

Keeping their feet wet: Area water monitors focus on projects that are fun and encourage people

With summer just around the corner, Wisconsinites look forward to summer activities such as boating, swimming, fishing, canoeing and kayaking. This past January, the South Fork Flambeau Watershed Association received a 2009 Volunteer Stream Monitoring Award from the Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and the University of Wisconsin-Extension for their active role in protecting the South Fork Flambeau River and its tributaries. The group will begin their monitoring season this month.

"Our little motto is get your feet wet and do projects that are fun and encourage people," said Mary Lobermeier.

Part of the core water-monitoring group, Butch and Mary Lobermeier, Fifield, also serve as the chairpersons, respectively, for the Association's grants and by-laws committees. Both Butch and Mary have participated in numerous monitoring and stream restoration projects.

"One thing that motivates me is that we didn't have baseline data on the streams up here," said Butch. "None of us realized our resources weren't being watched. Now when pollution occurs, developers don't have a get out of jail free card to say 'it was always this way.' Know-

ing the data we are collecting is useful is very essential to building sustainability and community among volunteers."

For the past five years, Association members have monitored three tributaries to the South Fork Flambeau – Sailor Creek at the Old 13 crossing, Murray Creek (a class one trout stream which supports trout naturally without any restocking) and Three Mile Creek near State Highway 70.

"One of the things we found with our monitoring is that most of our water is pretty darn good except when we caught people dumping septic tanks right into the water," said Butch. "Once that was cleared up, though, we found the water quality to be great except for Three Mile Creek."

Three Mile Creek contains an active cranberry marsh, which is governed under the cranberry laws. The Wisconsin State Legislature passed The Cranberry Laws in 1867. They grant cranberry growers the statutory right to construct dams and ditches on lands adapted for cranberry culture. Recent State Supreme Court cases have construed this law to include the right to divert water for use in cranberry culture without permission or regulation.

"The cranberry marsh is at the very headwaters of the creek so it was channelized back in the late 1960s up to Highway 70. There's about a mile, that isn't channelized, before it comes into the South Fork so it can filter a little bit, but right up to the highway there is pretty dirty water containing muck and having less clarity," said Butch.

"We think there also might have been beaver dams downstream from the Cranberry Marsh and upstream before the site so sometimes it is hard to tell all the factors affecting the river," said Mary.

Formed in 2005, the South Fork Flambeau Watershed Association received a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources River Protection grant and immediately began stream monitoring through the Water Action Volunteers Program. When UW-Extension and the WDNR launched a pilot program in 2006 where citizens collect data for the WDNR using the same methods as the WDNR scientists (level 2 monitoring), the South Fork Flambeau River Association jumped at the opportunity to participate.

The group also participates in a variety of other monitoring and restoration activities. One of the group's more recent projects included relocating native mussels

out of residential construction sites on the river. The group moved as many mussels as they could downstream – away from the dangerous, construction zone.

"We moved thousands of them, but there were still tens of thousands that weren't moved," said Butch. "We'll recolonize the area this summer when we move the native mussels back to the finished construction sites. Luckily, there were no endangered species out there, just the more common mussels. The good news is when you are moving thousands of them, the fact that they are there indicates the water quality is good."

With a growth of second vacation homes and retiree homes in the area, the Lobermeiers keep watch over residential construction along the South Fork.

"There is development going on all the time, and one of the things our group does is float the river annually," Butch said. "We have a camera, and we take pictures of problem sites and we forward them to zoning and the DNR. Unfortunately, shoreline zoning laws are not being enforced across the board."

Education is one of the Association's missions as well.

"We like to get children involved

and have them learn a respect for the environment," said Mary. Even though the membership in our group is for 18 and over to be a voting member, we've started a youth membership where kids can join and be involved in what we do. We'd like to expand stream monitoring."

Currently, the Lobermeiers monitor every June, July, August and September with a few other club members including Rick and Vickie Thorbjornsen of Park Falls. The Lobermeiers make a conscious effort to include their son in monitoring activities as the Thorbjornsens do with their grandson.

"Monitoring really is a lot of fun and very rewarding," said Mary. "We feel that in our generation we are doing our part and that we are leaving a legacy by teaching our son and Rick and Vickie's grandson the responsibility of stewardship."

In addition, the South Fork Flambeau Watershed Association annually hosts river clean-ups, breakfast by the river and numerous ecological speakers.

If you are interested in stream monitoring or in joining over 60 members in the South Fork Flambeau Watershed Association, please contact the group at southforkflambeau@yahoo.com.