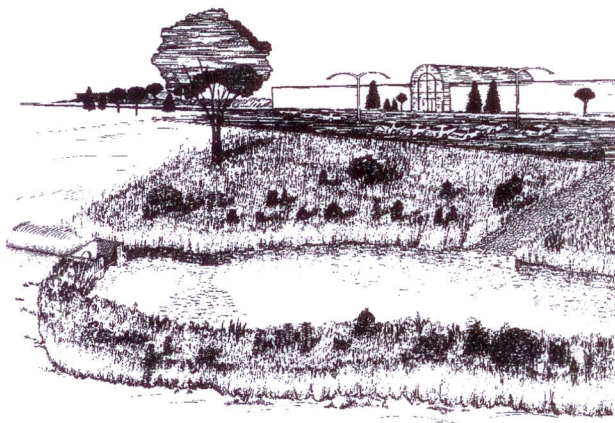


Stormwater Detention Ponds

Recently, there has been an explosion in the number of ponds dotting the suburban landscape. Most have been created to satisfy local government regulations for stormwater detention in new developments. These ponds can be attractive features—they provide opportunities to observe nature, engage in recreation, or simply enjoy the view. Perhaps your home sits alongside a stormwater detention pond, or there's one down the street in the neighborhood park. Your office complex may have a detention pond or two on its property.



Stormwater detention ponds or “basins” are designed to hold rain water that has “run off” the surrounding landscape of lawns, roads, and rooftops. The stormwater is held in the basin awhile and slowly released to a nearby waterbody. In this way, stormwater detention basins reduce how fast runoff enters our natural waterways. This protects areas downstream from flooding and erosion. Most detention ponds also function to trap pollutants in runoff such as nutrients, metals, and sediments. As a result, detention ponds most likely aren't going to look like a natural pond or lake. They may not have clear water, provide certain recreational activities, or be a top destination for wildlife. Still, there are things that can be done to

improve the appearance and recreational benefits of detention ponds, while they continue to do their main work of stormwater detention.

In this edition of *Lake Notes*, we'll first talk about what signals a degraded detention pond, what some of the causes might be, and what can be done to better manage the pond for recreation and aesthetics.

Signs of Degradation

Undesirable Water Quality

Turbidity: Turbid water, appearing cloudy or muddy, is caused by sediment, algae, and other particles suspended in the water. Stormwater runoff carries soil and debris into detention ponds from the surrounding landscape. Erosion of the pond's shoreline also contributes to turbidity. Bottom-feeding fish, notably carp, can cause a lot of turbidity as they stir up the bottom sediments in search of food. Rooted aquatic plants have a hard time growing in turbid water. Without such plants covering the pond bottom, sediments are more easily resuspended by wind and waves.

Algae Blooms: Algae thrive in water that is rich with the nutrients phosphorus and nitrogen. Stormwater runoff carries into detention ponds excessive amounts of these nutrients from lawn fertilizers and pet and waterfowl waste. When algae become abundant enough to color the water green or form paint-like scums, it's called a “bloom.” Like sediment turbidity, algae blooms block sunlight from reaching through the water to the pond bottom, which prevents the growth of rooted aquatic plants—a beneficial part of a pond ecosystem. Algae blooms also can create a situation where oxygen levels in the water become very low or even near zero—thus affecting aquatic life.

Poor Habitat for Plants and Animals: Detention ponds have little chance of supporting a wide variety of aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals when poor water quality and shoreline conditions exist. Without shoreline and aquatic plants, habitat (including food, nesting materials, and cover) for animals, fish, and other aquatic organisms is limited. Turbid water and low oxygen levels favor fish species that can tolerate those conditions (such as carp and bullhead) while other species such as bass and bluegill suffer.

Eroded Shorelines

Some detention ponds may have shorelines with bare, exposed soils, and these may be “sloughing” (falling) into the pond. Such erosion can be caused by many things including steep side slopes, excessive soil moisture, inappropriate soil types, and lack of deep-rooted, water-tolerant stabilizing vegetation.



Pond shorelines often are designed too steep, making it difficult to establish stabilizing vegetation. Furthermore, detention pond shorelines typically have been planted with turfgrasses such as Kentucky bluegrass. Turfgrasses are too shallow-rooted to hold shoreline soils against the action of waves.

They also cannot survive

long periods of being underwater or in saturated soils—as often occurs in stormwater ponds.

