

5 - MLR's Lake Steward Program: helping lake associations meet their water quality goals

By Jeff Forester, Executive Director, Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates

Two years ago, Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates, MLR developed a program to improve water quality that allows individuals to be the change. The Lake Steward Program promotes shoreline restoration projects among lakeshore homeowners, making the restoration process easier through our team of helpful volunteers and resource guides that give property owners the direction they need for lake health improvement. In two short years, over two and a half miles of Minnesota's shorelines have been protected by the Lake Steward program and the efforts of dedicated, lake-conscious property owners. Minnesota Lakes and River Advocates hopes to continue this momentum, encouraging lake association members to earn their very own "Lake Steward" sign as a badge of honor for their commitment in protecting Minnesota water quality.



Lake Stewards are property owners, endorsed by their lake associations, who have taken the initiative to restore their shorelines to a native landscape. Many of our Lake Stewards enjoy visits from animals and wildlife that feel comfortable enjoying a natural habitat.

The Problem - Our lakes are in trouble and it is getting worse

Five years ago the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, MPCA listed 40% of our lakes and rivers as impaired. In 2020 the MPCA listed 56% of the lakes and rivers in Minnesota as impaired. The degradation of our lakes, mostly by phosphorus, is accelerating. Phosphorus drives eutrophication, excessive plant and algae growth, decreasing oxygen levels in the water column.

The sources and reasons for water degradation are both plentiful and complex, but degraded shoreline is one significant contributor. According to MN DNR Minnesota has lost approximately half of its natural shorelines. The rate of shoreline development is also accelerating.

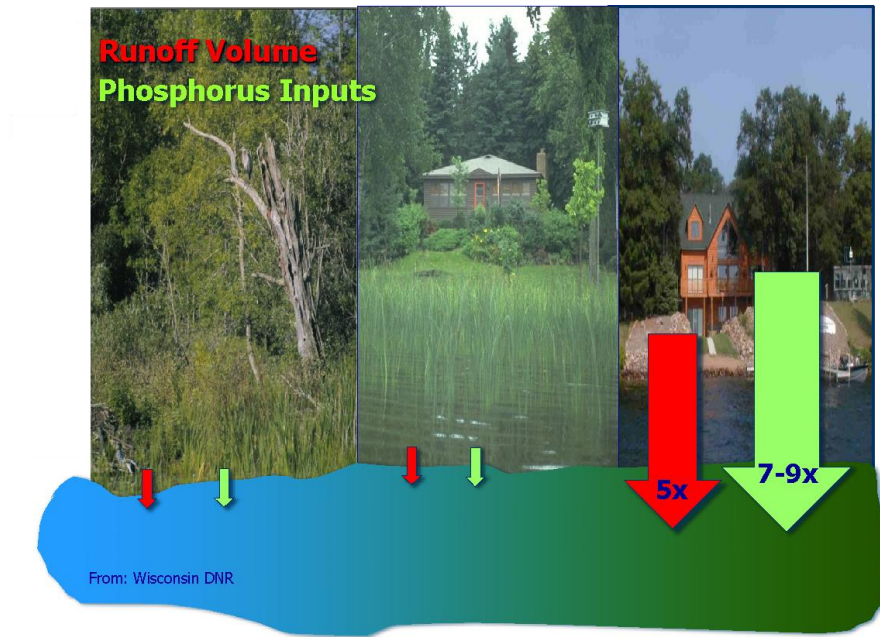
The good news is that lake shore management is within a lake association's jurisdiction. We own shoreline. We can reverse this trend. We can protect water quality, create habitat for shoreline nesting birds like loons, pollinators and song birds. Each one of us can become Lake Stewards. In addition, we can help build lake association membership, create stronger partnerships with professional resource managers and other local civic groups.

Past efforts have been largely ineffective

Fifty-three years ago Minnesota passed the Shoreline Management Act of 1969 and created a baseline set of minimum shoreline standards statewide. County Boards can set stricter standards, but not more lenient.

