

Annual Lake Cleanup Initiates Further Conversation, Concerns

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By KRISTIAN CONNOLLY

COOPERSTOWN

August 16, 2024



John Membrino rides the SUNY Oneonta Biological Field Station barge as he surveys nearly half a ton of debris removed from Otsego Lake on Sunday, August 11. (Photo by Debbie Creedon)

It's a scene common to junk yards and landfills across the globe. Picture a pile containing a small, rusted propane tank; half a six-foot-long water tank, cut lengthwise; a single sawhorse; various lengths of corroding pipe; roughly 18 tires of various sizes; planks, boards, and other wood and metal debris of different shapes and sizes; multiple lengths of rope. Nearly a half-ton of detritus. Now picture those objects in Otsego Lake. This was the case until this past Sunday, August 11, when lakeside property owners and dedicated volunteers from the Otsego Lake Association cleaned up the shoreline and removed all of that waste during the OLA's annual "Otsego Lake Cleanup Day." Gathered at the SUNY Oneonta Biological Field Station's boathouse afterward, researcher and OLA Director for the Town of Otsego Paul Lord observed simply, "Some things that you think wouldn't end up in the lake do."

Using a barge supplied by the BFS, the OLA transported all the collected materials to the north side of Three Mile Point. From there, the Village of Cooperstown hauled the majority to the county transfer

station, with scrap metal headed to a scrap yard, according to Village Public Works Superintendent Mitch Hotaling.

“Part of [the Village’s] focus is on the lake as the water supply,” said Lord. “They want that trash out of here, so we put it there, they take it out. And they have done that quite consistently over the years, and we’re very grateful for it.”

In wide-ranging conversation at the boathouse following Sunday’s cleanup, OLA members and cleanup day volunteers discussed everything from the importance of getting the word out about events such as Sunday’s to how the cleanup day has changed over the years (for example, fewer tires nowadays, as they’ve become less commonly used as bumpers on docks). All while making plenty of time to talk about the seen and unseen that affects lake and watershed health: mussels, harmful algae blooms, cyanobacteria, plastics, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—more commonly known as PFAS or “forever chemicals.”

As for the materials that can be seen and collected from the lake by concerned citizens, as was the case Sunday, the message from the OLA about its efforts, and what others can do to help, was as clear as much of the lake water appears to be these days.

“This is all to help the health of the lake,” said OLA Director-at-large and cleanup volunteer Debbie Creedon. “We can’t get rid of the quagga mussels, we can’t get rid of the zebra mussels, we can’t get rid of the HABs that happen. But we’re doing our best, and we’re trying to get the message out to people.”

Three decades ago, local citizens mobilized to help bring attention to serious issues facing the health and future of Otsego Lake. On a separate track from those efforts, the OLA has existed since 2002 “to educate, advocate, and actively participate in protecting the health, beauty, and well-being of Otsego Lake by facilitating the implementation of the Otsego Lake Watershed Management Plan.” That plan, first drafted in 1998 and updated in 2007, is now nearly 20 years old.

In the 17 years since the plan’s last revision, much has changed. To name just a few examples, Otsego Lake has seen the introduction of zebra and quagga mussels, and increased levels of cyanobacteria and instances of HABs. Additionally, much more has generally been learned about pollutants due to common and ubiquitous materials such as plastics and PFAS.

The next update to the lake’s watershed management plan has been underway for about a year, said Lord, before he underscored the inherent challenge in developing a plan for a body of water that is eight miles long and contains 110 billion gallons of water, and exists within a watershed encompassing 74 square miles.

“The watershed plan is a consensus document,” said Lord. “There are five municipalities in the watershed, and getting them all to agree on something is no small feat.”

Efforts to recognize the rights of environmental entities like lakes, rivers, and watersheds have become more and more common, as so-called “Rights of Nature” measures are being discussed at municipal, county, or state levels. Two such measures—one a bill introduced in the State Assembly to recognize the rights of the Great Lakes, and another a resolution passed by the City of Kingston to recognize the rights of the Hudson River Watershed—have been discussed in New York over the past couple of years, while similar efforts have been undertaken in states such as Florida and Pennsylvania, and in other countries.

Otsego Lake’s clean, pristine waters and natural beauty were made internationally famous in the first half of the 1800s, featuring in two of James Fenimore Cooper’s “Leatherstocking Tales.” The BFS’ web page on the history of Otsego Lake begins in the 1600s. But Otsego Lake is thousands and thousands

of years old, and people lived in sustainable and respectful interrelationship with that body of water for thousands and thousands of years prior to Euro-American settlement.

By contrast, today's ecological and human-health issues that are derived from environmental sources can reasonably be connected to the cumulative and ongoing effects of just 200-plus years of post-industrialization and Euro-American cultural norms being the dominant, overpowering force affecting this land and its ecosystems.

Alex Hamer is a Central New York photographer who spent parts of 2016 documenting the protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline that threatened the water supply for the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota. Hamer, whose mother was Oneida, lives in historical Onondaga homelands. He was at the Fenimore Art Museum this past Saturday, August 10 to participate in the "Celebrate Native America" and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) history event held alongside Otsego Lake.

In Hamer's opinion, a healthy future depends on finding a long-term balance between embracing an understanding of the interconnectedness and stewardship of the water, land, and environment, and in supporting those taking steps to do good in whatever way they are trying to do good in the moment.

"To have a healthy relationship with the environment would mean to be mindful every day of how our actions affect the environment," said Hamer. "This means different things to different people... Much like plants, an idea comes from a seed. The community cleanup project around Otsego Lake could be looked at as a seed. Neighbors engaging in a goal to make even the surface area better could engage young minds to want to look deeper. Which, as we know, is where many problems lie, in what we cannot see."

Hamer later added, in a nod to the OLA's efforts, "It's important to positively acknowledge that there are people working to do better, and if we don't try and use a good mind, it can have an impact when we interact with those that are fighting for the same goal."

The OLA's annual lake cleanup day is one part of a larger effort to protect the lake and its watershed. Such work takes planning, effort and effective communication in order to generate widespread participation in the community.

"We anticipate doing this next year, and we keep that in mind and prepare," said OLA Treasurer Betty VanHeusen. "We'll be preparing in the winter for six months ahead, so we ask that people along the lake prepare six months ahead, too, and start to get their stuff together."

When it comes to protecting Otsego Lake and its watershed, and all of the life that is supported by the lake ecosystem, perhaps it's the simplest piece of advice that should be heeded in the here and now. Such advice was offered as volunteers were wrapping up their day of work at the lake, and it applies to both what we can see, and what we can't see.

"Think about what you're throwing in the lake," said Creedon. "Does it belong there?"