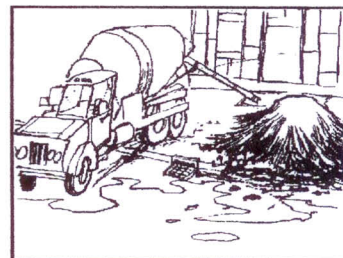
Soil type and structure play a major role in shoreline stability. If the soil is too compacted or there is not enough fertile topsoil, stabilizing vegetation will be tough to establish. Highly erosive or bare soils around the detention pond will not hold together when water levels fluctuate. Soils with a high organic content (e.g., peat or muck) hold water and are prone to sloughing (unless the shoreline is graded to a very flat slope).

Sedimentation

Detention ponds will fill with sediment when shorelines are eroding and as stormwater runoff carries in soils from the surrounding land. Sedimentation can cover fish spawning beds and create mudflats where opportunistic, weedy species such as purple loosestrife, reed canary grass, cattails, and willows can invade. Sediment accumulated along shore can impede

recreation such as fishing and launching of boats. Sedimentation also decreases the pond’s water volume. This reduces how well the pond protects downstream waterbodies—since less water volume means there’s less time for pollutants to settle out within the pond and be broken down biologically.

While soil erosion from agricultural croplands in Illinois typically ranges from 1 to 10 tons/acre/year, erosion from construction sites can exceed 100 tons/acre/year!



Reduced Aesthetics

Any of the above-mentioned signs of degradation can contribute to a decline in the pond’s visual appeal. High turbidity and brown or green water colors can detract from the pond’s appearance. Eroding shorelines and bare side slopes can be an eyesore. Even the droppings left behind by waterfowl on lawn and park areas can detract from the overall enjoyment of the pond. In fact, large, resident flocks of Canada geese have become quite a nuisance in urban and suburban areas. Detention ponds provide the perfect habitat for them: open water typically surrounded by low-growing vegetation. By grazing heavily on nearshore grasses, these birds contribute to shoreline erosion and produce excessive amounts of droppings that are extremely rich in phosphorus and nitrogen.



Solutions

Watershed Management

A “watershed” is the area of land that drains into a waterbody. Managing the activities going on within a detention pond’s watershed is just as important—if not more so—as managing the pond itself. There are several things that you can do in your own yard and community that can help reduce sediment and nutrient runoff or how much water levels fluctuate. These include:

- Establish a “buffer strip” of native vegetation along the pond shore (see another *Lakes Notes* fact sheet, “Shoreline Buffer Strips”).
- Have soils tested to see what nutrients your lawn and garden areas really need.
- Reroute roof downspouts onto lawns rather than onto driveways or streets.

- • Ensure that soil erosion and sedimentation control practices (e.g., silt fences, sediment ponds) are installed and maintained on construction sites within the detention pond's watershed.
- • Encourage regular street sweeping, cleaning of storm sewer catch basins, and maintenance of vegetated drainage swales.
- • For more tips, see the *Lake Notes* fact sheets "Home and Yard" and "Fertilizers and Pesticides: Options for Lawn and Garden Use."

Stabilize Eroding Shorelines

The planting of native wetland plants along the shore and deep-rooted prairie grasses on pond side slopes should, in most cases, be adequate to stabilize eroding detention pond shorelines. Some minor regrading may be necessary. Depending on the steepness of the side slopes, the incorporation of "bioengineering" materials such as fiber rolls or A-jacks structures also may be appropriate (see the *Lake Notes* fact sheet "Shoreline Stabilization: Bioengineering Alternatives").

Pond Cleaning (Dredging)

Periodically, sediments accumulated in the pond will



need to be removed. The frequency will depend on how well soil erosion and sedimentation controls are working at construction sites, on the effectiveness of other "best management practices" (BMPs) in the watershed, and how well the pond shoreline is stabilized. With good BMPs, sediment removal may not be needed more often than every 10 to 20 years, depending on how much sediment the pond was designed to store.

Although the sediments must be tested prior to removal, in most cases they will be clean enough to dispose of in a landfill. In many cases, the sediments will be sufficiently clean to spread on land and be reseeded. A permit(s) for sediment removal also may be required. (More information on sediment removal can be found in the *Lake Notes* fact sheet "Lake Dredging.")

Minimize Resident Waterfowl Populations

For suggestions on how to discourage large numbers of resident waterfowl at your pond, especially Canada geese, refer to the *Lake Notes* fact sheet "Canada Geese and Your Lake."

Regular Inspection and Maintenance

To ensure the proper operation, acceptable aesthetics, and water quality effectiveness of the detention pond, several basic maintenance activities should occur.

- • Inspect the outlet structure periodically and after storms, and remove debris blockages.
- • Inspect the inlets for scour and pond shorelines for erosion, and stabilize as necessary.
- • Regularly remove trash and debris.
- • During the first three years after planting, monitor shoreline and side slope vegetation frequently and conduct supplemental plantings as needed to ensure good cover. After that, inspection once a year should be enough.
- • Maintain the shoreline and side slope vegetation and remove nuisance plants. Native wetland and prairie vegetation will need much less frequent maintenance than a pond surrounded by turfgrass which needs frequent mowing. However, native plants may require more specialized expertise (such as prescribed burning).