Five decades later it is clear that top-down rules, education, and enforcement has been only minimally successful. Rules are expensive to enforce or are circumvented through the variance process. The simple fact is that many shoreline owners make shoreline landscaping choices based on a common standard for a "good lawn," manicured grass down to the shoreline, sculpted bushes, trimmed trees, ornamental plantings. Many don't want to be the neighbor with a "wild" yard.

Lake Steward inspires a different aesthetic for shoreline. The Lake Steward sign recognizes that the most prestigious landscape is one that protects water quality and provides habitat for wildlife.



A poorly developed shoreline can deliver 7 to 9 times more phosphorus into a lake than a natural shoreline. One pound of phosphorus can create 500 pounds of algae in the lake.

The Goal - Improving water quality in our lakes

The question is how do we get from this;



to this:





Natural vegetation is beautiful, and the deep rooted native plants take up nutrients and provide habitat.

Assessing the Problem

The Minnesota DNR has conducted lake shore surveys on 785 lakes across the state. Each site on the lake receives a relative measure of the extent of the natural shoreland present at the site¹.

¹ Given that the social norm for shoreland stewardship likely falls on a continuum from a preference for suburban/urban lawn to a deference for nature with a preference for a more natural setting and healthy shoreland, the average of the site scores is used to assign the lake's Shoreland Stewardship Quality class (a 'High' classification indicates a lake with a lot of natural shoreland present and a 'Low' or 'Very Low' score indicates a lake with little natural shoreland remaining).

