

Who Owns Wisconsin's Lakes and Streams? We All Do!

That's right. No one person or company can own any of our state's surface waters. They are public resources, owned by all of us.

Together we own the waters of Lake Michigan, the Wisconsin River, Lake Winnebago, Trout Lake, the Turtle-Flambeau and Chippewa flowages, the Wolf River, and all of our state's more than 15,000 lakes and 84,000 miles of rivers and streams. These waters are held in trust by the state Department of Natural Resources

The Public Trust Doctrine is affirmed by the state Supreme Court. It gives us the right to swim, boat, fish, hunt, skate and generally enjoy these waters and their scenery. Over many years, the doctrine has been upheld, defined and expanded by court cases and state laws. It is part of Wisconsin's culture.

Private parties can and do own the land along lakes and streams. Landowners have the right to use those shorelines and have access to the water. However, the Wisconsin Supreme Court has ruled that when conflicts occur between private and public rights, the public's rights take priority.

If we accept the Public Trust Doctrine, then we all have a duty to help protect the waters for the good of everyone. In fact, it is the Public Trust Doctrine that empowers the DNR to protect our right to the waters through permitting rules, and through laws that allow local zoning ordinances to limit development along waterways.

The Public Trust Doctrine, like our waters themselves, is a treasure worth protecting.

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.

Did you know...
The Public Trust Doctrine is enshrined in Wisconsin's Constitution. It declares that all the state's navigable waters are "common highways and forever free."

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ONEIDA COUNTY
Lakes and Rivers Association