

How to Evaluate a Lake Association's Effectiveness

Leah L. Fitchett and V. Reilly Henson

Introduction

People value lakes for a wide variety of reasons. Lakes can hold significant personal and cultural value, provide opportunities for recreation, bolster property values, and even comprise people's livelihoods. These values can motivate people to work together to protect, preserve, and manage lakes as part of civic groups like lake associations. Depending upon the characteristics of the lake, along with the needs and desires of the community, these associations can vary greatly in terms of their vision, goals, membership, and activities. Regardless of their variability, lake associations and similar groups share the potential to play an important role in the management of lakes and watersheds.

Given this potential, it is important to determine whether or not a lake association is performing effectively. But how do we define effectiveness? Whereas a business might be able to look at profit or growth, it is not as easy for civic groups to choose a single metric to represent the outcome of their efforts. Because many factors influence the environmental quality of a lake, it is generally difficult – or even impossible – to trace changes back to a lake association's actions with complete certainty (Figure 1). In fact, the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of civic organizations has led to the rise of several different frameworks to guide evaluation. Some focus on internal processes; others focus on judging outcomes; still others focus on comparing characteristics to other organizations (Cameron 2015).

Clearly, there is no simple answer to the question of whether a civic organization is effective. However, the process of thoughtfully evaluating your lake association is immensely beneficial,

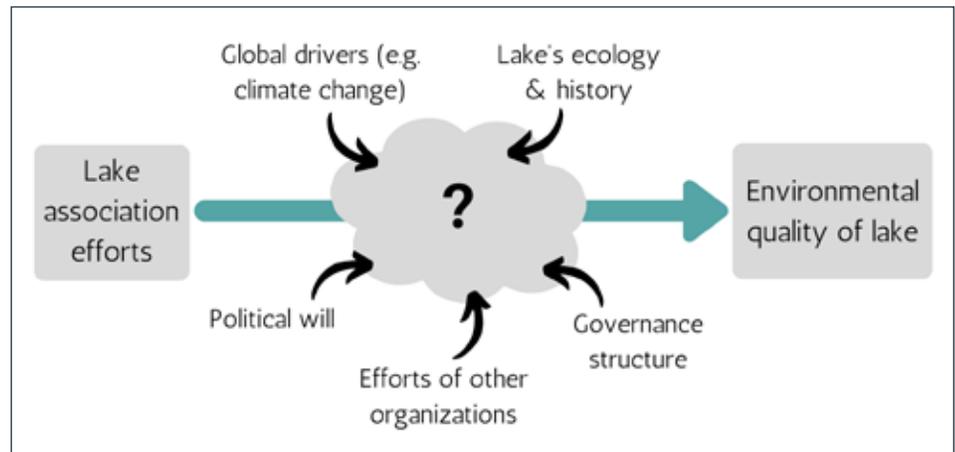


Figure 1. Many factors affect a lake's environmental outcomes, making it difficult to trace changes directly back to a lake association's actions.

as lake associations are often well situated within their communities to play a significant role in contributing to lake management and conservation. Evaluating lake associations' effectiveness can yield useful insights that inform future strategies, management practices, partnerships, and more.

There are three common frameworks for evaluating nonprofit effectiveness that can be usefully implemented by lake associations as a proxy to better understand their own contribution to environmental quality. These frameworks include: (1) the Goal Attainment Framework, (2) the Capacity Framework, and (3) the Reputation Framework.

Each of these frameworks addresses a question that can be asked of a particular organization, which are, respectively: (1) To what extent does your organization achieve the goals it has set for itself?; (2) What resources are available to your organization and how are they leveraged?; and (3) How effective is your organization perceived to be by the general public? We describe each of these frameworks for

assessment separately in this article, but recommend that lake associations draw from all three perspectives when performing evaluations to gain the most complete picture of their organization's effectiveness.

Assessment Framework 1: Goal Attainment

The first question to ask is to what degree your lake association achieves its goals. An association would be considered effective if it regularly achieves publicly advertised goals, or the objectives laid out in its mission, and has the ability to continue doing so. Civic groups such as lake associations typically have missions that reflect public needs, as they were created with the intention to solve a problem or address a potential issue of public interest. Under this evaluation framework, a lake association considers the degree to which it is achieving its goals in a way that is measurable, reliable, and can be sustained over time.

It is helpful to identify the motivations behind your lake association's

mission, to more accurately assess the extent of its achievements. There are three common types of missions that a lake association may have: human-centered, nature-centered, and pragmatic. Human-centered missions are focused on the ability of a lake ecosystem to improve the quality of life of those who interact with it. Nature-centered missions are more focused on the intrinsic value that lakes are believed to have, and the idea that people may even be morally obligated to protect them. Finally, pragmatic missions revolve around protecting the lake for additional benefits such as property values, tourism, or fishing resources. None of these mission types is superior to the others; each is based on real human needs and beliefs. Because they are all highly distinct, though, it is useful to consider which one is being invoked when evaluating whether your lake association is meeting its goals.

