

Development on Our Lakes: Are We at a Tipping Point?

Many imagine a time countless decades ago when our northern Wisconsin lake country was in a steady state of environmental equilibrium. A web of food and habitat resources nurtured a steady diversity of life in an endless natural balance across the land and waters.

From the perspective of centuries, this balance of nature was really not so steady or predictable. Forest fires, shifting climate trends, and the sweeping rise and fall of dominant organisms periodically created sudden and random affronts to the notion of nature in balance.

So it is today with many of our lakes. An abrupt and sweeping influx of human development has come to the peaceful natural shorelands. A study of northern Wisconsin lakes shows that in the 1960s, 25 percent of private shoreland was developed – and that at the present pace 90 percent will be developed by 2025.

This surge in development has been shown to cause a 700 percent increase in phosphorous entering into our lakes. Sediment loading has increased by 18 percent. Invasive species are arriving and lakes are warming, putting new pressures on the fragile balance of plants, fish and wildlife. Suddenly, the delicate balance of lake ecology is being upset.

A Minnesota study discovered a tipping point for healthy lakes. When the natural forested portion of a northern lake's shoreland falls below 60 percent, lake health begins to deteriorate. Many northern lakes are reaching a tipping point. Lakeshore development has begun to exceed nature's capacity to remain in a stable state.

We can help keep lake health in balance through development choices rooted in sound science and maintained through state and local shoreland conservation rules and guidelines. Sustainable lakeshore stewardship practices will allow us to pass the cherished legacy of our northern lakes on to future generations.

One in a series of articles sponsored by the Oneida County Lakes and Rivers Association (www.oclra.org). For more information, contact Bob Martini at 715-282-5896 or email to webmaster@oclra.org. OCLRA encourages the use and distribution of this material by lake associations, their members, and other parties concerned about water quality.

“Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher ‘standard of living’ is worth its cost in things natural, wild and free.”

**—Aldo Leopold
Foreword to
“A Sand County
Almanac,” 1949**

OCLRA

ONEIDA COUNTY
Lakes and Rivers Association