



JOE SIENKIEWICZ/OF THE NORTHWESTERN

CODY LARSON RECORDS his findings using the Secchi disk to measure turbidity or clarity of Lake Butte des Morts off of Sand Pit Road. It was just more 2 feet. Oshkosh Northwestern 8/1/2006

Testing the waters

Program building first database on water clarity

BY ALEX HUMMEL
of The Northwestern

At 22, Cody Larson figures he already owes a debt to Winnebago waterways - the places he swam, fished and cruised as a child.

He's studying management and conservation of the local string of lakes and rivers in school. He works for a Greenville company that stocks ponds, restores shorelines and attacks unwanted aquatic weeds.

And in his off time, once or twice a week, Larson is willing to launch his boat from Winnebago County's Lake Butte des Morts boat landing. He uses a global-positioning satellite system to find the same watery spot and spends 15 to 20 minutes or so dunking a disk into the depths, observing and logging water clarity data.

With every measurement, the numbers and records form a better picture of the lake's character.

"It's a real simple way to help out the lakes in our area," said Larson, a Fox Valley Technical College student.

Larson is just one of a growing number of lake lovers making some size-



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CODY LARSON sends down the Secchi disk in Lake Butte des Morts off Sand Pit Road.

able strides. They are developing - believe it or not - the first-ever database of water clarity in the "Winnebago Pool," the family of lakes from Winnebago to Poygan strung together by the Fox River.

In 2005, the inaugural year for the "Winnebago

Pool Self-Help Monitoring Network," 86 volunteers were trained. They obtained about 500 measurements on the Winnebago pool lakes.

Tonight, Michael Lizotte, director of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh's Aquatic Re-

Monitor training

- Today, 6 to 8 p.m.
- Aquatic Research Laboratory at UW-O; Pearl Avenue behind Koff Sports Center on the Fox River near campus.
- Training free and open to public; lasts about two hours; volunteers get equipment, learn about program, how to properly take measurements, record data.
- Registration encouraged before today's session: by e-mail: winnebagogpool@yahoo.com; or at (920) 424-0848 contact: Michael Lizotte, UW-O Department of Biology.
- www.uwosh.edu/facilities/buildings/aquatic.php -- UW-O's Aquatic Research Laboratory.

search Laboratory, hopes to get more Cody Larsons to step up, get trained and help find some answers. Lizotte will host another training session at the col-

WATER: Water wasn't monitored

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lege's aquatic laboratory, on campus behind Kolf Sports Center, starting at 6 p.m.

With all the water surrounding Oshkosh and Winnebago County's communities, you'd think there would already be some definitive guide resting on a Department of Natural Resources shelf somewhere. Or, maybe local fishermen or sailors would have compiled some well-worn almanac.

Not so. And that's why finding funding to launch UWO's citizen-driven water quality monitoring work was a cinch, Lizotte said.

"One of the points that was very easy for me to make is just showing that we aren't doing that in this part of the state - we aren't doing the environmental monitoring," he said. "I was able to argue that if we were a typical part of Wisconsin, based on our human population around the lake, we should have at least 100 people around the lake monitoring. But we didn't. We had one, and, in some years, we had zero. The best explanation we have is people assume a large lake like this is monitored by somebody, presumably, the government."

Volunteers tonight will get an overview of the project, why it's being undertaken and a primer on using the GPS equipment and a "Secchi disk," the black-and-white implement volunteers lower into the water and determine the depth at which it "disappears" into the murk.

The answers from the data will determine whether algae levels are normal or off-kilter. Eventually, they may help pinpoint whether manmade pollutants streaming off the land are greening the water.

"There have been decades of work to try and improve the situation, but we don't know if it's improving the lake because we haven't been monitoring it," Lizotte said.

Think of the project like a large net being cast over the local waterways. The more fine the threading, the more distinct points where the net touches the water. By the same rationale, the more volunteers who adopt a spot on the lakes, the more covered it is and the more statistically-worthy the data will be - giving scientists, Realtors, sportsmen, everyone a better idea of what's happening to the water.

Some lakes, like Green Lake, have had such citizen water mon-

itoring networks for 20 years, Lizotte said. But Lake Winnebago hasn't benefited from organized citizen monitoring because it is, relatively, colossal. "It could take several hundred people" to meaningfully cover and collect data, he said.

So far, some of the Winnebago pool project's trained volunteers use motorboats to reach their measuring points. Some use kayaks. All have a common passion for getting some answers.

Bob Beckstrom, 66, is a retired human resources director from the paper industry and a board member of the citizen-led Winnebago Lakes Council. He lives on the lake in the town of Black Wolf about five miles south of Oshkosh. When he saw ads in the newspaper looking for volunteers to monitor the waters, he stepped up.

"In the opinion of just about everybody here in the lakes, these lakes are cleaning up," Beckstrom said. "... Nobody can figure out anything to attribute anything to it except zebra mussels."

But is the pristine water necessarily a good thing? When the water stays clear, "the sun penetrates more, and you have more photosynthesis, so more weed growth," Beckstrom said.

"It's always very interesting," he said last week. "Because as you're going out, you wonder, 'What kind of reading am I going to get today?' When I first started this early summer, I was getting readings down to eight-and-a-half feet of clarity. I went out yesterday. I got three-and-a-half feet. Every time I come home, my wife says, 'What kind of reading did you get today?' ... It's just interesting to follow."

Mary "Tinker" Callan, 46, who used to own a medical staffing business, views herself as a defender of the water.

She monitors three separate Lake Winnebago sites every week. And she's developed an eye for the changes.

"I think just educating people is just really vital in the full circle of taking care of this lake," she said. "We have to educate people who live on the lake: 'You shouldn't be burning your garbage because of the ash, the phosphorous and things like that.' ... Look at our economy. This lake plays a major role, too. Someone has to come forward and say hey, we have to monitor it."

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