The achievements of your lake association can be broken down into two parts: the actions that are taken, and outcomes of those actions. For example, if the goal is an increase in public knowledge, a relevant action might be printing informational flyers about algae, and a possible outcome would be that members of surrounding neighborhoods are better-educated about algae in the lake. However, an alternative outcome of the same action could be that very few people read the flyers, and that public knowledge does not increase. If this were the case, your lake association might at first appear to be achieving its goal, because it took an action that is commonly considered to increase public knowledge. But upon delving further into the outcome, it becomes clear that there is room for improvement. For this reason, it is crucial to evaluate actions and outcomes together to understand whether your lake association is achieving its goals.

Assessment Framework 2: Capacity

The second question asks about the assets available to your lake association that allow it to persist and grow over time. An organization is considered to be more effective if it is able to maintain or expand its operations and resources over the course of several years, rather than dissolving or shrinking in scope.

A lake association's survival, growth, and scope all inherently depend on its capacity, which refers to the resources available to leverage, including the capabilities and knowledge of the individuals who help it function. In this way, capacity can serve as a metric for effectiveness. An organization's capacity consists of seven types of resources: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built (Flora et al. 2005). See Table 1 for examples of how each of these could apply to a lake association.

A lake association is able to take actions by leveraging its capacity. For example, a lake association might use its physical, built resources – e.g., a headquarters building – to host meetings

with local stakeholders, or use natural resources like a beautiful lakeshore to draw people into attending a promotional event. In this way, capacity and effectiveness can create a positive feedback loop: When an organization gains capacity, it can become more effective, which in turn enables it to acquire even greater capacity.

Of course, this positive feedback loop is influenced by whether or not a lake association leverages its capacity strategically and appropriately. For example, if a lake association holds a successful fundraising event and gains significant financial resources, but it does not invest or spend those financial resources in ways that demonstrate it is

Table 1. The different types of resources, and examples of ways that lake associations can use them to build or maintain capacity.

Type of resource	Application to lake associations
Natural	Lakes are often important natural landmarks, as well as offering opportunities for recreation. A lake association might use these factors as evidence that protection efforts are worthwhile, to help motivate its audience to engage in those efforts.
Cultural	Lake associations may host or participate in cultural events to strengthen their ties to the local community. They can also take responsibility for cultural artifacts that are important to the community, such as antique watercrafts or a cultural museum.
Human	A lake association may be able to tap into the training, education, and expertise that is shared by its staff, board members, volunteers, or members. In addition, the sheer number of individuals who are actively involved in a lake association is also considered part of a lake association's human resources.
Social	Social resources are made up of the trust, cooperation, and rapport a lake association has with the surrounding community and other institutions or organizations. Partnerships, collaborative efforts, and involvement in conflict mediation can be indicators of a lake association's social resources.
Political	A lake association's political resources consist of its connections, collaborations, and influence with political leadership. Lake associations can draw on these resources to generate support or to participate in the rule-making process, so that their values and mission might be included in policy and regulations.
Financial	Monetary resources can include membership dues, donations, fundraising revenues, sponsorships, investments, and savings. Financial resources allow lake associations to pay for equipment, upkeep, and daily operations, while also providing a means to invest in activities and lake management efforts.
Built	This is the infrastructure owned, rented, or used by a lake association. This can include property, buildings, and equipment. Built resources can determine the types of activities that are feasible for a lake association to engage in.

achieving its goals, then it has not necessarily increased its effectiveness despite an increase in its capacity. This is related to the Goal Attainment Framework described above, which demonstrates why it can be useful to combine frameworks when evaluating an organization. Likewise, an effective lake association only continues to grow or maintain capacity if it directs some of its activity internally to reinvest in the organization itself.

According to the Capacity Framework, an effective lake association is likely to have significant public recognition, member engagement, and goal attainment, as these are all connected to having access to strong, diversified resources. When evaluating your association's capacity in this way, you should consider the context in which the organization is operating, the types of resources that are being employed, and whether or not organizational capacity needs to be further strengthened in order to attain the established goals. The most effective associations are likely to make use of each of the seven categories of resources, rather than relying solely upon one or two.

Assessment Framework 3: Reputation

The third question to ask is how people perceive your lake association. This framework suggests that public recognition and social trust of an organization can serve as good proxies for organizational effectiveness. In other words, where it might be impossible to measure effectiveness directly, it can be quite useful to understand how effective people *believe* an organization to be. Therefore, under this context, an effective lake association might be one that is well-known, respected, trusted, and relied-upon by members of its community. To determine whether this is the case, you can examine how decision makers, the media, and the general public interact with or view your association. If they tend to cite the lake association as a credible source of information, offer praise for its accomplishments, and invite it to participate in community events or serve on local committees, then it would be regarded as an effective lake association under this framework.

When considering how your lake association effects change within its community, partnerships may be key. Lake associations often partner with other non-profit organizations, local interest groups, businesses, researchers, or even political efforts. When an organization operates at the intersection of practice, policy, and science in this way, it may be referred to as a *bridging organization*, or a *boundary organization* (Crona and Parker 2012). If your lake association is functioning as a bridging organization within its community, this is a good indicator of effectiveness under the Reputation Framework. Lake associations are often perfectly situated to connect stakeholders with the local knowledge they need in order to make management decisions regarding the lake and its watershed (Figure 2).

