

Saving the lake

By Kathy Hanson
Contributing Writer

Ahhh, summer's here and the lake has never looked more inviting. Bring on the swimming, sailing, cruising, fishing and the myriad water sports and activities that Lac Courte Oreilles has offered people—much to their delight—for centuries.

Many people have a fleeting awareness of the increasing problem with water quality degradation; not many know how very serious it is, how it threatens so much of what we take for granted.

Behind the scenes, however, there are people who are making it their life's mission—quite literally—to save the lakes. They do it like most heroes do—quietly, without the expectation of glory or even acclaim, and they do it every day.

This is your opportunity to meet a few of the key players behind the curtain—or more aptly, behind the waves. In their quest to save the lake, they have forged a matchless bond between the Courte Oreilles Lake Association (COLA) and the LCO Conservation Department (LCOCD), a bond and relationship that goes back more than 20 years and is growing stronger with each passing year.

Gary and Linda Pulford

Current COLA Vice-President Gary Pulford, who with his wife Linda purchased property in Victory Heights on Musky Bay 10 years ago, said the relationship between COLA and LCOCD was cemented in the mid-1990s when everyone realized it was time “to “preserve the water quality of the LCO lakes.”



Pulford, who spends 3-4 hours a day (all volunteer effort) working on the water quality issues—namely phosphorous discharge—worked 42 years for the State of Minnesota's Pollution Control Agency, including a couple of stints with the USEPA. His strengths lie in water and air quality and solid and hazardous waste—a made-to-order expert for what COLA needs, although his wife Linda—he will quickly tell you—supplies the IT expertise as well as ensuring he sees the “human side” of things.

Pulford said that together—COLA and LCOCD—are working on changing the standard of acceptable levels of total phosphorous from 15 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion. That may not seem a critical difference to a person not trained in the science of water quality, but Pulford says 15 is too high and the standard is not site-specific, failing to take into account the major differences between the many lakes in Wisconsin. Right now the lake is at 12, Pulford said.

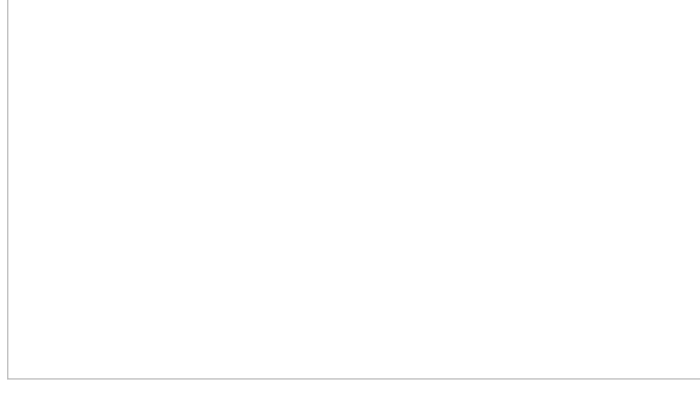
“We need to protect the two-story cold water fishery and the status of the whitefish and cisco that will not survive the degradation of the lake waters,” he said, adding that small changes in water quality impact water quality.

“Of course, the LCO tribe understood that a long time ago and they have, through the LCOCD, collected over 20 years of information on the water quality through sampling,” said Pulford. There are 10 locations on the lake that get sampled twice a month, May through October.

COLA provides funding to assist LCOCD in the costs of the sampling, including materials and lab work. Pulford said cranberry farming, septic systems, shoreline and residential development and run-off impact the water quality on Lac Courte Oreilles.

Brett McConnell

Brett McConnell has spent 17 years as an environmental specialist with the LCO Tribe, EPA Division. He was born in Hayward, moved away for some time and returned after he graduated from UW-Stevens Point with a degree in Natural Resource Management.



McConnell describes his main job as water resource management, monitoring 27 lakes and 43 miles of rivers and streams on the reservation, along with 20 monitoring sites. “My main focus is Lac Courte Oreilles because of the cranberry issues,” said McConnell, who speaks with animation about the work he does and the responsibilities with which he is charged.

When asked about COLA, he said, “It's incredible what COLA has accomplished. We've helped so many lake associations but COLA is above and beyond anything I've ever seen.” He said COLA's levels of activity, commitment and donations are off the charts. “No one comes close to them,” he said. McConnell said LCOCD does not have a huge department and resources are limited, but COLA provides more science, expertise and funding—and that, along with LCOCD's 20-year database of quality assurance data—is what makes their alliance different and stronger from all the rest.

