

Encouraging Best Practices in the Lake Home Rental Community

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Visiting the edge

Here in the Northeast, we always look forward to finally putting away snow shovels, taking out canoes and sandals, and heading to the nearest body of water. People are drawn to lakefront properties for their summer vacations. They look forward to visiting the same spot year-after-year, or to venturing out and staying in places they have never been. In addition to traditional vacation rental accommodations found in lake communities, the rise in popularity of short-term rentals through online companies such as Airbnb, Homeaway, and VRBO, makes it easier than ever for people to rent lakefront property, at times directly from a property owner.

Those of us who work with lakes have heard a great deal of concern about the rise in lakeside rental visitors throughout the summer season. Some lake stewards want to know if renters are aware of septic system restrictions and capacities in the places they rent, and whether renters are aware of lake protection strategies.

With over 800 lakes and ponds in Vermont and some of the [clearest lakes in the nation](#), escaping to the water here is a popular vacation destination. As permit analysts with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (VT DEC), we decided to check in with a few of the state's realtors to hear about what lakefront property renters are asking (and not asking) before renting a property (Figure 1).

Among the realtors we spoke with, there was agreement that the main thing on a renter's mind is access to the water. Renters know they have a short, blissful week or two at the lake, and the most important information they want to know about a rental property is how to get on or



Figure 1. Sharing the edge on Island Pond, Brighton, Vermont. Image by L. Miller

in the water and what types of activities are appropriate at the lakefront access.

VT DEC: What do renters want to know when they inquire about renting lake front property?

Matthew Lamb, Slopeside Okemo

Vacation Rentals: The main question that renters ask me is about access to the water. Renters want to know if there is access from the property, or whether there is some sort of communal or right-of-way

access. Once they know they can reach the water, visitors then ask about the presence of plants, or in some cases, whether blue-green algae has been observed in the area. Renters want to know about the density of plant growth and whether the lake front access area is good for swimming and boating.

Chip Tremper, Preferred Properties, agrees. Both renters and buyers of lakefront properties primarily ask about docks and whether the property has one.

It is encouraging to hear that non-limnologists are aware of and have concerns about cyanobacteria, as the health impacts of swimming in [cyanobacteria are well-documented](#). Shifting the public perception of aquatic plants can be a bit trickier. All aquatic plants are often lumped together in the “weed” category and seen as a nuisance. Temporary visitors are interested in getting uninhibited access to the water, and much less inclined to think about the habitat and water quality benefits that native aquatic plant beds provide (Figure 2). **Matthew Lamb, Slopeside Okemo Vacation Rentals**, notes that rental properties located in front of “weedy” areas never do well; people are not interested in renting them.

Regulations vary from state to state, and, in the case of Vermont, from waterbody to waterbody. Size, shape, depth, and classification status play a role in determining what is appropriate and legal for each waterbody. For realtors and property owners, sharing use restrictions and boating regulations are an important part of advertising a rental. Most realtors we spoke to revealed that not many renters ask about specific boating regulations pertaining to watercraft type and speed limits; rather they want to know if they can or can’t bring a motorized boat.

VT DEC: Are boating regulations and other recreational uses clearly conveyed to renters?

Chip Tremper, Preferred Properties: If I’m listing something that prohibits jet skis, I include it in the listing ahead of time to be proactive. Generally, people wanting to bring their jet skis won’t ask me about the property if I tell them upfront that jet skis are not allowed.

Cindy Sanville, Sanville Real Estate: Some renters want to know about fishing regulations including what species and size of fish can be caught, fishing limits, and whether there are sensitive areas.

It is important for visitors bringing their own boat, canoe, or kayak to be reminded that humans are the primary vector of transport of invasive species from one waterbody to another. Many nuisance plants and animals can be



Figure 2. Aquatic plant community on Lake Horton, Hubbardton, Vermont. Image by L. Miller

unknowingly carried on fishing gear, boating equipment, or in very small amounts of water in a watercraft. The easiest and most effective means to ensure that you are not moving aquatic invasive species is to make sure that your vessel and gear, is clean, drained, and dry before moving between waterbodies (Figure 3).

Once they have enjoyed a full day of sun and water, renters likely come inside to shower, cook dinner, and run the dishwasher. Many lakefront camps and cottages, built in the early half of the 20th century, have older septic systems, systems designed for occasional use, or just completely unknown wastewater treatment. When camps that were traditionally used for a few weekends a year are converted to year-round use, increased pressure may be placed on these septic systems.

VT DEC: Do renters inquire or express concern about septic system of the rental?

Cindy Sanville, Sanville Real Estate puts it simply: People are on vacation and not thinking about septic or water. Folks accustomed to having city water on demand don’t realize the limitations of a well and will sometime just let the water run.

Kathy Burns, William Raveis Real Estate, Vermont Property Company:

The status of an existing septic system is a major conversation if someone is buying a property, but renters are not thinking about these items. Owners of the building or camp are responsible for their septic systems. In Vermont, property owners who rent out their lakeshore properties are required to get Fire Safety permits that identify the maximum number of people who can stay at a time in a dwelling. This may help prevent the septic system from being overloaded, but it doesn’t specifically address septic capacity.

