

open marriage: community development and environmental management

Lowell L. Klessig

Like most analogies the following one between marriage and lake management in Wisconsin is an imperfect one. Though imperfect, it does illustrate the role that Extension can play in mitigating one of the major societal conflicts of our time—the conflict between economic growth and environmental quality. This article won't describe Wisconsin's Lake Management Program in detail.¹ Rather, that program will be used as a context in which to explore the involvement of the University of Wisconsin-Extension in a nontraditional area of public service education.

Childhood Conflicts: Jobs Versus Clean Water

Like the boy and girl who lived next to each other and spent their childhoods throwing mud pies at each other, the advocates of community development and environmental quality have an early life history of conflict. Consensus reigned for a short time following the birth of the modern environmental movement in NEPA² and Earth Day-1970. However, as rhetoric evolved to political action, conflict replaced consensus. With the recessions of the early 1970s, that hostility erupted into open bitterness.

Environmental legislation at the local, state, and federal levels has often put Extension educators in a delicate position. State specialists and especially county staff must be responsive to the economic needs of their clientele. At the same time, they must be responsible for adult education relative to new social goals on water, air, and solid wastes usually set at higher levels of government.

Many programs, such as the non-point pollution abatement program, could be used to illustrate this tension. I'll

Lowell K. Klessig: Lake Management Specialist, Environmental Resources Unit and Assistant Professor of Environmental Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Extension—Madison. Received for publication: February, 1977.

use Wisconsin's Lake Management Program because I've been working with it, in an Extension capacity, for six years.

Courtship: From Demonstration Project to Institutionalized Structure

Like the kids next door to each other, eventually something more positive than mud pies must be exchanged if love and respect are to grow. For Wisconsin's inland lakes, that exchange was an economic development grant to demonstrate lake management. The Upper Great Lakes Regional Commission made the award on the premise that the long-term economic viability of tourism in the region depended on recreational lakes of high environmental quality.

The demonstration project (1967-73) was conducted by University of Wisconsin-Extension in cooperation with the Department of Natural Resources. The project addressed two major questions: *what* could be done to manage lakes and *who* could do it?

We were aware that these two elements would have to be united before any management would take place. Various techniques were field tested using the traditional Extension philosophy in agriculture. However, agricultural agents knew that progressive farmers would adopt new management techniques. For lakes, the answer to the question of *who* wasn't so obvious. After considering state government, county government, town government, and sanitary districts, we concluded that only the property owners around Wisconsin's 9,800 lakes were close enough to and had enough interest in a given lake to take on management responsibility.

To that end, recommendations were made to the state legislature to enable lake communities to form a special purpose unit of government for lake management. Lakeshore communities armed with the information provided by the project reports, slide-tape sets, films, media stories, and local presentations then prevailed on the legislature to create Chapter 33 of the Wisconsin Statutes in 1974.

The Bride: A Local Lake Management District

Like the hometown wedding preparations by the bride's family, the creation of a lake district is a major community undertaking. It's locally initiated and requires boundary drawing, petitioning, and hearings. The district will also be locally operated following creation. It has management responsibility for the lake, the power to tax, the power to own property, and other typical powers of government except police power. To that end, the lake management district becomes the functional agency for the clarification of community goals regarding the lake resource and implementation of a management plan.

**The Groom: State
Department of
Natural Resources**

Like many modern weddings, the groom comes from a more distant location. Chapter 33 mandated that the local lake districts must form a partnership with the Department of Natural Resources before they can receive state technical and financial help. The terms of the partnership require a feasibility study conducted to state specifications, approval of implementation projects by both the district and the state, and granting of various state permits designed to protect the environmental values of the larger public.

To the environmental manager (limnologist), the enhancement of the natural resource (water quality) is the touchstone. But the ultimate reference is still people—people in a larger geographic area (public interest) and people over longer periods of time (future generations). Ultimately, all resource management must be justified in terms of social well-being.

**The Parson:
Cooperative
Extension Service**

Like the parson using the marriage ceremony to bridge the families of the bride and groom, the legislature deemed that a third party could facilitate the lake management partnership. Because of Extension traditions for adult education delivery and local credibility³ and because of the specific history of Extension involvement in the inland lake demonstration project, the legislature provided funding for two state specialists to help local lake communities by working with the Department of Natural Resources and through county-based Extension staff.

In the first two years of the program, we've played that role at over 200 community meetings and at 15 regional conferences attended by leaders from 400 lakes. In addition to attending meetings with state specialists, many county-based staff (especially resource agents) have conducted their own local meetings using materials produced at the state level.

About 80 districts have been created and have entered into the partnership. However, Extension public service has continued beyond the altar of creation. In 1976, the educational emphasis shifted from new district creation to follow-through community development work with the existing lake district commissioners. As new public officials in a new unit of government, they needed help drafting bylaws, using taxing powers, understanding feasibility studies, and following accounting procedures. *Lake Tides*, a newsletter for lake people, has supplemented individual meetings, letters, and calls.

