

How to Form a Successful Lake Association

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Association: an organization of persons having a common interest (*Merriam-Webster*).

The basic foundation for a successful lake association is to have a diverse group of people supporting a common interest in managing a lake. To have it be successful, the association needs to be sustainable and create near and long-term changes.

So how does one go about forming a cohesive group with a common lake interest that makes a difference? There needs to be a reason for an association to form in the first place. If there is no need, then the association will fail right from the start. Find that need or purpose that people can get excited about. What is the reason people will get involved, spend their time and resources, and continue to stay involved?

Lake groups

Every lake is unique and so are lake associations. With these differences, lake groups can fall into three general types. Here are the three types and what purposes they might serve.

Watershed group – With more complex systems such as reservoirs or urban lakes, a watershed group can be more effective at overseeing larger projects. Watershed groups tend to have more governmental agencies involved (local, tribal, state, and federal), along with private industries, drinking water agencies, and wastewater facilities. Governmental compliance and non-point source impacts are important features for a watershed group.

Homeowner's association or HOA

– Many lakes/reservoirs are lined with private or partially private, lakefront homeowners. These property owners have a direct impact and interest in the health

of the lake. Lake-focused HOAs tend to care more about recreation, aesthetics, water quality, and the future of the lake. The underlying concern or motivation for these HOAs can often be property values. Enjoyment, protection, and monetary value are important elements to a lake HOA.

“Friends” group – These groups tend to be smaller and grassroots in nature, where passionate people have a common interest in a lake topic. These lake groups focus on education, protection, and working with a wide range of others to help protect what they enjoy and highly value. Mobilizing people and fundraising for specific tasks are important for friends groups.

No matter the type or name, a successful lake group forms around a common purpose and has sustainable behaviors that support a common cause (Figure 1A and B). All these lake-focused groups tend to have some common themes that allow them to be successful.

Key points

If you are thinking about forming a lake association or are currently participating in a group, here are a few ideas that may help with making it successful.

Key individuals and structure – There needs to be a key person or two that hold the organization together. They spearhead the group by being a chairperson, president, homeowner, employee, or a lake user that makes it their mission to make the group successful. These key people are the glue that makes the group successful.

Critical mass – A successful lake association needs to have a solid base of

supporters and participants. The more, the better. It takes time, resources, and money to protect and restore a lake. A strong base of active supporters and stakeholders builds the foundation that supports the group.

Inclusiveness and communication

– Since lake groups are focused on a lake, whether private or public, they are dealing with a public good and a natural resource that eventually belongs to everyone. Lake associations need to reach out to all possible stakeholders in order to build membership and to develop a strong network. Good communication is the key to this inclusiveness. A successful lake association must be open-minded, work collaboratively, and have a strong communication network.

Diversity – Yes, there should be a common lake thread that stitches the group together, but the more diverse the membership the better the group. A lake association should have people that understand the political, emotional, social, and economic systems involved with the lake. You need expertise in working with land owners, navigating governmental agencies, finding philanthropic connections, motivating agencies to work with citizens, and influencing regulations and state legislation to favor your causes. Think beyond just the lake.

Steady funding – Having a steady, reliable source of funding is an important part of lake groups. Similar to personal portfolios, a successful lake association needs to have a diverse funding plan where money comes from various, reliable sources like memberships, grants, sales of products, events, and donations.

Paid coordinator – In order to be a sustaining organization, it is helpful to



Figure 1. A. Marking storm drains near your lake is a great way to educate people about watershed issues. Schools often look for community projects like this. B. Watershed stakeholder meeting with fun pet waste poop balloon.

have a hired professional that coordinates all the efforts. It takes time to organize meetings, write and distribute newsletters, recruit board members, manage memberships, and network with other stakeholders and organizations. A dedicated coordinator can provide helpful daily oversight while keeping the long-term vision in mind. A coordinator may be a logical choice for a larger lake, with many association members, a bigger budget, and whose watershed encompasses multiple municipalities.

Quality data – It is important to have unbiased facts. Monitoring is expensive, but it is vital that trustworthy, reliable data

are collected to support the lake association’s activities and overall mission. A routine monitoring program can show progress, provide information for an adaptive management plan, and help with public education. Just be sure that the data that you are collecting are meaningful to understanding the big picture of what is going on in the lake and watershed. Established state or academic volunteer monitoring programs and professional laboratories can provide guidance and methods for good data collection.

Mission and vision statements – It is important to have a short, agreeable

mission and vision statement. Even a simple list of attainable goals is helpful. A successful lake association needs to have a clear understanding of what their purpose is, what the goals are, and a means of measuring how they achieved them in the future.

Important story – What is your hook? You need a story with an overall draw that will keep your members excited. A successful lake association needs to show why stakeholders and others need to care and participate regularly in the organization. In order for people to feel like they need to participate, they need a strong connection that matters to their underlying values. Your story needs to do that.

Puppies and kids – People are naturally attracted to cute things. If you want to be heard, increase your audience, get your message out, it never hurts to include puppies and kids in your press release, website, or newsletter. Local schools and classrooms are great resources to get your message out (Figure 2).

Have a plan – It is important to have a plan and to have it written down. Keep it simple. Watershed plans and lake protection plans can easily become large, distracting, boring documents that are never used. Plans are living documents that need to be clear, readable, and concise. A successful lake association needs to have a plan that everyone agrees on and uses.

