

1 - Water Connects Us All - The Work You and Your Lake Association Does Benefits Us All

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

The 2019 MLR annual meeting in Cass County was our first Water Connects Us All™ conference. That same year we also began publishing the Water Connects Us All™ monthly e-newsletter.

But what does it mean when we say Water Connects Us All™? This phrase is both aspirational and hydrologically accurate.



Celebrating my daughter's 12th birthday with blueberry pancakes in the blueberry patch.

Water is personal. Some of my most cherished memories are buoyed by a Minnesota lake. I remember early mornings rowing my mother over a reef while she jigged for breakfast walleye and crappies. I remember a day spent at the headwaters of the Mississippi with my two young daughters, now grown, the wedding of my niece on a bluff overlooking Lake Vermilion, four generations gathered to celebrate. I remember falling asleep to the call of loons. I remember standing in waist deep water after a sauna with my father, steam rising off our bodies, and watching the northern lights paint the sky.

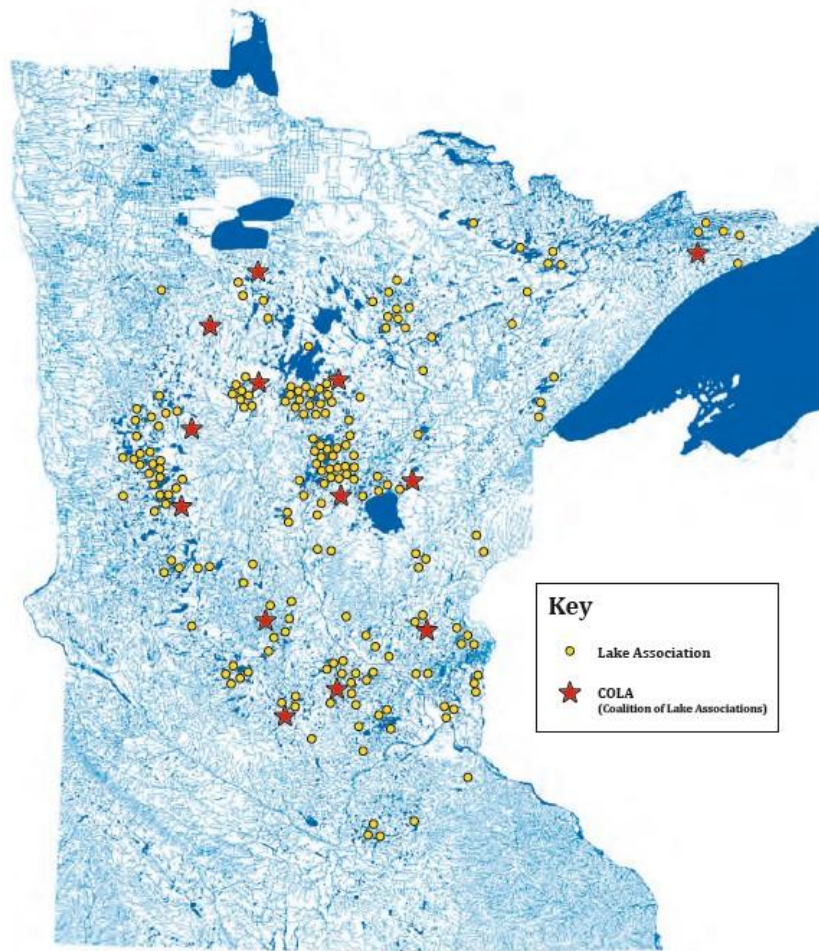
I'll bet you have similar memories. Water connects us all™.

Most of us see our lake homes or cabins as heirlooms, not assets and want to leave them to children and grandchildren and even great grandchildren. Water connects our pasts with our futures.

As lake association members, we work to protect water in the lakes we love. But water percolates into groundwater reservoirs or flows downstream to other lakes. The work you do to protect or improve water quality, prevent aquatic invasive species spread and runoff phosphorus or sulfate pollution benefits everyone downstream. For Minnesotans that means most of the eastern half of North America. Minnesota is the headwaters of three continental sized watersheds, the Mississippi River to Gulf of Mexico, the North Shore through the Great Lakes to Montreal, and from the Red River up to the Arctic Circle. The work Lake Associations do benefits everyone in the northeastern part of North America.

