring to see just how they will affect our waters. We avoided the threat of the Asian carp with an electric barrier below Lower Gar." At the same time Hawkins said, "there are many other invasive species knocking at the door and looking for an opening. To combat them, we're working first on prevention, educating the public so that they don't enter our waters on boats and trailers." He also added that the lakes need to be healthy with good native plants that offer no space for invasives.

John Wills agreed with Hawkins, saying prevention is a huge key in this battle against invasives. "There are really bad things coming our way, and prevention is the key." These include boat inspections at ramps and educating the general public. Wills has been part of many watershed projects in the Iowa Great Lakes overseeing the workings of the Dickinson County Water Quality Commission. Many of these projects have been both agricultural and urban, including several at historic Arnolds Park.

Joe McGovern shared the partnerships the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) has made in Dickinson County, working to protect soil and water. Most recently the INHF has been instrumental in the purchase and protection of the Wallace and Bowers Nature Area on the north shore of Big Spirit Lake. "This is about water quality, but it will actually be a working farm with a prairie buffer strip, alfalfa, cover crops, along with soybeans and corn. The tenant has told us that by doing

these conservation practices, he is now making more money on this land than he did before." McGovern also addressed the topic of climate. "There is no doubt that the climate is changing. It is a fact. We must ask the question what are we going to do to make changes that will work for water clarity and agricultural profitability."

David Thoreson has spent his life sailing and exploring the world. He expanded on the thought of climate change. It is real, "and it is a complicated issue." Thoreson spent time last summer at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Immense and magnificent, Thoreson also found the trip to be very revealing with significant evidence of climate change. The ice is disappearing, and 56 percent of all caribou have died off in the past 20 years. "Climate changes in the Arctic don't just stay there. Changes in the Arctic are affecting us here in Iowa. Heavy rains and flooding are becoming the norm and what is happening is a true crisis. It is not a political issue. It is only through changes in land practices that we can make a true difference."

As the mayor of Coralville, John Lundell brought a unique perspective to the panel discussion. Over the years, Coralville has received storm water and clean water awards. Residents of Coralville have bought into the idea of community planning designed around what are the environmental best practices for each development. As these projects are planned, public input sought out. "We have developed a culture that believes in these practices." Commercial contractors and private individuals are working together to achieve these best practices. As a result, runoff practices are changing dramatically for the better.

At the Lakeside Lab, Mary Skopec's world revolves around water. She agreed with Hawkins and Wills that there is great value in prevention. Even though zebra mussels are in the Iowa Great Lakes, Skopec says, "We need to talk to people and educate them about the importance of prevention, that we still need to clean, drain, and dry." At the same time, she says, "We have to be more proactive with water quality and quantity. Everything flows downhill." As we look at our lake usage and recreation, "We need to come up with smart solutions and smart management plans."

As I sat at the panel discussion, I could sense the pride that the panelists have for their positions and their belief in the importance of water and soil quality. During the question-answer session, it became obvious that those in attendance were extremely interested in getting answers to the water and soil quality issues in both urban and agricultural settings. All panelists agreed that the answers to these issues truly lie in working together.

## Export the Okoboji Clean Water and Recreation Model to Greater Iowa

By David Thoreson  
Photographer, Sailor Explorer and Story-Teller

As a Midwestern boy, it seems strange to say that I've always been drawn to water, but ultimately this interest changed my life forever. I was fortunate to grow up in a time where playing and exploring the outdoors was the natural thing for a child to do. My days were spent exploring the woods, rivers and lakes of northern Iowa. It was during these great experiences of my youth that the dream to further explore the world became very real.

I have now spent the past three decades as a professional photographer and sailor, documenting the outdoors locally in the Iowa Great Lakes region and sailing the world's seas and oceans. Water still guides my path in life and has become the issue that changed me from a person attracted by its physical beauty to an advocate for its protection for future generations. This is what we do at the Iowa Great Lakes.

I'm honored to be presenting at the inaugural TEDxOkoboji event this autumn with other terrific speakers. I'm developing a story of my connections to the water and how it has taken me along so many highways in life from local lakes to the great oceans and polar regions of the world. Sailing to the waters of the Arctic Ocean led me to the issue of our changing climate, which altered my life's work forever.

Back in Okoboji, and reflecting on the Iowa Great Lakes, I now understand that we have a different economic engine than the rest of the state of Iowa. Our engine runs on beautiful, clean water.

As long as there are high quality natural resources, we enjoy a \$300-million, tourism-based economy. Everyone is outside having fun. Everyone is happy. We all win but the rest of the state is suffering from impaired waterways which damage any opportunity to develop their own recreational economies.

Iowa's small, rural counties have seen water quality degraded, opportunities diminished and residents leaving. On the flipside, Dickinson County is growing and celebrating clean water in workshops, festivals and many completed projects. We work hard in a very nonpartisan, cooperative manner to create and maintain a mix of agriculture and robust tourism. It's a different formula than the rest of the state.

Iowa's agricultural economy has expanded to a point where it is damaging to our waters and nature, and we are losing our precious topsoil downstream. Restoring and enhancing natural landscapes and resources is key to developing local, sustainable economies. There is an "Okoboji Model" here that certainly could be exported to other rural areas of the state.

Let's create a new vision of the Iowa landscape where not only agriculture thrives, but also healthy, outdoor corridors of opportunity. We once had a tallgrass prairie wilderness across the state with abundant clean water. Bringing back nature around the edges for public use is the cure for the rural Iowa blues, cleaning our waters and providing healthy family and community opportunities. **This is the Okoboji way.**

## In Memory...

The Okoboji Protective Association expresses its sincerest sympathy to the family of Ned Stockdale, who passed away on September 27, 2019. Ned truly loved the Lakes, serving as the Commodore of the Okoboji Yacht Club in 1993 and as a sailboat race judge for more than 25 years. A longtime member of the OPA, Ned served both as an OPA board member and was a past president. The OPA thanks you for your years of service!

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## OPA Newsletter

P.O. Box 242  
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The OPA Newsletter welcomes submissions from its readers.  
Editors:..... Barbara Mendenhall  
Steve Weisman

## World Wide Web

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# OKOBOJI PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION



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