Nancy Larrow, from Century 21 Jack Associates:

Property owners are responsible for deciding who goes into their home, as realtors facilitate the rental details. It is up to the homeowner to approve the number of people they allow to rent their home at one time. Realtors don’t have specific information about septic capacity to pass on to renters. It is the responsibility of the property owner to ensure their septic systems are working properly and to understand signs of failure. In Vermont, the [Lake Wise Program](#), which promotes lake-friendly development of shoreland properties, has held lake community outreach events known as “septic socials.” [Septic Socials](#)



Figure 3. Decontaminating kayaks before leaving the lake. Image by J. Mulhollem

are fun, informal, and educational events that shed light on an unglamorous and often overlooked issue. Septic socials are hosted by a volunteer lakeshore landowner and attended by neighbors. A septic system professional is invited to briefly discuss system operation and maintenance using the host landowner's system as a demonstration model. In addition to building community amongst lake enthusiasts, the event encourages landowners to return home and take a look at their own system to think about maintenance and to understand warning signs that something may be wrong (Figure 4).

If renters are not familiar with rural landscapes, they may not be aware that the property is not connected to a municipal sewer system. A friendly placard in the bathroom or kitchen can help remind visitors to use water sparingly. Property owners may also want to make clear in their advertisement or rental agreement that the property can only support a certain number of people; the septic system of a two-bedroom cottage will not likely accommodate a 20-person family reunion several weeks of the year. A failed septic system is not only financially costly to the property owner, but [detrimental to lake water quality](#). Small lots mean tanks and leach fields are close to each other and close to the lake water table, increasing the risk of

discharging fecal coliform (among nutrients and other microbes) to the waterbody.

To help encourage renters to be stewards of the lake during their brief visits, lake associations or other watershed groups can help create and/or disperse a simple, one-page document of suggested best practices that can be distributed to

rental property owners. A brief, visually colorful "lake ethics" handout could include the following types of information:

- Let visitors know that aquatic plants in a lake are natural! Seeing aquatic plants in a lake are like seeing trees in a forest. They provide important habitat and are often great fishing spots.
- It is important to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. The best way to prevent the spread of invasive species is to ensure that all boats and gear are clean, drained, and dry before entering the water.
- Point renters in the direction of the nearest car wash or boat wash station.
- Rules of conduct on the specific lake, for example: What are the speed limits near shore and are there no wake zones? Are there horsepower limitations? Are personal watercraft (jet skis) allowed here?
- Where to get a fishing license and information about what to fish and what to not use as bait
- What not to flush in a septic system, and encouraging visitors to space out heavy usage of water (dishwashing, laundry, showers, etc.)



Figure 4. A septic social encourages good care and maintenance of wastewater systems. Image by A. Picotte

- Let renters arriving from out of state know that firewood should be acquired locally and not transported from [out of state](#).
- Many states have regulations that protect shoreland vegetation: remind renters that live trees need to be left in place and firewood should be purchased instead.
- Treat wildlife with respect, especially loons and other birds that may be nesting or feeding along the immediate shoreline

As limnologists, watershed planners, researchers, ecologists, and lake lovers, we can take it upon ourselves to help educate lake visitors in a friendly manner. It is unreasonable to expect all renters to know about best management practices or

to want a full ecology lesson on water quality. We all want to relax on vacation! Here exists a great opportunity to balance information and education and share the resource we all love with visitors and maybe inspire some new lake stewards.

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Laura has an M.S. in Forest Resources from Oregon State University and her favorite place to swim is in Lake Champlain.

Lindsay Miller is currently a permit analyst with the VT DEC Lakes and Ponds Management and Protection Program. She helps landowners understand the regulations associated with development and use of Vermont's lakes, and provides outreach on shoreland best management practices. Lindsay has an M.S. in Natural Resources from the University of Vermont, and enjoys gardening, running, and swimming in all types of water. 🌿



Need Help? Reach out to a NALMS Subject Matter Expert!

Sara Peel, NALMS Past President

Wonder whether that green plant that popped up on the other side of cove is invasive? Or better, curious what plant it is and how it may impact your recreational season or the fall fishing? Has your association thought about working within your drainage basin or watershed? Need help laying out options for getting started?

Considering adding a monitoring component to your lake management efforts? Should you start with the Secchi Dip-In or maybe hire someone to design a more robust program? Where and how do you submit the data and what does it mean?

Or for those groups that have been working tirelessly to improve conditions around your lake or within your watershed - stabilizing eroded areas along your shoreline, building relationships with your watershed farmers and landowners, working with shoreline residents to plant native buffers – are you ready to consider working within the lake itself? NALMS' Subject Matter Experts can help with these questions and more!

What is a NALMS SME?

A NALMS subject matter expert (SME) is a Certified Lake Manager or Certified Lake Professional who can write and speak confidently about a topic based on education and firsthand experience. As certified members of NALMS, our subject matter experts have demonstrated a high level of education, training, and commitment to furthering the science and protection of lakes. This person can help you and your association on a specific topic on which they have firsthand experience or are considered an expert. SMEs have opted to join the NALMS Subject Matter Expert list and are willing to work with you and your association to provide this expertise without a motive for financial or other personal gain.

Where to find SMEs?

The Subject Matter Expert list is online (<https://www.nalms.org/subject-matter-experts/>). Our list includes in-lake and watershed management experts, people that focus on lake dredging and sediment management, water quality testing in your lake and watershed, help for fisheries and aquatic plant management questions and techniques. Several SMEs focus on algal blooms, nutrient sources and bloom mitigation and more. You can find experts on specific diatoms or algal species or those that focus more holistically on your whole lake or watershed.

Now What?

Reach out to any of the experts included on NALMS SME list. Looking for expertise that is not included on the SME list? Reach out to Alyssa Anderson (aanderson@nalms.org), our Member Services Coordinator, and she will query our Certified Lake Managers and Certified Lake Professionals to identify an expert to provide assistance!

