

## News

### Learning about Lake Superior's everglades

By Kevin O'Brien

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Water

The earth never offered man

Water

As a gift

Water was part of her

It is her blood

Her moving force

And in this, she said

You will see your greed

Your mistakes

Your image

But few will see me

MELLEN ♦ Several poetic passages from the Bad River Tribe captured the concerns of those gathered for the Bad River Watershed Association's summer picnic and annual meeting in Gilman Park on Saturday.

Known as "Wisconsin's Everglades," the 675,000 acres of wild land in the Bad River watershed and Kakagon Sloughs is one of the state's largest natural treasures.

The BRWA is made up of people who live somewhere within the watershed, many of whom own property on or near one of the dozens of Bad River tributaries.

"It gets a group of people together who are dedicated to viewing the area they live from the perspective of rivers, streams, and creeks and how our actions affect those waters," said BRWA President Tom Erickson, who has been with the organization since it started last August.

Laurence Wiland, a member of the BRWA's Board of Directors, said ecological boundaries create a community, and just like a neighborhood association, residents need to think about how their actions affect others.

One of the BRWA's first accomplishments was starting monthly water quality sampling at five sites along the Marengo River with help from Tracey Ledder, who has helped train 14 volunteers in testing

the water using seven sampling kits.

Wiland said they are monitoring levels of nitrates, phosphates and pH levels over time to determine the effects of more people and more development.

The White River flows through Wiland's property in Sanborn, and he enjoys fishing and swimming in it without worrying about fecal chloroform from failing septic systems and cattle farming.

"This watershed, all things considered, is in pretty good shape," Wiland said.

Erickson said BRWA's mission is to keep it that way by working with local governments to find ways of preventing problems in the future.

Residing on the headwaters of the White River in Delta, Erickson said water quality is an important issue to him because he has lived in areas where the local water was tainted by high levels of fecal bacteria.

"We have a real precious resource and I just want to do what I can to make it stay that way," Erickson said.

Dorothy Lagerroos, a Northland College professor and BRWA board member, said the watershed is in an area that will be hit with a "huge wave" of retired residents in the next five to 10 years, so they want to start collecting data now to show the effects of development in the future.

As visitors gathered around for food and a look at several displays on the watershed, Erickson talked about how the logging industry in the 19th century had "severely affected" the watershed by damming up the rivers and how the rivers have been "slowly recovering" since then.

"We're lucky our waters are in the condition they are in now," Erickson said. "Hopefully, with our efforts, we can continue that into the future."

#### Year-round testing

Ledder told the group about the water sampling efforts, giving out several volunteer awards, include an "ice buster award" for those who had to break through the ice on the Marengo River to get samples in December and the "sheer volume award" for the person with the biggest water samples.

Seventeen trained volunteers are also helping Ledder take samples of macroinvertebrate species such as stone flies at nine sites along the watershed in the spring and fall and studying them under microscope.

Taken all together, Ledder said the current test results and data show "very good to excellent water quality."

The most obvious problem within the Bad River watershed, according to Ledder, is the erosion of clay and silt, which adds nutrients to the water that impact the ecological balance of river and streams and can affect fish spawning.

Ledder has her masters degree in environmental science and engineering from Virginia Tech and has worked for 12 years in labs studying hazardous waste sites, including a watershed in New Jersey.

"When you're out there sampling, you feel connected to your river and you go out and tell a friend, and they tell a friend," Ledder said.

Leslie Kolesar of Saxon, for example, lives near Lawrence Creek, which feeds into the Potato River, and started doing water testing with BRWA after her friend Joan Elias, a board member, got her interested.

Kolesar said she believes strongly is "good stewardship of the land," and is also concerned about the

invasion of exotic species such as purple loosestrife.

"I really admire the people who took on this project," Kolesar said. "It's a huge undertaking to keep that watershed healthy."

One of the picnic's activities was testing water samples from the nearby stretch of the Bad River which ran through Gilman Park, an activity which Ledder said would give potential volunteers an idea of what the monthly testing is like.

Keith Carlson, who owns a cabin near the headwaters of the Brunsweller River, participated in the testing, holding up test tubes of yellow liquid to show the level of dissolved oxygen in the water.

Concerned about the water quality in his area, Carlson said he has been doing monthly water testing off of County Trunk Highway C, and along with invertebrate samples, he said they found "pretty high quality water" which he would like to see maintained.

A group effort

Erickson noted that the BRWA's Board of Directors consisted of appointed members from organizations such as the Bad River Tribe and the Nature Conservancy, and seven elected members from any of the 20 towns within the watershed.

Rae Ann Maday, watershed coordinator for the Bad River Natural Resources Department, said the tribe has been testing water quality at 22 different locations over the last six years and realizes that they don't have any control over what happens to the water outside tribal boundaries.

"We need those partnerships to maintain the water quality we do have," Maday said about the BRWA.

So far, Maday said the watershed has provided a "clean, healthy place to live," but higher levels of fecal matter from cattle and failing septic systems may make it necessary to "curb that development so it doesn't ruin the very reasons people move here."

Matt Eitream of Montreal, who was at the picnic with his three kids, said he worked as a specialist for both the tribe and BRWA on developing geographic information systems (GIS) that pinpoint intersections between roads and water where erosion tends to occur at higher levels.

State Representative Gary Sherman of Port Wing attended the picnic because of one such trouble spot where State Highway 13 crosses the White River and the hillside is sliding into the water.

Known as the "Red Clay Slump Project," Sherman said Martin Hanson is heading the initiative and working with BRWA to get the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to do something about the problem.

Having experienced 30 years of evolving public policy regarding water treatment and representing about 20 sanitary districts as an attorney, Sherman applauded BRWA's efforts to focus on a "manageable area" without relying on the often "distant and uncaring" bureaucrats in state or federal government.

"People are put in a position to do it themselves," Sherman said. "I think localizing the project is more democratic."

Volunteers and donations are needed to help with water quality testing. For more information on BRWA, contact Laurence Wiland at 715-278-3659. Send donations to Bad River Watershed Association, 310 Stuntz Ave. #300, Ashland, WI 54806.