

the lake where you live

Why not join?

People give interesting reasons for not voting in elections.

I don't know the candidates. I don't like the candidates. I'm too busy. Politics is a waste of time. I just don't care. One vote can't possibly make a difference. And so on.

People who live or own property on lakes also have interesting reasons — for not joining their lake association. At an association meeting I attended recently (at a lake other than Birch, where I live), an officer mentioned that more than 50% of the lake's owners were members — and that was better than at some lakes she had heard about.

Later, before giving a presentation to the group, I wondered out loud why so many lake people don't join up. It can't be the oppressive dues, typically \$20 or \$25 a year.

After my talk an association member gave some likely reasons based on long experience. Some neighbors don't like each other. People have different ideas on how to manage the lake, and if they disagree with the board's direction, they drop out or never join. Seasonal residents are only at the lake on weekends — they'd rather have fun than discuss boring lake business. And, I must suppose, some people simply don't care.

All those reasons, and any others I can think of, are lame. I have to ask: Is a lake a community or not? And if it is, then why would someone not want to be part of that community? Things happen to lakes. Water levels rise and fall. Invasive species come in. Fisheries change. Conflicts arise. Everyone in some way is affected.



Ted Rulseh
COLUMNIST

The association is essentially a first line of defense or, maybe a better analogy, a first responder. The Department of Natural Resources doesn't have the funds or the people to bail out a lake that's having problems. The association has to do the heavy lifting, ideally with help from a grant or two and a consultant. As in the rest of life, the saying holds: Many hands make light work.

More fundamentally, if you don't like the direction where your lake group is headed, is that any reason to quit or stay away? Problems get fixed and conflicts resolved through communication. If you quit, you lose your voice, your place at the table.

The Friends of Birch Lake, of which I am a member and have been an officer, has about 80% to 90% participation — quite good but still not ideal. We're fortunate to have very good alignment on a direction: harvesting invasive rusty crayfish, restoring the fishery to its former glory, protecting the scenic value.

Do all of us agree on everything? Of course not. We disagree, for one thing, about the need for quiet hours on behalf of those who prefer to enjoy the lake without noisy motors. But there are lots of voices and lots of volunteers for projects. That's how it should be.

As far as I'm concerned, anything less than 100% association membership is sad. The lakes are our legacy. The work of protecting and improving them is a job for everyone.

Ted Rulseh resides on Birch Lake in Harshaw and is an advocate for lake protection and improvement. His Lakeland Times and Northwoods River News columns are the basis for a book, "A Lakeside Companion," published by The University of Wisconsin Press. Ted may be reached at trulseh@tjrcommunications.com.