Iron Lake Tour

On September 19, 2023, Austin Dehn of the WDNR and I met with Sandy Rich, Mark LaLiberte, and Ron Hultman to discuss aquatic plants, invasive species, erosion, water depth, navigation, and other issues on Iron Lake, as part of a pontoon boat tour. It was noted that due to recent rain events, the lake depth has increased to the point where most of the submersed aquatic vegetation was at least several inches below the surface and only a handful of water celery patches were floating around. We discussed questions about mechanical harvesting conditions and permitting, aquatic plant management plans, and property access to the water.

* Can we create an aquatic plant management (APM) plan? Yes! Certain DNR grants exist for this purpose. While APM plans mostly deal with aquatic invasive plants, and you currently only seem to have yellow iris, it can be useful to have such a plan already created, in the event of an aquatic invasive plant introduction. A Lake Management Plan is far more comprehensive, using information like land use around the lake, water chemistry, fish populations, aquatic plant species, community goals and needs, and other things.
* Austin stated that mechanical harvesting is more like trimming the tops off aquatic plants, as opposed to fully digging them out of the bottom, and it only gets approved as a management method for navigational purposes. From what we observed, Iron Lake would not qualify for this.
* Regarding invasive species, the only invasive plant we observed was yellow iris, which is a shoreline/wetland invasive plant. Yellow iris can be cut and dug out by hand, but to treat it chemically or mechanically, would require a permit, and these methods would not pertain to water accessibility.
* If you wanted to remove aquatic vegetation from the water by hand for personal use (getting your boat to and from the dock), you are allowed to do that. Your allotted width is a single, contiguous, 30-foot stretch, and the length (perpendicular to the shoreline) can be as long as it takes to get to open water, **but only to the extent that is necessary**. Your swimming area can be part of this 30-foot-wide allotment.
* Can you use a Diver Assisted Suction Harvester (DASH) boat? On aquatic invasive plants, yes, but this method is very targeted, expensive, and time consuming. A diver goes to the bottom of the lake with a suction hose, lightly removes the invasive plants and rhizomes from the sediment and then feeds the invasive plants in by hand. You cannot stick the hose into the bottom, as that would be considered dredging. There were no submersed aquatic invasive plants observed on Iron Lake at this time, and using DASH on native vegetation would not be approved.
* Can we pull the plants out of the bottom? No, as this would disturb the sediment and would be considered dredging. Dredging permits do exist, but not for this purpose.
* Questions were asked about the dam, and Austin provided some department names to contact regarding the ownership, maintenance, accessibility, use, and vegetation removal. Andy does not work with dams, so his knowledge on the subject is minimal.
* Can we remove the floating mats of vegetation if they are not rooted to the bottom? Apparently there is nothing in the rules saying you cannot do that, so yes, if you deem it necessary and feasible, go for it.
* We also made a few recommendations for the shoreline to protect lake health, which could help reduce the amount of nutrients feeding the aquatic plants and algae. Any properties that are experiencing shoreline erosion from waves may want to plant shrubs and trees within 35 feet of ordinary high-water mark. The roots of shrubs and trees help stabilize the soil while also absorbing a lot of energy from the waves. Native forbs, grasses, sedges, and wildflowers further stabilize the soil by sending down deep roots and anchoring in place. Additionally, if you have bare soil on a slope that doesn’t seem to have channels carved by water flow, you can seed it and/or place plant plugs, shrubs, etc. in those areas. Erosion mat helps with establishing those plants in the soil. Finally, if any landowners have gutter downspouts or impervious surfaces that allow water to flow directly toward the lake and are interested in addressing those, let Andy know and he would be happy to do a site visit. When stormwater flows toward the lake without slowing down or being absorbed into the ground, it can carry sediment, phosphorus, and excess heat, which fuels plant and algae growth and can cause other issues. Healthy Lakes grants through the DNR can help with things like native plantings, rain gardens, fish sticks, and a few other practices. Bayfield County Land & Water Conservation Department may also be able to help with cost-share dollars on projects, depending on the practice, need, and funding availability.
* It is worth noting that Iron Lake an incredible amount of aquatic plant coverage, especially on the bottom in the southeastern bay. Throughout the lake, we found species like clasping-leaf pondweed, large-leaf pondweed, northern watermilfoil, water celery, white water lily, bullhead pond lily, and fern pondweed, to name a few.

Thank you for your interest in keeping Iron Lake healthy!