



Susan A. Jones
Watershed Management Coordinator
Dane County Office Lakes & Watersheds

1995 Yahara River Lakes Water Recreation Study Findings Summary

(prepared by the Dane County Regional Planning Commission for the Dane County Lakes & Watershed Commission)

The Dane County Lakes & Watershed Commission sponsored a Water Recreation Study in 1995 to define and address public attitudes and trends regarding recreational use and management of the Yahara River Lakes. Boat launch field surveys were conducted as well as a public opinion questionnaire was sent to several thousand lake users, most of which were Dane County registered boat owners.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated poor water quality (i.e., algae, scum, etc.) as a moderate or serious problem, rather than a minor or nonexistent one. About 20% of respondents indicated that water quality conditions “often” caused them to seek recreation elsewhere. Other issues noted as “moderate to serious” included: personal watercraft/jet ski operation (54%), weedy areas (52%) and large motorboats/high speeds (51%).

Compared to previous surveys, overcrowding seemed to be an increasing concern: 57% of respondents indicated heavy recreational use kept them from using the lakes at times, usually on weekends rather than holidays. Twenty-four percent indicated conflicts with other lake users as a significant problem.

Respondents appeared satisfied with recreation support facilities and services. Inadequate shore facilities (e.g., restrooms), weather and storm warning systems, waterway markers, fishing piers, fish cleaning sites and lake levels were identified as being significant problems by only 10–30% of questionnaire respondents.

There was substantial support and a perceived need to increase the Sheriff’s water safety patrols on the lakes. Over 100 respondents suggested “increasing boat patrols and law enforcement” to improve recreation. Field survey results estimated 1,270 boats were launched from major public and private access sites on the Yahara Lakes between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 29, 1995. This figure is about the same as totals compiled during two similar surveys conducted in July 1986. Approximately 10% of all boats had out-of-state registrations.

Average annual beach attendance for 1990–1995 (102,000 people) is over 50% lower than the 1980–1989 average (234,000). While there may have been numerous reasons contributing to this decline, public perceptions over poor water quality was suspected as a leading factor.

Conversely, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) angler survey data for Lake Mendota indicated there had been a substantial increase in fishing pressure on this lake 1980–1990. This is probably due in large part to an intensive game fish stocking in the 80s.



1995 Recommendations included:

1. Prioritizing nonpoint source pollution control in the Yahara watersheds; accelerated programs to control/reduce sediment/nutrient discharges to the lakes from agricultural and urban sources
2. Continued monitoring of recreational uses and consideration of developing specific boating access and waterway protection plans for individual lakes in order to maintain public safety and enjoyment and protect lake and riparian resources
3. Consideration of expanding boat patrols and law enforcement on the Yahara River Lakes
4. Expansion of boater training and safety programs
5. Investigate the effects of personal watercraft/jet ski operations on other lake recreational uses and determine if specific management policies should be formulated
6. Reevaluate user fees to finance the maintenance and the operation of boat launching facilities and locks
7. Continue to periodically reevaluate trends in boating activity and motorboat sizes

Dane County Surface Water User Survey Plan Development 2009-2012

Although it is widely recognized that the water resources of Dane County contribute significantly to the local economy, no recent assessments place any kind of economic figures on their importance. The Dane County Office of Lakes and Watersheds (OLW) has received three small grants to implement an update of the 1995 Yahara River Lakes Water Recreation Study.

Working with the UW River Falls Survey Research Center to develop and implement the various surveys, the OLW used the 1995 Yahara River Lakes Water Recreation Study as a model. When completed, the information gathered will lead to a better understanding of the user groups, their numbers, their concerns, distance travelled, spending habits and how recreational use may increase with improved water quality, what that would mean to the area economically and how management efforts might be changed as a result.

Phase I (2009)	Work with UW River Falls to develop survey plan and tools
Phase II (2010)	Implement "General Population" Survey (mailed survey to help determine different levels and types of uses of area surface waters)
Phase III (2011-12)	Implement Intercept Survey (interviews conducted to gather data from people using surface waters)
Phase IV (2012)	Implement Recreational User Survey (grant application not yet submitted; gather data on economic impact of surface water users)
Phase V (2013)	Develop recommendations for comprehensive management plan

While initial implementation began in the Yahara River watersheds, all surface water resources in Dane County will be included in the implementation of the surveys. The OLW intends to reach as many user groups as possible considering the many different users of the lakes, rivers and streams at different times of the year using the most effective means to obtain responses from each target audience.

With better data on the economic value of the resources and how the resources are currently being used, especially when we are able to compare it to data from 13 years ago, it may be easier to show that concerted efforts to protect and improve these special lakes, rivers and streams will benefit everyone in the area.

The OLW is currently seeking volunteers to interview fall, winter and spring users of the area's surface water resources. Please contact the OLW at 224-3730 if interested in volunteering.