

Healthy Waters



Healthy Waters Series: #6

Healthy Waters for Sustainable Communities

What is it about our region of Minnesota that makes it such a great place to live, work, and play? Fishing, enjoying the lakes, watching wildlife, hunting, bird watching, listening to the peaceful cry of the loon? Enjoying our high quality waters and natural resources are certainly a big part of the “Good Life in the Leech Lake Watershed.”

These resources bring people here, to stay or vacation. Clean water is part of our heritage and keeping it clean is a legacy we can leave for the future. We value our waters in ways that aren’t easily measured in dollars and cents—similar to our families, our children, our pets, and our freedom. Our waters are priceless, irreplaceable assets that form the center of the quality of life in this region. That’s hard to put a price on.

We can measure the economic impacts of clean waters on our communities. Healthy waters lead to a healthy tourism industry, the leading industry in Cass County. According to the latest statistics from the Minnesota Department of Revenue for the Leisure and Hospitality Industry, tourism-related activities grossed \$94 million in sales in Cass County in 2011. Those numbers only include amusement, recreation, accommodations, and food services. Add in the dollars spent in our communities from tourists for groceries, gas, bait, and other commodities. Each dollar spent can circulate throughout the community many times over.

The hospitality industry in Cass County grew 47 percent—by \$2.8 billion—from 2000 to 2011 as reported by Carol Altepeter, regional manager at Explore Minnesota Tourism at a recent Cass County Economic Development meeting. There were 1,850 tourism related jobs in 2011, the highest number of tourism related jobs in Northwest Minnesota. Jobs in tourism increased during 2011 and 2012 in Minnesota following three consecutive years of job losses. Cass County has the highest number of resorts (127) of any county; resorts alone grossed \$43 million in sales in 2011.

Healthy waters keep people coming back to enjoy our natural resources and spending dollars in our communities. These dollars will help sustain our communities for the future as our region of Minnesota grows in population. The Minnesota State Demographic Center projects a population growth from 2010 to 2040 of over 20% in Cass County and more than 30% in neighboring Crow Wing County. The North Central Region of Minnesota is the fastest growing region of Minnesota outside of the seven-county metro area. Keep our waters clean and natural resources healthy and “they” will come!

Our fish and wildlife depend on good water quality. Keeping the forests healthy allows water to infiltrate into the ground instead of running off into the lakes and streams laden with nutrients from the soil that can pollute our waters. And, we are dependent on good quality groundwater for safe drinking water.

The Leech Lake watershed lies in Minnesota's premier lake country and contains some of the most pristine water resources in Minnesota...and in the nation. They are true gems we want to see our children, grandchildren, and future generations enjoy.

What happens on the land largely determines the quality of our waters. Nature and precipitation certainly impact water quality, but that is out of our control. But we can control what we do on the land, both on the shorelands and within the watershed, to keep nutrients from reaching our waters and degrading them. The next article in the Healthy Waters series will talk more about individual and community responsibility for keeping our "clean waters clean" for future community sustainability.

Sustainable communities are those where a healthy environment, social well being, and economic vitality all intersect to form a satisfying quality of life. Change anyone of those factors and the quality of life changes. Let's all do our part to make sure that we have healthy waters and a clean environment to sustain our communities and our way of life for years to come.

This article was written by Paula West, executive director, Leech Lake Area Watershed on behalf of the Civic Engagement Team of the Leech Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Project. The next article in the Healthy Waters series: Healthy Waters For the Future: It's Up to You.