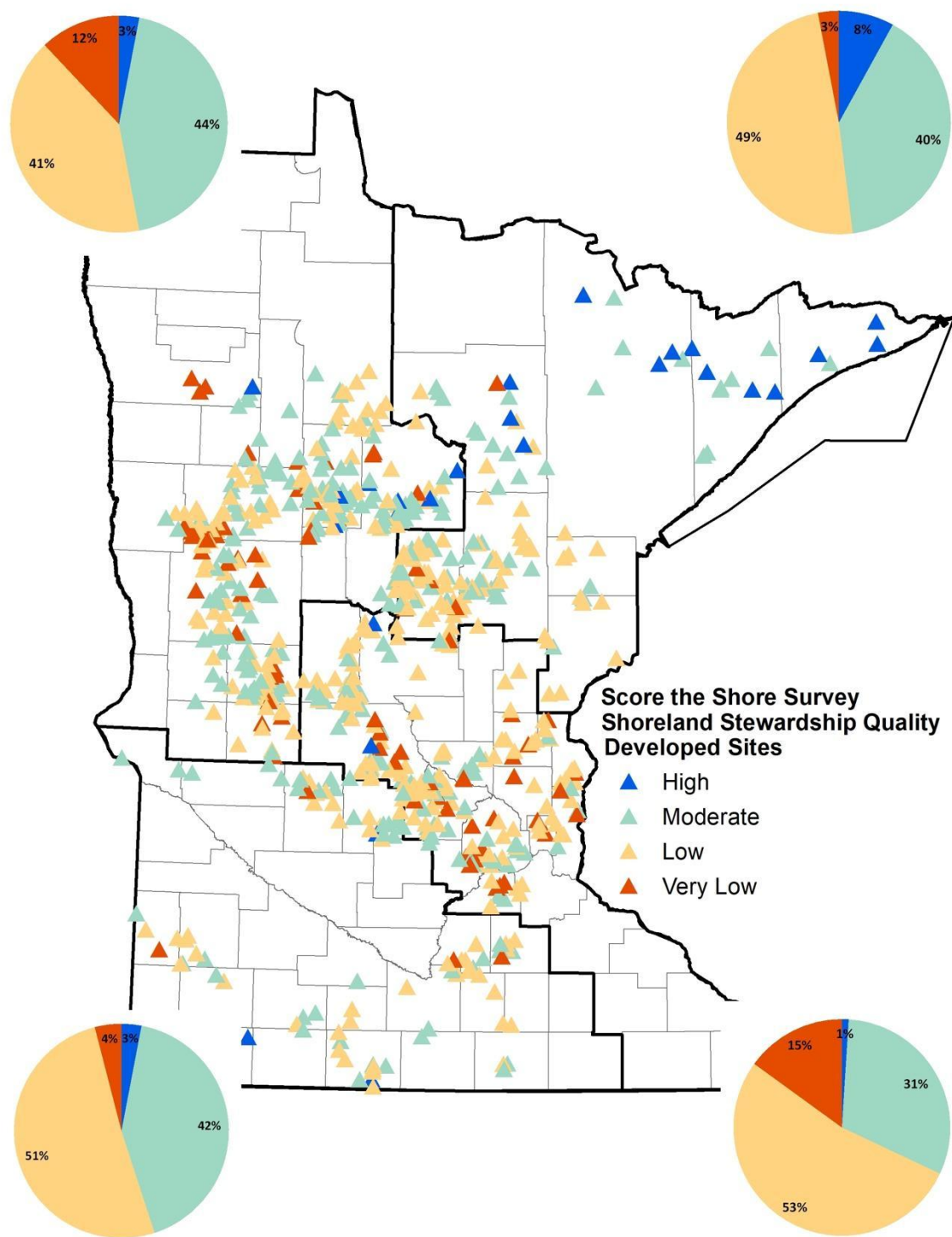


Figure 2. Score the Shore survey results by DNR administrative region rescored using only developed sites for each lake.

Solution - Lake Steward helps lake associations meet their water quality and membership goals

We know that all lake home and cabin owners are passionate about “their” lakes. They are invested in them both financially and emotionally.

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates’ Lake Steward program leverages two simple truths:

- No one wants an impaired lake.
- Second, shoreland owners benefit from Lake Steward. They save money and effort on harmful practices. They get social standing, recognition and the admiration of others because of the Lake Steward Award sign on the shore that designates the goal.

The Lake Steward Program is simple - MLR makes it easy

MLR Member Lake Associations can enroll by contacting MLR Program Manager Kayla Hanke (kayla@minnlakesandrivers.org) and designating a lead volunteer

for the program. MLR will provide the tools and support you need; training for your volunteer, ways to promote the program within your association, automatic data collection that allows for simplified organizing strategies amongst volunteers. This Lake Steward Lead Volunteer will be your lake association’s expert and primary contact with MLR for the program.

Many property owners will be surprised that their score was not higher. Most of us think we are protecting the lake we love, but recognizing a need for different shoreline management strategies is the first step to shifting the aesthetic away from suburban type of landscaping towards more lake friendly landscaping choices.

Our committed Lake Steward Lead Volunteers will coordinate a site visit with property owners to conduct an evaluation of their property's

shoreline. The evaluation is guided by MLR's shoreline evaluation tool, and volunteers will receive the support they need to get started through a short, virtual training session for one or many Lake Steward Volunteers from your lake association.



Owners that meet the Lake Steward criteria will receive the Lake Steward Award sign for the end of their dock. The Lake Steward volunteer from your lake association can work with the owners that do not meet the criteria to better understand their goals, and lead them to simple actions they can take to improve their shoreline. MLR will provide a Lake Stewards Shoreline Owners Guide to describe Best Practices and the impacts of runoff on lake health and connect them with local resources like grants or cost share programs. Many can take simple steps that might not have occurred to them like not mowing within 35 feet of the lake or eliminating fertilizer and pesticides to promote healthy habitat. Lake Associations can promote their Lake Steward Award winners in their newsletters and local media to recognize their efforts and encourage more owners to restore their shore.

