

Permit Me to Introduce My Family

The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

The COLA Call columns have been attempting to increase public appreciation of Hubbard County water resources----lakes, rivers, and wetlands----and to sound an alarm concerning a variety of threats to these resources. Whether one owns lakeshore property or merely uses the lakes for recreational purposes, preservation of our water quality is of vital importance. Even if one neither owns or uses, all county citizens derive direct or indirect economic benefit from the magnetic attraction of our waters to tourists and vacationers.

Being mindful that some past columns may well have been a bit too didactic for some readers' tastes, this column would like to introduce you to the Me family. I was first introduced to them by Ann Beaver through an article she wrote for the April 2006 issue of the Minnesota Waters newsletter. The family brings into stark relief many of the lake threatening issues and practices previously elaborated in this column. The Me family bought an undeveloped wooded lake lot a few years ago, then hired a contractor to build a large two story house with a walkout basement and an attached three stall garage with space for a workshop. They placed the house as close to the lake as the ordinance allowed. As they wanted a lake view from as many rooms as possible, the house was designed to stretch out parallel to the shoreline, and as they wanted all the views to be free of "obstructions" they hired someone to cut down the trees. Next they built a pole barn in which to store their water toys, lawn tractor, ATVs, snowmobiles, and yard tools. They built it close to the house to avoid a long walk to the pole barn, increasing the amount of impervious surface near the lake setback and thus increasing potential runoff into the lake. They don't like walking through all those "weeds" (native grasses) to get to the lake so they planted a lawn all the way down to the shoreline and put in a sidewalk leading straight down the hill to the lake. Then they decided it would be nice to have a beach on the lakeshore, so they dug up some lawn and had a 10' x 30' "sand blanket" put in. During the first year they discovered their driveway got muddy when it rained, so they had it

blacktopped. The winter's ice action caused their entire shoreline to heave, reestablishing the ice ridge that was illegally cut out when they sodded the lawn, and parts of the shoreline started to erode because there were no deep native plant roots left to hold the soil in place. So, they hired someone to place rip rap along their shoreline, eliminating what meager wildlife habitat there was, and their landscaper used his bobcat to redistribute and level the "sand blanket" beach.

Then there is the Me family's dock, which really isn't on their property at all—it's in the lake, which is public property and habitat for a large variety of aquatic flora and fauna. The DNR does allow a property owner to place a reasonably sized dock on this public property. However, the Me family has lots of water toys and puts in a long dock with mooring spaces and boat lifts, some with canopies, for their pontoon, speed boat, fishing boat, and jet skis. To enjoy cocktails on the dock while watching the sunset, they built a large platform at the end of it. The kids don't want to be touched by those icky "weeds" when they play in the water, so the family put in a weed roller to constantly churn up the bottom to prevent "weeds" from growing.

It's a pretty bleak picture, much worse than the situations of most (but certainly not all) lakeshore property owners. But most owners have done some of those things—after all, it's part of our culture, part of our molding the environment to suit our life. So, what can be done to slow the aging of the lakes? For starters, manicured lawns can be eliminated or dramatically scaled back. Wide, deep shorelines can be restored and returned to native plants; we could even plant more trees along our shoreline, remembering that they don't block the view, they are part of the view. We can scale back the size of our docks and the number of our boat lifts. We can learn to live with the aquatic plants, and clear only enough of them to get watercraft out to open water. We can also make sure the runoff created by all our roofs, roads, and sidewalks doesn't reach the lake. We don't have to give up everything we think we want and need, but we can all do something. If each and every person who lives on or uses the lakes would take even one or two steps to slow the lakes' aging process, the cumulative positive effect on the health of the lakes would be enormous! If nothing is done, the lakes will continue to become old and green before their time, ultimately of little good to those of us who live here and no longer attractive as a vacation destination for visitors. The immediately preceding COLA Call columns have discussed the process presently underway to update the Minnesota shoreland rules. Many, possibly most, citizens who do not own lakeshore think this process does not affect them. They are wrong about that. Correspondingly, too many shoreland property owners consider their property is theirs to do with as they please. To the extent that what they do adversely impacts our public waters, they too are wrong. All Hubbard County citizens should help ensure that that is understood.

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