A typical sequence of Extension involvement in a lakeshore community follows:

1. County agent and community leaders attend a regional conference organized by the state specialists.
2. Lakeshore community leaders meet with the lake association and appoint a committee to explore lake district formation.
3. County agent arranges a planning meeting with the committee, a state specialist, and other local professionals to develop an educational and organizational strategy. The specialist provides sample petitions and booklets. The committee discusses boundaries and sets dates for a major educational program.
4. At the community meeting, a specialist discusses the lake district concept and distributes literature. The committee chairperson discusses boundaries and petition drive.
5. After the county board receives the petitions from the organizing committee, the county agent arranges for a specialist to discuss the law with the county Agriculture and Extension Committee. After all property owners are sent notices, the Agriculture and Extension Committee holds a formal public hearing with the county agent acting as secretary and a specialist in attendance to answer questions.
6. After formation, the county agent helps the new district in applying for state aids.
7. State specialists organize regular regional workshops for lake district commissioners and provide newsletters, handbooks, and other written and verbal information.
8. County agent and/or specialist attends district's annual meetings and occasional board of commissioners meetings as general public consultants.

The Attendants: The State-Level Inland Lake Council and Local Government

Like attendants who witness, guide, and coordinate the wedding ceremony, state and local attendants are provided by the law. The Inland Lakes Council, which consists of five state agency heads and four citizens appointed by the governor, was created to advise the Department of Natural Resources. A county board member and a member of a local municipality are given two of the five seats on a lake district commission. In addition, the Soil and Water Conservation District and the Regional Planning Commission must formally review the management plans of the lake district.

**The Marriage
Counselor:
Cooperative
Extension Service**

Like charges of infidelity in marriage, internal suspicions or outside gossip can damage a relationship. While the program is still in its honeymoon stage and has enjoyed strong support by the press and the legislature, occasional tensions and controversies have flared.

Internal suspicions are based on lingering perceptions by the partners. Some local districts still have difficulty visualizing the Department of Natural Resources as a management partner rather than a badge-toting, regulatory agency. Some state bureaucrats still hold local citizens in low esteem and view lake property owners as selfish about "their lake" and chronically dissatisfied. Extension has tried to dissolve these suspicions on both sides. As a nonregulatory agency with a long history of locally based public service to the community and with personal continuity, Extension has been able to at least partially overcome the aloof-policeman stereotype of state bureaucrats. As professional colleagues in the circles of state bureaucracy, we've been able to portray local community leaders as underpaid, intelligent citizens plagued by full-time jobs, endless meetings, and unintelligible red tape.

External charges have arisen from both economic development interests and from environmentalists. Environmentalists are disturbed by chemical treatment of lakes, dredging, disposal of dredge spoils, and other "manipulations" of a "natural lake." Commercial interests are sometimes worried that a lake district in the hands of vacation homeowners (who can vote) will inhibit additional development of the lakeshore. Both groups of critics view Extension involvement as promotion rather than education.

But the lake district is institutionally designed to handle such diversity of interests. The marriage is opened over time and over space. The law doesn't prescribe fidelity to any set of doctrines for the community. It provides a political mechanism by which the community can reach a decision on the future of the lake based on preferences and willingness to pay. That decision may tend toward further development and uses of chemicals or it may tend toward regulation of subdivisions and restrictions on motorized recreation. It's likely to represent a compromise of the viewpoints in the community and focus on those water quality projects that enjoy high consensus. Finally, the decisions of the district are subject to approval by the Department of Natural Resources as trustee of the public interest in navigable water.

The arrangements, though imperfect, tend to curtail feuding and facilitate serious discussions. The discussions sometimes generate heat, but they're also teachable moments for Extension.

The Offspring: A Together Community Around An Enhanced Lake

Like parents who hope for a perfect child, the lake management partners have ideals of pristine lakes that can be approached but not obtained in a complex ecosystem.

It's the process of determining the ideal and approaching it that's important to community development. Whether the community wants swimming, fishing, boating, sailing, duck hunting, or other partially incompatible uses, the important outcome is the ability to make a community decision—to try to maximize human satisfaction.

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To Extension personnel, the process of community development and of natural resource management is synergistic. Both reduce to human development.⁴

Footnotes

1. Lowell L. Klessig, "Institutional Arrangements for Lake Management in Wisconsin," *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, XXXI (July-August, 1976), 152-55.
2. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 declared that a clean environment was a national goal and required preparation of Environmental Impact Statements for federal government actions.
3. Clay Schoenfeld, "National Environmental Education Perspective," *Journal of Environmental Education*, V (Winter, 1975), 9-10.
4. Jerry Parsons, "What It Is—Is Human Development," *Journal of Extension*, XIV (July-August, 1976), 2.