Who is responsible for long-term inspection and maintenance will depend on local circumstances. In residential settings, the basin may be owned by the local municipality or park district and thus would be their responsibility. In many cases, however, the surrounding homeowners association is the owner and thus is responsible for upkeep.

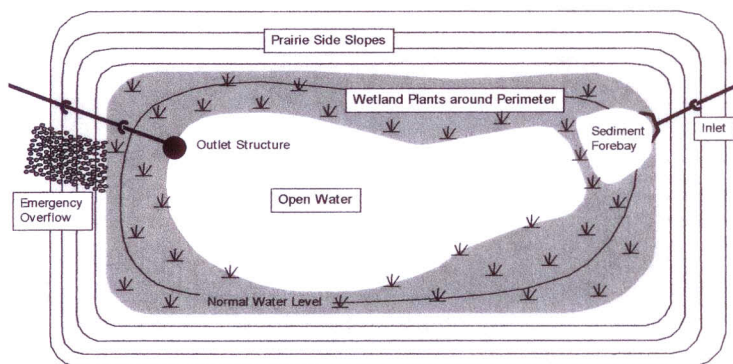
Public Education and Awareness

- • Share this publication—and others in the *Lake Notes* series—with your neighbors and public officials.
- • Organize or participate in a storm drain stenciling project.

Proper Design

Shoreline slope is one of the most important factors from an erosion control, as well as a safety, standpoint. Detention pond shorelines should be very gradual—ideally 5:1 (5 feet horizontal to 1 foot vertical) or flatter. At such slopes establishment of vegetation will be much easier and more likely to last. Also, adding a wide, underwater ledge about 6 to 12 inches below the pond's normal water level will provide a perfect place to establish wetland plants around the shoreline.

The shoreline should be planted with wetland plants and the basin side slopes with prairie vegetation. Wetland plants tolerate water level fluctuations and absorb wave energy, thus protecting the shoreline against erosion. On slopes, the deep, intricate root systems of native prairie plants are able to hold soil together very well.



The detention pond's depth influences its water quality. Generally, detention ponds should be deep enough to maintain open water areas and limit sediment resuspension by current, wind, or waves. Typically, the average depth should be at least 4-5 feet and maximum depth at least 8 feet. If you want fish to survive through the winter, it is generally recommended that at least 25% of the pond be at least 10-12 feet deep.

Access for maintenance equipment should be provided in the design. Incorporating a separate pond ("pre-sedimentation basin") or area within the basin ("sediment forebay") where sediments can settle out before reaching the main detention pond will localize sediment deposition, making sediment removal easier. Also, having a bottom drain valve built in will allow the pond to be drained and make maintenance easier.

Finally, the surrounding development that contributes stormwater to the detention pond should be designed with natural drainage features. These include vegetated "swales" and "filter strips" wherever possible—as opposed to street curbs and gutters, storm sewers, and concrete-lined channels. Natural drainage techniques reduce the amount of surface water runoff entering the basin and also filter out pollutants.

"Retrofitting"

If certain of the design features recommended above are lacking in your detention pond, the basin still can be improved by modifying, or *retrofitting*, it to reduce operational, aesthetic, or maintenance problems. While particular site or monetary constraints may limit what can be done, in most cases revegetation of the shoreline with wetland plants and side slopes with prairie vegetation can be readily accomplished.

A Word of Caution about Certain Recreational Uses

Stormwater not only carries with it sediments and nutrients, but also bacteria and other pathogens. Consequently, swimming in detention ponds typically is cautioned against.

On industrial sites, the potential exists for serious contamination of both water and sediment. Hence, eating fish from such detention ponds is discouraged.

Lake Notes is a series of publications produced by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency about issues confronting Illinois' lake resources. The objective of these publications is to provide lake and watershed residents with a greater understanding of environmental cause-and-effect relationships, and actions we all can take to protect our lakes.

Appreciation is extended to the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for illustrations from their "Water Quality Digitized Clip Art Collection." The detention pond schematic was prepared by Tom Price and Holly Hudson.

This *Lake Notes* publication was prepared by Holly Hudson of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, Chicago, Illinois. Thanks are extended to Dennis Dreher and Tom Price for their review and comments.

For more information about other publications in this series and to request copies, please contact: Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, DWPC-Lake and Watershed Unit, P.O. Box 19276, Springfield, Illinois, 62794-9276; 217/782-3362.

June 1998. Permission granted to reprint with credit to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.