To be perceived as credible by the public, an organization generally also needs to have effective internal dynamics. This means that lake association personnel must have access to a positive working environment, opportunities for developing leadership skills, and a transparent decision making processes (even if those personnel are unpaid volunteers). If the internal workings of your lake association are smooth, efficient, and well-established, then the association is much more likely to have a strong reputation amongst community members, who care

about how the lake association's work gets done.

Lake Association Actions

To understand how mission, capacity, and reputation translate into outcomes, your lake association must finally look at the concrete actions it takes. Lake associations generally work to guide lake management through one of three avenues: acting to directly influence the lake, acting to influence people's norms and behaviors, or acting to influence formal rules or policy. For example, a lake association might host a lake clean-up event, advertise lake-friendly practices for leaf disposal, or advocate for lake-friendly agricultural policies. Importantly, any of these actions can also be accomplished by a lake association acting through its partnerships with other community entities. Ultimately, the actions that your lake association takes (as well as the resulting outcomes) determine whether it is attaining the goals laid out in its mission, building and leveraging capacity, and establishing and maintaining a strong reputation.

Conclusion

These frameworks for assessing a lake association's effectiveness are not intended to produce a definitive answer to the question of whether your lake association is good or bad, or effective or

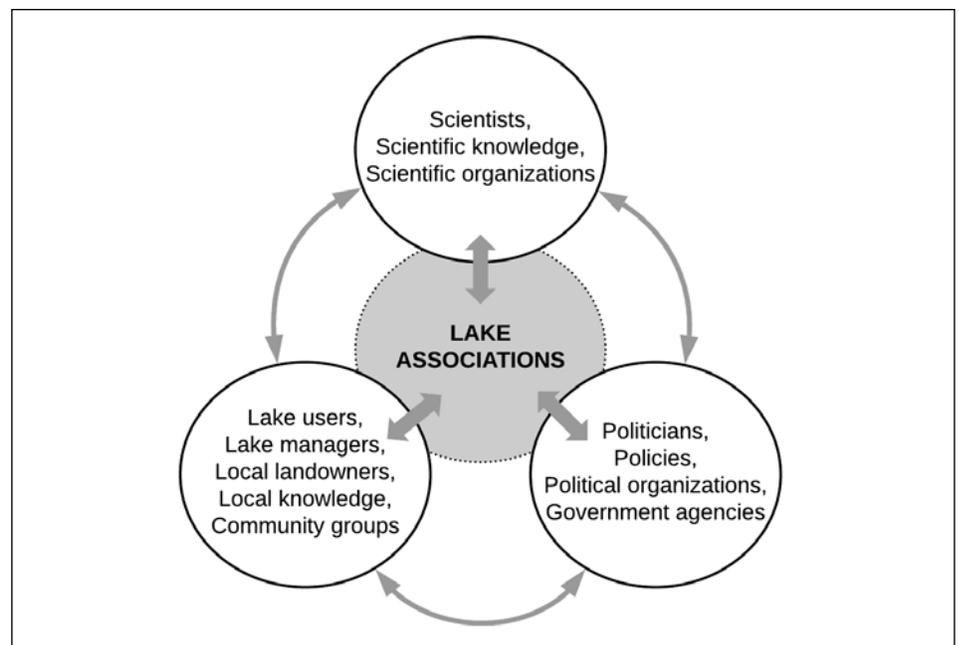


Figure 2. Lake associations are positioned such that they can mediate communication, collaborations, and/or information (from Fitchett 2019).

not (Herman and Renz 1999). Rather, you should use them as tools for evaluating and monitoring your lake association's effectiveness, as a means for identifying areas for improvement. By recognizing gaps between its potential and its actual accomplishments, a lake association can strategically determine how to better allocate resources, form partnerships, and focus actions in the future. Depending upon the context of the lake association and the needs of its community, these frameworks can be used to help chart a path toward greater effectiveness.

It should be noted that there is overlap between these three frameworks, reinforcing several common themes in evaluating effectiveness. For instance, an organization's self-described goals are likely to include items such as building partnerships and leveraging resources. Additionally, social ties, partnerships, and connections that bolster the organization's reputation also simultaneously represent resources that make up an organization's capacity. An organization can neither achieve its goals nor establish a good reputation if it does not have the capacity to sustain itself. Because of this overlap, major strengths and/or gaps are likely to be highlighted regardless of which framework is applied to an organization's evaluation, although utilizing a combination of these three frameworks can provide the most comprehensive assessment.

Lake associations are poised to play a major role in lake management and conservation, and these frameworks can be applied to better understand the role these groups are playing in their individual communities already, as well as the potential they have waiting to be unlocked.

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Leah L. Fitchett

recently finished up her master's research on the human dimensions of natural resource management. She is interested in understanding the ways in which people come together to collectively manage and conserve shared resources, and in working with communities to promote sustainable development.



V. Reilly Henson

works as a project manager for the CNH Lakes research team. Her primary focus is on communicating the science, and helping to make information about the project – including its data – accessible to researchers and public audiences alike. 



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