Tracking Progress of Lake Steward Benefits

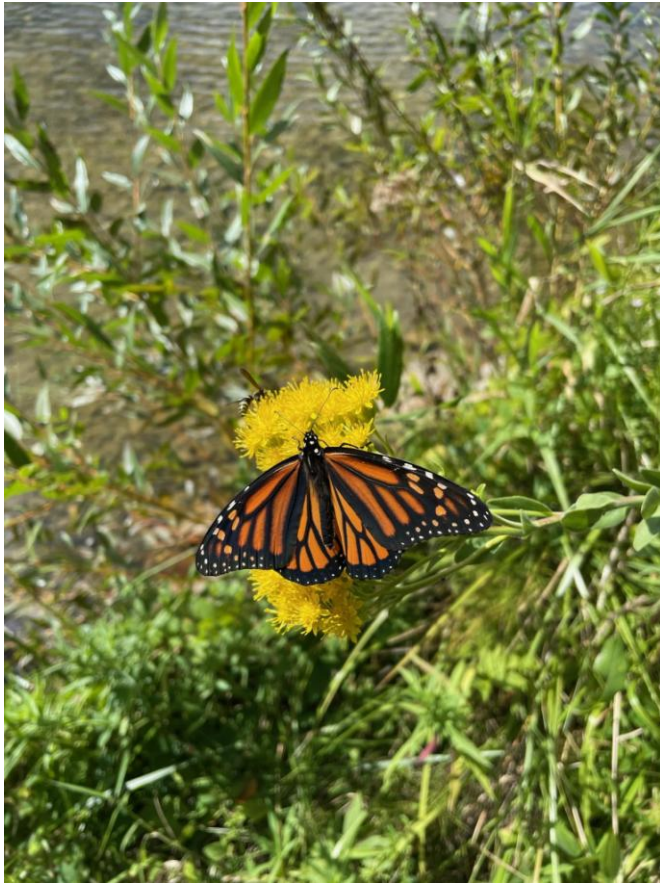


Minnesota Lakes and Rivers has created a phone-based App shoreland evaluators will use to document their site visit. The data from the site visit will be stored in a centralized database so that we can document how many miles of shoreline have been protected, number of acres per lake, pounds of phosphorus sequestered on land instead of ending up in the lake. This data will allow each lake association to pursue specific goals and provide statewide data MLR can use to promote the program

to other lake associations, legislators and policy makers. As the benefits of Lake Steward become clear, there is much that local governments and state agencies can do to further support this effort.

For instance, In the last three years Gull Chain of Lakes Assn (GCOLA) Lake Steward has had 238 quiz responses, and made 108 property visits. There are an additional 54 candidates who have not yet had site visits. Over two and a half miles of lakeshore is under Lake Steward protection on Gull Lake. In response to this success the East Gull Lake Township added Lake Steward language to their shoreline development permit form.

Social science tells us that when 15% of a group adopts a new behavior it reaches a critical mass, or tipping point, for social change. After the first 15% of early adopters the rest of the of the general population accepts the change and begins to emulate it. Gull Lake hopes to make this 15% goal in the next three years.



Unlike other shoreline programs, Lake Steward is truly a grassroots effort, starting at the shorelines. As the program expands and more and more lake associations connect with professional resource management agencies like watershed districts, county resource departments and MN DNR, there is significant potential to expand the program. Some lake associations are having shoreland tours of the Lake Steward winners. Much of the work lake associations do like water quality analysis, loon counts and fish stocking are invisible to non-member shoreline owners, but non-member property owners will see the Lake Steward signs and read the media stories and connect the lake association directly to lake improvements. They will see the work the lake association is doing. In this way Lake Steward serves as an important branding tool and helps drive membership.

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates supports our Lake Steward Volunteers as well as property owners by offering additional education and training. Expertise and understanding of lakeshore ecology will grow among lakeshore owners, the program will expand and a new shoreland ethic will become the norm. As policy makers see the data and recognize the impacts of Lake Steward, MLR will push for greater incentives that have worked well in other areas, like property tax considerations for preserved shoreline. With a peer to peer grassroots base, Lake Steward can have significant impacts on water quality and your lake association membership efforts.

MN Lakes & Rivers Advocates ~ PO Box 22262 ~ St. Paul, MN 55122
www.mnlakesandrivers.org ~ 952-854-1317 ~ judy@mnlakesandrivers.org