

Social Marketing Campaign Aims to Encourage Property Owners to Restore Lakeshore Habitat

By Bret Shaw and John Haack

It is well known that increased shoreland and residential development across the state has had a significant negative impact on natural scenic beauty, water quality, and fish and wildlife habitat. While home owners frequently see their individual property changes as small and insignificant, lake managers and scientists are observing broader trends and some significant impacts from the many small actions that are adding up to measurable changes for the worse in water quality and habitat availability over a relatively short span of time.

John Haack, an Extension Basin Educator in northwest Wisconsin, had been working on these issues for 25 years. Most strategies that he and his colleagues had implemented to address negative impacts on shoreland ecosystems relied on classical education techniques such as brochures and workshops, operating on the assumption that if people only knew their individual decisions were cumulatively impacting the lake, they would change their behavior accordingly.

For the past few decades, however, residential development around northern lakes has increased dramatically. Additionally, at least up until the recent economic downturn, people were also building larger and larger homes adjacent to the lakes and making landscaping decisions such as neatly manicured lawns and sandy beaches that further impacted their shoreland areas.

In response to this realization that regulations and education were not having their intended effects in conserving shorelands, Haack wanted to try something new. After being exposed to social marketing, he set out to try this approach on lake-related issues (for more on how Haack learned about social marketing and selected the specific lakes for testing the campaign, see the Person Profile about John Haack on page 3).

Social marketing is an approach to outreach that promotes the voluntary behavior of target audiences by offering benefits they want, reducing barriers they are concerned about and using persuasion to motivate their participation in program activity. A key factor influencing interest in social marketing relative to other approaches is its focus on behavior versus other softer outcomes such as increasing knowledge or changing attitudes. At the end of the day, behavior is truly the only dependent variable that will produce positive, measurable effects on the environment.

With feedback from natural resource scientists, it was determined that the single most important action shoreline property owners could do to maintain water quality and improve fish and wildlife habitat was to preserve or restore buffer zones of native vegetation along the lakeshore. With support from Burnett County and funding from the Department of Natural Resources Lake Protection Grant Program, Haack set out to implement a social marketing campaign encouraging property owners to better manage their shoreline ecosystems.

The first year of the project has been focused on understanding how shoreline property owners think about the issue of buffers and landscaping on their

land, what barriers exist toward adoption of the targeted behavior and what would motivate these residents to manage their shorelands in a more lake-friendly manner. Initially, focus groups and interviews were conducted to gain a broad understanding of residents' attitudes and to inform development of a quantitative survey that would be used to inform the planning of an actual social marketing campaign to be launched in Spring 2009. The survey was distributed in Summer 2008 and 165 residents responded with a 72% response rate among residents of Long and Des Moines Lakes. Key findings from this survey and strategies that will be implemented based on these results are described below.

Respondents clearly indicated that the most important benefits of allowing more natural vegetation on the shoreland areas of their property was maintaining good water quality, improving fish and wildlife habitat and reducing runoff water and soil erosion from entering the lake. So, people seem to understand the benefits of natural vegetation around the lake though the properties of fewer than a quarter of participants meet the intended standards of the county and state shoreland buffer regulation standards. Indeed, there was a significant disconnect between the properties as categorized by a trained field biologist in terms of whether residents met shoreland protection requirements and how residents categorized their own properties. For example, while the biologist rated 50.9% of properties as being most in need of restoration, only 3.1% of respondents felt their property was highly manicured and maintained. While these weren't the same exact categories, it's clear that residents had different ideas of what constitutes a natural shoreline as compared to a biologist. One way to address this misperception in the forthcoming social marketing campaign is to provide pictures of real properties that meet and don't meet shoreland buffer standards to provide greater understanding about the issue.

Respondents were also asked what strategies would encourage property owners to allow a portion of their shoreland to return to a more natural state. The highest rated item was tax credits. Interestingly, however, only 16.6% of participants said they were actually enrolled in the Burnett County Shorelands Incentive Program. This would suggest that our campaign would want to find out how we can modify and improve the existing program to encourage more property owners to participate.

Another question asked of residents was what were their barriers to allowing more natural vegetation on the shoreland areas of their property. One encouraging sign was that none of the barriers were perceived as being very important. Among the highest rated barriers for restoring buffers was an obstructed view of the lake and a reduced ability to see children or grandchildren while they are playing in the water. This result suggests that the campaign might emphasize strategic planting of low growing native shrubs and grasses so property owners still have a view of the lake and the ability to watch over their children.

Another significant barrier was the perception that having a shoreland buffer would prevent their property from having a sandy beach. Statewide standards allow for a 35 foot access corridor and beach area, so the campaign may emphasize strategies to help property owners strike a balance between their desire to recreate by the water and protect the quality of their lake.

One final barrier that rated relatively high was that people were concerned that having a buffer would increase the prevalence of nuisance insects such as ticks. One

strategy that property owners with this concern can implement is the use of mulched paths, which ticks avoid.

Another area the survey explored was what wildlife they enjoyed seeing most, with the intent of explaining to residents how pristine natural habitat contributes to the well being of their favorite animals. Respondents indicated that eagles and loons were the animals they wanted to see more of around their properties. For example, in the messaging of our campaign, we will emphasize that loons need natural vegetation for nesting and raising their chicks and both eagles and loons need good water quality and healthy fisheries for feeding.

On the other hand, property owners were not interested in attracting some kinds of animals to their property – most notably geese. One of the insights that emerged from both the focus groups and surveys is that while people may be okay with watching geese fly overhead or swimming in the water, they do not like them congregating on their lawn and leaving unsightly and unsanitary fecal matter behind when they migrate off to greener pastures. Even for people not focused on water quality and wildlife habitat as a reason for allowing more natural foliage to grow on their shoreline property, the campaign will communicate that lawn-loving geese will be deterred from spending too much time on their land because they fear that natural shoreline vegetation may harbor predators.

The survey also asked respondents about how they liked their property's lakeshore to look. The rationale for this question was that we wanted to know whether property owners would be more willing to just "let it be" and allow natural, native vegetation to take over or whether they preferred a look that was more clearly controlled by the owner, which would suggest a more proactive approach to creating buffers. Responses came in right about the middle of these two extremes, suggesting that our campaign should recommend how to allow more natural elements to emerge in the shoreline area while allowing some flexibility to plant native shrubs and grasses to enhance the buffer's restoration.

Next steps are to use this data to develop campaign materials and strategies, build partnerships with community stakeholders and launching the actual campaign in early Summer 2009. An evaluation protocol has also been put in place to monitor how opinions and attitudes have shifted as a result of the campaign. Most important, individual parcels will be reassessed at the end of the campaign to measure whether this initiative has been successful in encouraging residents to restore buffers on their lakeshore property.

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