

Rock Lake Improvement Association Celebrates 50 years

By John Crump and Cory Nelson

On August 21st, Rock Lake Improvement Association (RLIA) will be celebrating its 50th anniversary at the group's annual meeting in Korth Park.

For the past 50 years, RLIA's primary goal has been to protect the health of Rock Lake and its watershed. To attain this goal, one of the group's highest priorities has been to provide accurate information and education for community members and municipal leaders. RLIA works with the municipalities, the DNR and the Joint Rock Lake Committee (JRLC) to encourage the adoption of policies which promote the health of the Lake and its watershed so that our entire community can continue to enjoy one of the finest lakes in the region for a host of recreational activities and to continue enjoying the beauty of the lake which enriches all of our lives in so many ways. This special lake has been described by DNR officials as Jefferson County's "rare gem." RLIA has grown to approximately 150 family and/or individual members and has a Board of 10 Directors who coordinate 7 standing committees and additional subcommittees which take on a wide variety of initiatives. RLIA wants all of us to work together to protect the Lake, and the surrounding ecosystem so that those who come after us will have a healthy Lake to enjoy for generations to come.

In 1971, three local visionaries, Robert Rummeler, Robert Colyer and Sherwood Harvey formed the RLIA. The original Articles of Incorporation stated that the organization's purpose was "to preserve, maintain and improve Rock Lake, the surrounding area and community. The association shall be involved in activities that will provide or promote conservation, safety, sanitation and zoning of Rock Lake and the surrounding area and community."

Other early members included Bob and Fran Dauffenbach. From 1987 to 1999 they served as "Water Quality Monitors" (citizen scientists) collecting data on Rock Lake for the DNR. This data continues to serve as invaluable historic water quality benchmarks. They also collected aquatic plant data for the DNR. In addition, Bob worked with the Lake Mills Fish Hatchery to establish the Rock Lake fish stocking program. In the year 2000, Bob and Fran were presented with the Wisconsin Lake Stewardship Award from Wisconsin Lakes, our state's only statewide lake conservation nonprofit organization.

In 1994 RLIA applied for and received a DNR Lake Planning Grant which funded an important study assessing threats to the Lake's quality and aquatic habitat. The resulting 1995 report summarized these threats and made recommendations to alleviate or minimize their impact.

In 1999, RLIA won the Wisconsin Lake Stewardship Award in the group/organization category for these and other projects. That year, RLIA formed the Korth Park Project Committee which spearheaded the community effort to establish Korth Park. The Committee raised over \$5,000 to kick start the project and to pay for the appraisal of the Korth farm property. The committee publicized the effort and organized a community petition which showed strong support for converting the farm into a County Park. Committee members included Stan Smoniewski, Beth Harvey, Jeremy Wallace, Hope Oostdik, and Johanna Chworowsky.

These efforts along with the support of County and Lake Mills municipal leadership resulted in Jefferson County being awarded state funds from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program which was used to purchase the Korth farm. Our community is indebted, not only to these visionaries, but also to the Korth family for allowing the County to make that purchase in the year 2000.

The Korth Park Master Plan was adopted by the County in February 2001. This plan was followed remarkably closely, and as a result, the community enjoys the Park as we see it today. The Master Plan was developed by a steering committee that included Johanna Chworowsky from the RLIA Board, Hope Oostdik, who had been on the RLIA Board but by that time had resigned from RLIA when she was elected to the Town Board, Patricia Cicero (Jefferson County Land & Water Conservation Department) and Karen Etter Hale (a City resident who was also the Executive Secretary of the Madison Audubon Society at the time).

In 2001, Hope Oostdik received the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association Leadership award for her work with RLIA and the Town Board involving public education, lake conservation and shoreland restoration.

Rock Lake Management Plans were published in 2006 and 2018. RLIA applied for and won DNR grants to hire a consulting firm to spearhead these vast projects. Each of these plans required countless hours from community members and organizations representing all stakeholders of the Lake including motorized and nonmotorized recreational enthusiasts and businesses, shoreland owners, agricultural interests and fishing interests. Organizations that participated included RLIA, the JRLC, the City and Town of Lake Mills, the DNR and the County Land and Water Conservation Department. The current 10-year plan (2018-2028) is 155 pages and comprehensively covers a host of Rock Lake watershed issues and threats as well as plans to address these challenges and target goals to measure our progress or lack thereof. The plan, including a more approachable “executive summary” is available in its entirety on the RLIA website at <https://rocklake.org>.

From 2010-2014 another DNR grant allowed a comprehensive evaluation of the Miljala Channel. This project was performed cooperatively with RLIA, Jefferson County Land and Water Conservation Department, UW Madison and the consulting firm of Montgomery Associates. The UW portion was completed in 2013. The consultant’s report was completed and published in 2014. They are both available on the RLIA website.

RLIA has also sponsored or participated in a wide array of community activities including Spring Cleanup, leaf-free storm sewers (to minimize the impact of harmful nutrients from entering the lake), educational pontoon tours, Shoreland & Rain Garden Walks, installation of “fish sticks” (providing fish and turtle habitat), frog monitoring, Turtle crossing signage, a road salt educational webinar and many other initiatives. RLIA has also continued to work with the County and the DNR to measure water quality via periodic water sampling of the Lake and watershed tributaries.

In 2019-2020, RLIA petitioned the Town and the City to erect Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) boat cleaning stations at the five Rock Lake boat launches. RLIA worked with both municipalities and in March 2020, long-time RLIA treasurer, Jim Colegrove, met with Calvin

Geerds, who volunteered to help put up the stations for his Eagle Scout project. Town and City officials worked with Calvin and the project was completed in July 2020. The AIS stations are the crucial piece of the Clean Boats Clean Water initiative that is critical in keeping invasive aquatic species out of Rock Lake.

50 years ago, the founders realized that a cooperative partnership was needed to reach their goals and that is even more true today. Threats to our lake quality and ecosystem are ever present. Please checkout rocklake.org to see a host of interesting and important information about the lake and ways that you can help protect it. Please join us in celebrating the 50th anniversary of RLIA and thank all the leaders and community members who have vigorously pursued these goals for the past half century.