

VINCENT LAKE WORKING MODEL ("VLWM") EVALUATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Lake Riparian Areas in Northern Alberta

Riparian areas are the green zones of water-loving vegetation that border waterbodies like lakes, streams and wetlands. They are a crucial part of the environment in northern Alberta, located along the shorelines of the many hundreds of lakes in the region. Riparian areas play important roles in lake health and ecological function as well as in recreation living and enjoyment. Healthy riparian areas also contribute to local community economies in several ways.

- Healthy riparian areas help filter pollutants (improving water quality); store and release water into the watershed (facilitating water quantity); buffer the erosive forces of water and wind (protecting the land base and water clarity); and provide fish and wildlife habitat (enhancing biodiversity and opportunities to enjoy it).
- Riparian areas are used and managed by many different people and organizations, and may be a combination of Crown, municipal and homeowner property.
- Riparian areas contribute to Alberta's economy by:
 - offering desirable areas for permanent and seasonal homes and businesses;
 - providing tourism destination points for consumptive and non-consumptive recreation uses such as fishing, bird-watching, swimming, picnicking and other forms of outdoor enjoyment; and
 - contributing to the provincial tax base used to pay for infrastructure such as roads, education and health.

Concern in Action

In September of 1999, a group of concerned government agencies (e.g. Public Lands Division, Fish and Wildlife Division, and the County of St. Paul) and conservation agencies (e.g. Alberta Conservation Association, Cows and Fish, and Ducks Unlimited Canada) met to discuss mutual concerns about riparian areas. The discussion was based on concerns that recreation practices, such as converting natural lake shorelines to sand beaches and mowed lawns, had not only become more prevalent but were not conducive to healthy and functional riparian areas. Indeed, these types of practices were believed to negatively impact the sustainability of the natural resources and the overall health of the watershed. Since watershed health and economic well-being are inextricably linked, long-term forecasts based on declining natural resources included a reduction in the economic benefits associated with healthy riparian areas and healthy lakes, as well as increased damage control costs to fix problems arising from any damage caused by inappropriate practices.

This led to asking the question: *"What methods and tools can be used to encourage practice change in riparian areas, so that recreation living and use is carried out in a sustainable manner, to ensure that riparian areas and watersheds continue to provide local, regional and provincial benefits such as good water quality, water supply, biodiversity, and opportunities for enjoyment?"*

Vincent Lake Working Group and Model

To answer this question, the Vincent Lake Working Group ("VLWG"), a partnership of core and consultative members, was formed. See www.healthyshorelines.com for a complete membership list. The VLWG developed the Vincent Lake Working Model ("VLWM") as a working experiment, using Vincent Lake, located 16 km north of St. Paul, Alberta, as a testing ground. The VLWG members cooperated and learned together, working until 2002 with the Vincent Lake community to develop and implement awareness and education tools designed to encourage practice change at the lake. It was intended that the results of the experimental working model would, in future, be available for transfer to other interested lake communities. In this way, they too could build upon and develop their own community-specific plan, using the VLWM as a template to promote learning and practice change pertaining to lakeshore management.

Evaluating the VLWM

To determine the impact of the VLWM as well as those characteristics of the model which may be suitable for transfer to other lake communities, the VLWM was evaluated independently in 2002-2003 by Nancy G. Bateman, MA, at the request of the VLWG. The evaluation was designed in two parts. Part 1 of the evaluation used a nominal group decision approach, whereby key stakeholders were interviewed in-person to identify issues and common themes. Observations were condensed into central questions and desirable characteristics of the model and future template, which were subsequently fine-tuned and voted on in a stakeholder focus group session. Part 2 of the evaluation assessed knowledge levels and opinions of permanent and seasonal residents, using a survey mailed to 402 registered landholders at Vincent Lake and the Summer Village of Horseshoe Bay. Survey response rate was 46%. Using these two methods meant that the agreed-upon characteristics of the model and template arrived at in the evaluation reflected local views and requirements.

Key Findings of the VLWM Evaluation

- Survey respondents and key stakeholders responded positively to the five-element process used by the VLWM, borrowed from the Cows and Fish Program (awareness; team-building; tool-building; community-based action; and monitoring).
 - 95% of survey respondents overall rated awareness activities as important.
 - Of those who reported practice change, 74% indicated they had stopped mowing their riparian area or had found other ways to encourage natural vegetation at the lakeshore.
- The VLWM was regarded as an appropriate template for interested communities to empower them to achieve a more sustainable future, but suffered from the practicalities of limited local leadership in an area populated by high numbers of seasonal residents.
- In addition to the five elements of the model designed to provide the opportunity for voluntary action, active enforcement of regulation was strongly supported as an additional element to achieve a sense of fairness within the community and overall improvement in lake health.
 - 95% of survey respondents indicated that regulations should be enforced (either in every case or in very serious cases of damage), if and when awareness has not led to voluntary action.
- Evaluation participants stressed the importance of monitoring both riparian health and impact of awareness activities. Survey respondents requested additional awareness and practice change information on several topics (particularly weeds; sewage treatment; and lake management regulations).

Recommendations for the Future

- Lake communities should be made aware of the successes and lessons learned at Vincent Lake, and that a flexible guide based on the VLWM experience is available to help them build an awareness and action plan matched to local needs and issues. The template:
 - should include the five-element Cows and Fish process, plus a sixth element of active enforcement for use when passive encouragement through awareness has not succeeded;
 - can adopt whatever mix of tools, roles and responsibilities meets the community's requirements;
 - may be community-based (entirely led by community members) or community-driven (built on input from community-members at key decision points), but in every case must provide the opportunity for community members to participate at least at key decision points, regardless of who takes the primary lead in the process; and
 - should consistently focus on awareness as the primary mechanism by which individuals can make voluntary informed decisions; and involve partners who can contribute clear and consistent technical support and/or facilitation of the process and/or activities.
- To move ahead, locally and regionally, leadership will require the provision of some type of coordination function similar to the watershed coordinator role adopted for use in Alberta's agricultural communities.
- The evaluation report and/or summary results should be communicated to the public in several ways, including a mailing to evaluation participants; providing local newspaper articles; making presentations to the community, local authorities and interested communities; and updating the VLWM website at www.healthyshorelines.com.