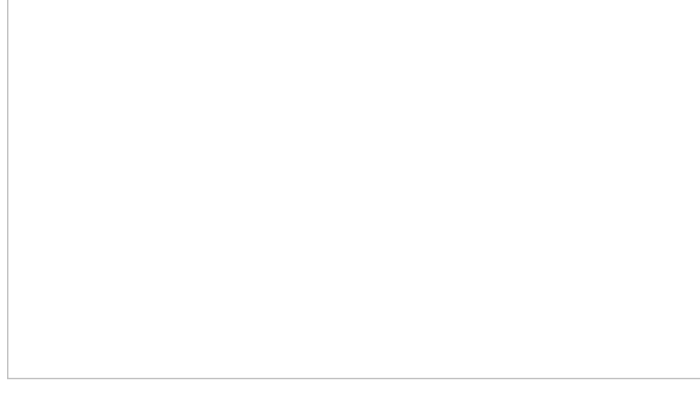
He said there are three cranberry marshes on the lake and four direct discharges: that is his main concern right now for the phosphorus load, although he also points to the development on the lake. There are an estimated 670 properties on Big LCO and another 351 on Little LCO, according to McConnell.

He credits COLA with the septic system survey they did two years ago, which Pulford said identified 14 failed systems. McConnell is not hesitant to fault the Wisconsin DNR with failure to adequately address water quality issues, calling them a “roadblock,” particularly when it comes to a phosphorous standard that is not site-specific.

“The beauty about working for the tribe is they give us the freedom to take part in projects that are good for everything. It's not a top-down bureaucracy,” McConnell said. He believes the water quality will improve, however, saying, “20 years from now it won't be a problem.”

Dan Tyrolt

Dan Tyrolt is the LCO conservation department director and has Sawyer there 21 years. With over 400 named lakes in Sawyer County and at least 50 active lake associations, Tyrolt said no other lake associations have gone to the extreme and the willingness to form a partnership like COLA has.”



Whether it's by email, phone, meetings or casual conversation, he and his department staff (3-4 and an occasional intern) are in touch with COLA people almost daily—usually with Pulford, Tyrolt said. “They support us fiscally and with volunteerism. None (lake associations) have gone to the extreme and willingness to form a partnership like COLA,” Tyrolt said.

With COLA, LCOCD is working with the 9-Key Element Plan to reduce run-off into the water; take and process watershed samples on a weekly basis; and develop very specific watershed management plans, he explained. Tyrolt said, “Whereas other lake associations get burned out, COLA keeps moving forward,” Tyrolt said.

He also said the number of professionals volunteering in COLA is amazing, citing people who are “top dogs” and professionals in the fields of water quality, landscaping, law and more. He said that lakes like Round Lake are seeing a sharp decline in water quality but Lac Courte Oreilles is holding fairly constant, even though it can't withstand much more pressure.

“The tribe will be able to use the COLA plans in their efforts to get additional funding using tribal funding, in addition to what COLA is able to get through both federal and state funding,” Tyrolt said, adding, “Their brainpower is astounding.”

What the future holds

If there is another closely-held belief between COLA and LCOCD—other than the obvious one that they have forged an unparalleled mission together—it is this: they are optimistic and determined to save their lake.

“COLA will never stop—they keep carrying the torch,” McConnell said.

Kathy Hanson is a free-lance reporter for the Sawyer County Gazette, the Sawyer County Field Editor for Our Wisconsin magazine, and Copy Editor for the Bayfield County Journal. She has also served as Staff Reporter, Business Feature Writer, Columnist, and Copy Editor for the Sawyer County Record.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Trails End Charity BINGO

Trails End Resort has designated COLA as the June charity for their BINGO events held Sunday mornings at 11:30 in the spring and fall and Monday evenings during the summer.

For the month of June, the final game splits the proceeds between the winner and COLA. Show support and attend this fun event.

Make a note:
COLA Charity BINGO
Monday, 8:00 PM
June 8, 15, 22 & 29

For more information, contact Joe or Michele at 715-634-2423.

COLA Annual Meeting

June 27, 2015
St. Francis Solanus Mission
8:30 am coffee and rolls
9-11 am meeting

COLA Boat Parade

July 4, 2015
Wismo Point then on to Chicago Bay
2 pm

For those with questions or interested in judging, please contact:

Tom Jones
tjones@abc-clc.com
or
Paul Eckerline -
paul.eckerline@cellmark.com
651-238-0794

COLA Annual Picnic

July 18, 2015
Bass Lake Town Hall
12-3 pm

LCO Foundation and COLA Charity Golf Tournament

August 15, 2015
Big Fish Golf Club
Registration 12 pm
Shotgun Start 1 pm

[Register Now!](#)

NOTICES

COLA Board of Directors

Guest Editorial
Sawyer Co. Record
[COLA Board alarmed about proposed DNR budget cuts](#)

April 8, 2015

Are your neighbors and extended family members of COLA?

If not, please ask them to [join](#).

Support COLA by contributing to the Lac Courte Oreilles Foundation

Why “Short Ears, ...?”

Lac Courte Oreilles, or Lake Short Ears, was the name used by the first French Traders who visited what was then known as Ottawa Lake. A local band of Ottawas observed the custom of cutting off a portion of their ears.

Tales of Lac Courte Oreilles

This book, edited by Tom and Sue Burgess, together with COLA's history committee, compiled a detailed history of Lac Courte Oreilles. The book is available from COLA and the Sherman & Ruth Weiss Community Library in Hayward.

COLA Mission: 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the interests of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA's membership.

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