These are just some of the key elements to having a successful lake association. Every lake and every lake association is different. It takes time and understanding of the situation to have a successful organization.

What not to do

It is also important to know what doesn’t work. There are situations where you might think you have done everything right, but your organization is not thriving.

- **Expensive dues or membership fees** – People and other stakeholders need to feel like they are getting something out of their membership.
- **Using bad or incorrect data and information** – Make sure you are collecting reliable data and the right



Figure 2. Summertime education on Barr Lake for inner-city high school girls group. Reach out to social and community summer youth programs to collaborate with.

data. Keep the future in mind when updating a monitoring plan.

- *Boring regulations* – Regulations can be a major obstacle for a lake group. Permits can take years to get. Government and regulations can be an alphabet soup of acronyms that turn citizens off. Make sure you have help with understanding regulations and to have the patience to navigate through them.
- *Waste-of-time meetings* – Free food is always a good thing at meetings and events, but make sure you also provide food for thought when it comes to your overall purpose and message (Figure 3).
- *Overwhelmed and a sense of hopelessness* – Give your membership or audience something they can help with. Make them feel like they are being productive and can actually make a noticeable difference in a relatively short amount of time. Break larger tasks down into smaller activities, so that interested individuals can volunteer their time and feel like they are accomplishing something.

Social skills

An obvious but overlooked factor in successful lake protection/restoration efforts is people. Any social situation comes with complex human interactions.

It is important to have a good set of ground rules when it comes to social interactions. Every lake association will experience confrontations. There are topics that bring out emotions and deep feelings. Here is a list of some potential conflicts to prepare for: use of chemicals, agricultural vs. urban landuses, drinking water vs. wastewater sources and discharges, fishing vs. water sports, speed limits, horsepower restrictions, local

ordinances, and believers in specific lake restoration techniques. The key to success is to provide a safe environment for people to speak. This requires a culture of listening. The last thing a lake association needs are factions of people undermining the overall goal of the association just because of old personal conflicts. Keep politics out of it.

Sustainability

Maybe you already have a successful lake association. The next question should be about how one maintains that success. To be sustainable, lake groups must be flexible and willing to accept and adapt to changes. A culture of change is good to have and this can be achieved with a regular schedule of board retreats, annual meetings, plan updates, and steady communications about progress on projects. A lake is not stagnant and neither should the organization that is looking after it. Dynamic equilibrium is a great term to describe successful lake associations as well as healthy lakes.

Resources

There are lake associations that date back to the early 1900s (Belgrade Lakes Association, Maine, for example) in different parts of the country. Lake restoration began in the 1970s thanks the



Figure 3. Food is a great way to reward volunteers for their hard work during Lakes Appreciation Month.

GUIDELINES

Ten practical guidelines for developing community-based restoration efforts (Williams, J. 1997).

1. **Select an appropriate scale** – keep it manageable and achievable
2. **Define a purpose** – keep the efforts focused
3. **Select project leaders** – find experts to coordinate projects, this ensures that individual talents are maximized and there is progress. Get more buy in from members.
4. **Build community ownership** – need local community to support your efforts. Building good working relationships with partners takes time
5. **Use the best available science** – need trustworthy data to assess conditions, measure changes, and get public support
6. **Design a business plan** – careful planning that includes objectives, tasks, and strategies is needed for every activity
7. **Follow the cardinal rules** – avoid doing more harm to the environment, focus on the problem and not just the symptoms, and work with rather than against nature
8. **Monitor and evaluate** – critical for an adaptive management approach and helps with documenting changes and with public education
9. **Communicate results and reward accomplishments** – key to maintaining enthusiasm, promoting cooperation, and showing support
10. **Maintain a long-term perspective for success** – lake management is an ongoing process as long as people are involved. Restoring and maintaining a lake requires a long-term investment perspective

development of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (National Research Council 1992). EPA then developed the Clean Water Act that included a lake improvement program, the Clean Lakes Program. This 40+ years of attention to lakes and lake management throughout North America provides plenty of resources. States and lake-rich regions are great resources to help forming lake associations. The North American Lake Management Society (NALMS) is a large non-profit organization in North America dedicated to various aspects of lake management, and it has been around for 40 years now, and has built international connections over that time. NALMS is a clearinghouse of lake information including conferences, programs, publications, peer reviewed journals, subject matter experts, certified lake managers, and a membership of experts across North America. It even has state and regional affiliate organizations on a more local level, for which many individual lake residents and lake associations are members.

Summary

An organization of people having a common interest may sound simple, but it is not. Do not get discouraged if a meeting flops or things do not get done. It is rare to step into the batter's box for the first time and slug a homerun at the first pitch. It takes time, patience, and a full understanding that forming a lake association is a long-term endeavor. After determining there is a need for a lake association, start finding the right stakeholders, volunteers, leaders, and staff. Start monitoring right away and establish ground rules when it comes to social interactions. The rest will come with time – understanding the regulatory landscape, making key stakeholder connections, developing a diverse membership, and ultimately starting to see improvements in your lake and achieving your association goals. And remember, don't work in a vacuum, organizations like NALMS and their affiliates can be great resources for information and connection.

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