MLR Lake Association Members

Over 200 Lake Associations in 35 counties are members of Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates.



Minnesota has more lake associations than any other state. Collectively, the 500+ Minnesota lake associations donate about \$6.25 million, annually, to the care of Minnesota's lakes in direct philanthropic giving. Lake Association members contribute about 1.2 million volunteer hours annually to lake conservation activities, including AIS inspection, lake surveys, attendance of meetings, water quality testing, and community education/outreach activities.

There are over 300,000 lake home and cabin owners in Minnesota. If this group of people came together we would have a major impact on water quality in Minnesota. Unfortunately MLR, as the statewide lake association organization, struggles to maintain a large enough membership base to meet the challenges our lakes face. *"Politics and advocacy is a numbers game. More members make us more successful in advocating for policy and funding that will move the needle on lake protection,"* said Jeff Forester, Executive Director of MLR.

We are all so busy, it is hard to find the time to stay current on Minnesota's lake and river issues. It is a full time job to attend the many seminars, symposiums and public policy forums about water that occur throughout the year, track lake and river related legislation, participate in working groups, task forces and hearings, read all the articles and papers that come out of our research institutions.

Yet all of these are important if we are to be proactive instead of reactive in our lake protection efforts.

MLR does this work so that you do not have to do it. MLR has your back. But we can only do this work with your support. Currently less than 1/10th of 1% of lake home and cabin owners are members of MLR.

As one long time member, John Lunde, from Kabegan Lake said to me recently, *"You're (MLR) the ones that are lobbying to protect our investment. Even a 1/10th of 1% of the value of my place as a membership contribution is well worth the price."*

The threats to our lakes and lake heritage continue to grow. During the many policy meetings, showcases, seminars and presentations I attend, I hear much about the problems facing our state's waters. It would be easy to despair:

- AIS continue to spread and new AIS are inbound from other states,
- Loons are dying from lead poisoning, entanglement in discarded fishing line, or killed as chicks when they are washed out of their nests by boat wakes,
- Fishery biomass is declining despite intensive fish stocking programs,
- Algae blooms are increasing in duration, intensity, distribution and scale,
- Poor shoreline development continues, with more than half the state's shoreline compromised,
- Industrial animal feedlot operations, AFOs are moving into Minnesota, largely due to clean water supplies. In 2018, Minnesota became the third largest hog producing state. Today Minnesota is second only behind Iowa, and is quickly closing the gap. These operations generate hundreds of thousands of gallons of manure. In 2020, 67% of Iowa's surface waters were impaired.

- In 2018, the MN Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) listed 40% of MN's surface water as impaired. Today the MPCA lists 56% of Minnesota's waters as impaired.

The trends are troubling.

Still I do not despair. I have hope, and it is not a false or naive hope. I have hope for two reasons:

- 1) there are practical solutions to all of these problems,
- 2) there are 300,000 lake home and cabin owners in Minnesota, an advocacy base large enough to counter the interests who benefit from actions that degrade the lakes we love.

In order to protect the lakes we love from AIS, runoff pollution, poor development, destructive boater behavior and other threats, we must build an advocacy force equal to this moment.

With bigger numbers we can push back on these special interests. MLR has the experience and capacity to mount a vigorous campaign that is worthy of Minnesota's iconic lakes.

To protect our lake heritage we must build a membership base large enough to support the work it will take:

- Media campaigns to educate the public about lake issues and frame solutions,
- Organizers to support and coordinate local groups, advocacy, and programs,
- Resource professionals to support local group's on the ground projects and efforts,
- Increased lobbying hours,
- Event planning to bring lake association leaders, academics, elected officials and agency staff together regularly to share knowledge and build relationships,
- Increased services like detailed property tax information, water quality analysis, aquatic plant inventories, and watershed hydrological studies for every lake association.

Many assume that if their lake association is a member of MLR, then they do not need to join. **This could not be further from the truth. The power of an advocacy group depends on the number of members it has.**

MLR will do the work to protect our lakes that your busy life prevents you from doing, but we do need your help promoting MLR membership to your family, friends and lake association partners.

We MUST increase the base of MLR members. Without a large statewide professional advocacy organization on the scale of Pheasants Forever or Ducks Unlimited, lakes simply cannot compete in the press of interests that converge to use and impact our waters.

Together we will build an organization that can meet this incredible moment.

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