

Community Capacity and Perceptions of Lake Health in Chetek, WI

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Project

- This project's goal was to understand community perceptions of lake health as well as real and perceived impacts of water quality on the community of Chetek, WI.

Methodology

- Part of an ongoing ethnographic project about community use and impacts in the Red Cedar Watershed; data collected over three summers.
- Data collection by
 - attending community events and observing meetings that pertained to the lake and the community.
 - interviews with local government officials, business owners, and lifelong community members.

Background

- Chetek, WI is part of the upper Red Cedar Watershed, and is an area known for its six-lake system and over 130 miles of lakeshore
- Many tourists visit the area to enjoy the local scenery, its recreational activities, and charming shops and restaurants – City of Chetek website

Community Capacity

- Community capacity can be defined as “the combined influence of a community’s commitment, resources, and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems.”- Effective Communities Project
- Chetek has the foundation necessary to build capacity to counter lake pollution. Organizations (CLPA, ROA, Chetek Chamber of Commerce) and concerned citizens and business owners whose livelihoods depend on the lake and the revenue it brings them are already in place.



Results: Community Perceptions of the Lake

• Lake Health:

- “The last couple of years haven’t been bad because of the **amount of rain** we have had, they haven’t gotten really bad. But on **drier years**, it has been really bad.” – Local Business Owner .
- “I think the algae, it **changes** from year to year” – Lifelong Chetek Resident
- “In my opinion I don’t think it is **getting worse visibly**, but, then you look at some of the **data**, and it started showing nutrient load, and that seems to be **actually growing**.”- CLPA Member

• What the lake means to the community:

- “We all know that the lakes bring a **substantial amount of revenue** in, and without it, we would be Dallas or New Auburn or something like that in the area.”- Local Business Owner
- “I think that **tourism** is what **keeps this town going**, and without the lakes we wouldn’t have that. So, it is important to do whatever we can to **keep the lakes cleaner**, and the fishing good.”- Chamber of Commerce Member

• Why it is important to be involved:

- “It would **impact** our schools, and **our services**, and **our everything**, but not a lot of people get that.”- CLPA Member
- “They don’t realize that **without the lake system** that they wouldn’t have a **grocery store** to get their groceries, and they wouldn’t have a **pharmacy** to get their prescriptions”- Lifelong Chetek Resident



• What should be done:

- “If we could **dredge it** and get rid of some of that salt and get rid of some of that **phosphorus that’s tied up** in that that doesn’t keep getting released and **get the water cooler** and get some weed growth back.”- Government Member
- “I would have communities in the area put in some type of **tourism tax**, and start to use that money to **make the lakes healthier**, to slow down the algae blooms, to take a **proactive approach** to making the lake system healthier, and then promoting Chetek.”- Business Owner



Conclusions and Suggestions:

- Businesses rely on the lake, and the community takes pride in their large tourist population
- The main rhetoric is that lake health is defined by the aesthetic appearance of the lake, rather than objective information
- Discussion about solutions is halted by the misconception that the lake’s health is directly correlated to the lake’s physical appearance
- At one community event, a group of involved stakeholders discussed their frustrations from lack of community involvement and their commitment to cleaning up the lake.
- In order to address lake health, open communication and education is needed
- Chetek has many building blocks of community capacity (especially resources, and skills), but commitment is needed. A common vision and unity between organizations and citizens will go a long way towards addressing lake health
- Respondents emphasize the lake is everyone’s responsibility, but not everyone accepts it. They stress that everyone must be involved in order to see results that will positively impact the community