[Switch to full desktop version](#)

DAILY NEWS COLUMNISTS

GUEST COMMENTARY: COLLIER COUNTY NEEDS TO PASS RESTRICTIVE FERTILIZING LAWS TO PROTECT OUR PONDS, CANALS, LAKES

By Herb Schuchman Naples
Published Wednesday, May 4, 2011

The Gulf of Mexico is experiencing damage from contaminated water pouring in. Not enough attention is being paid to the causes.

I live in IslandWalk, a North Naples community of 1,856 homes built amidst 30 connected ponds, commonly called lakes. Over the years we have found that our algae blooms have increased, along with fish kills and occasional odor. We have also found that this is not unique to our community.

Fortunately, our board is pro-active. When this situation became apparent, they formed a committee to study the causes and search for solutions. They allocated \$25,000 to investigate aeration systems, perform testing and to pay for consultants. Contact was made with communities throughout Florida and as far away as California, Texas and Colorado to ask about their stormwater retention ponds. What we discovered was alarming.

Test results:

- ☐ Nitrate and phosphate levels doubled in one year.
- ☐ Consultants estimated that we had two to three inches of muck on the bottom of our ponds. A diver measured it and found 12 to 30 inches of muck.
- ☐ Oxygen saturation levels were under what is necessary for healthy ponds.
- ☐ Increased pH.
- ☐ Loss of depth throughout our system. Our ponds may appear full but they contain less water each year.
- ☐ Water entering our system from communities have 40 percent more nitrates than our ponds.

We learned:

- ☐ The problem is not unique to IslandWalk. It is found wherever stormwater retention ponds exist. Florida is the state with the largest numbers of these systems.
- ☐ Communities around us appear to have as much or more damage than IslandWalk. Many of these communities are not aware of this.
- ☐ How, when and where we fertilize is as important as how much fertilizer we use.
- ☐ The average life of these systems before dredging is 20 to 25 years unless proactive measures are taken.

Proactive measures:

- ☐ Aeration will add about 20 to 25 years before dredging is necessary. Aeration must begin in time to reverse the accumulation of muck. IslandWalk has just installed a complete aeration system at a cost of \$320,000-plus.
- ☐ All fertilizers, insecticides, weed killers, house cleaning chemicals, car washing chemicals, power washing liquids, etc., must be controlled. Many of these are washed into the storm sewers which flow into the ponds. We now have a committee to help our residents select products wisely and to use vendors who abide by our recommendations.

□ We learned that all communities built around stormwater retention ponds will have to face dredging in the future. This is extremely costly. Buying time by doing the right things not only allows us more time to budget for the future but can significantly improve the water leaving our communities and ending up in the Gulf.

But what about all the other communities around us that are unaware and are pouring harmful chemicals, including copper, into their ponds to try to control the ever growing algae blooms? Copper is a known carcinogen in the form that it exists at the bottom of our ponds. What will happen to these communities if they remain unaware of the worsening problems? What will the impact be on the Gulf as more and more contaminated water is poured into it?

There are over 40 municipalities, counties, etc., that have passed restrictive fertilizing laws similar to the proposal recommended by the Environmental Advisory Board for Collier County. These include no fertilizing during the rainy season, no fertilizing within 10 feet of a body of water, fertilizing with chemicals at least 50 percent slow-release, etc. IslandWalk has contacted many communities with restrictive laws and have found no negative reports after up to four years of restrictions.

As a consequence of the knowledge we have acquired, IslandWalk has started an Outreach Program to other communities in an effort to help them understand the problems. Communities have already approached us for information, and we gladly share what we know.

Collier County now needs to do what more than 40 areas in Florida have already done. They need to pass restrictive fertilizing laws, which can be easily reversed if found unsatisfactory. Fertilization continues all summer, even with restrictive laws because at least 50 percent of the fertilizer applied in late May is slow release and lasts four to six months.

We are asking Collier County to do what more than 40 areas in Florida have already done — pass restrictive laws. Help us buy more time. We must raise awareness and do our part in saving the Gulf. IslandWalk is doing its part by being proactive to help other communities. We ask Collier County to do its part.

Schuchman is chair of IslandWalk's State of the Lakes Committee. He is a retired dentist and a former consultant to a pharmaceutical

company. For more information, email him at herbsiw@yahoo.com

5 COMMENTS

DAILY NEWS COLUMNISTS

Brent Batten: New York candidate gets Rolyed

Published 2:34 p.m. 4 Comments

Chris Griffith: The verbal offer isn't worth the paper it's written on

Published 10:55 a.m.

STORY SEARCH

Search

[Switch to full desktop version](#)

[Return to top](#)

Scripps Interactive Newspaper Group
©2011 The E.W. Scripps Co.