

Lakes are an important part of Minnesota life, providing the backdrop for recreational activities, homes and commercial businesses. Protecting these valuable resources is important not only to preserve an important Minnesota treasure, but also to protect the remaining freshwater sources on the planet.

Curb=shoreline

If you don't live on or near a lake, you're not off the hook—your practices can still affect the quality of these waters. Substances that run off yards, driveways and streets enter lakes via the storm water system. Oil from leaky cars, pop bottles and candy wrappers, nutrients and pesticides from lawn care practices, pet feces, eroded soil and yard debris like grass clippings, leaves and twigs can all harm the lake environment. When nutrients enter the lakes they essentially fertilize the water, allowing excess algae and invasive weeds to grow. So remember, every curb is a shoreline.

Follow these tips to help protect lakes:

- Properly apply and minimize the use of fertilizers and pesticides, or better yet, don't use them at all.
- Wash your car on the grass so soapy water is absorbed by the turf.
- Pick up after your pet.
- Use rain barrels to collect water that would normally run into the street, then use the collected water to irrigate plants.
- Pick up litter to keep it out of lakes.
- Closer to the lake, plant a buffer of native vegetation to reduce the amount of nutrients entering the lake. This also helps deter geese and stabilizes the shoreline.
- Avoid using coal tar-based driveway sealants which can contaminate waters.
- During the winter, use salt only if needed to de-ice sidewalks, and always shovel first.

About invasive species

Many lakes are polluted not only by nutrients and contaminants from runoff, but also are compromised by invasive species that compete with native animal and plant life. To protect lake health and diversity it's essential to control the spread of invasives, like zebra mussels and Eurasian water milfoil.

Zebra mussels, first transported to the United States in 1988, filter about one gallon of water per day, per mussel. Although they increase water clarity, they effectively remove animals and algae that are an important part of the food chain. In some areas this has caused various fish and invertebrate species to decline. Boaters can help prevent the spread of zebra mussels before launching and before leaving by:

- Draining live wells.

- Removing hitchhiking mussels from boats that have been in infested waters.
- Disposing of unwanted bait on land.
- Rinsing equipment with high pressure or hot water (at least 104 degrees Fahrenheit).
- Cleaning off any vegetation on boats, motors or trailers.

Removing all vegetation attached to watercraft will also help prevent the spread of Eurasian water milfoil, an invasive plant that prohibits the amount of light reaching the depths of lakes, killing more desirable native plants. Only a few inches of the milfoil plant are needed for it to grow new roots and infest another lake.