

WICOLA Survey 2006
Report of Findings and Summary

Introduction

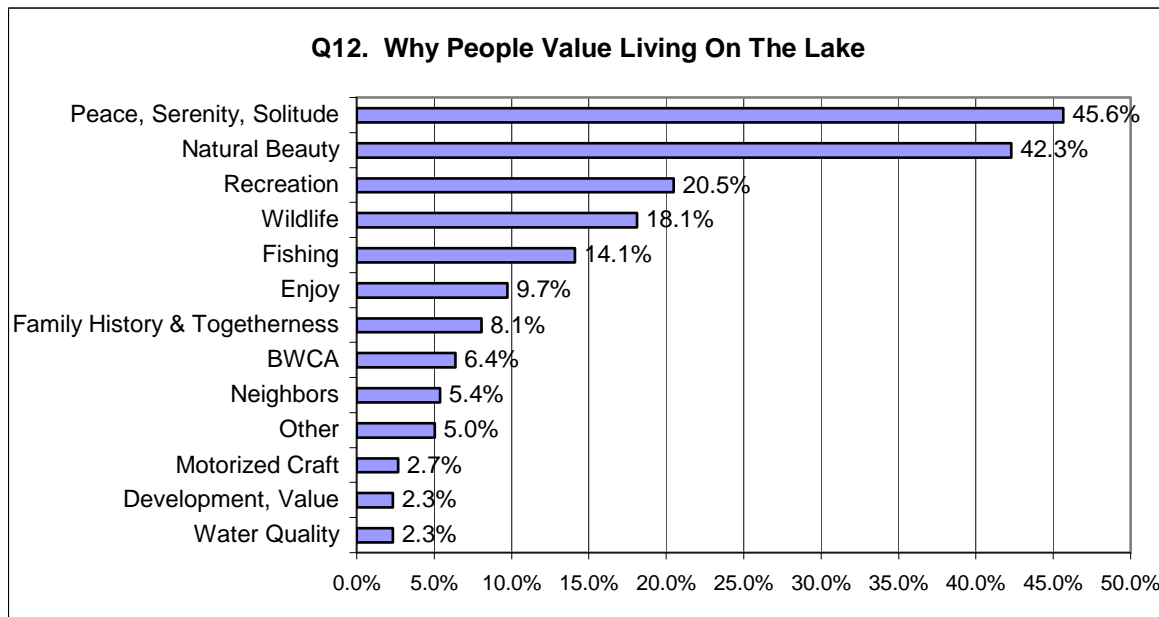
The White Iron Chain of Lakes Association (WICOLA) is a voluntary, non-profit organization which has as its purpose to enhance, promote and protect the interests of property owners on the White Iron Chain of Lakes (White Iron, Garden, Farm, and South Farm Lakes) and in the surrounding watershed. Over the years many issues regarding the health of the waters in the Chain, the enjoyment of the recreation it affords, and the appropriate development of the lands surrounding the chain have been identified anecdotally. However, the Board of Directors for WICOLA did not have good information about which of the many issues are of primary importance to the households and commercial properties on the Chain.

In June 2006, 517 viable¹ Household surveys and 19 Commercial surveys were sent to the members of WICOLA as well as to those persons and commercial enterprises which could be identified through county parcel records as owning lakeshore property on the White Iron Chain with response rates as shown in the chart below:

Survey Type	Number Sent	Number returned	Response Rate
Household	517	298	57.6%
Commercial	19	8	42.1%

People Like Living Here!

We asked people to tell us why they like living here (Question 12) —and found out that overwhelmingly they do. One hundred and thirty six respondents (45.6%) said that they enjoyed the peace, quiet, solitude and sense of serenity and 126 respondents (43.3%) said they came here for the natural beauty and wilderness feeling. Other reasons people like living here are: recreational opportunities other than fishing (61 comments, 20.0% of the respondents); enjoyment of the wildlife (54 comments, 18.1%), and fishing (42 comments, 14.1%) (As with other questions asking for written responses, there could be multiple types of comments so the answers add up to more than 100%). In another piece of good news 75% of the respondents told us in Question 9 (see also below) that the quality of the lake and the quality of their experience is about the same as it was five years ago.

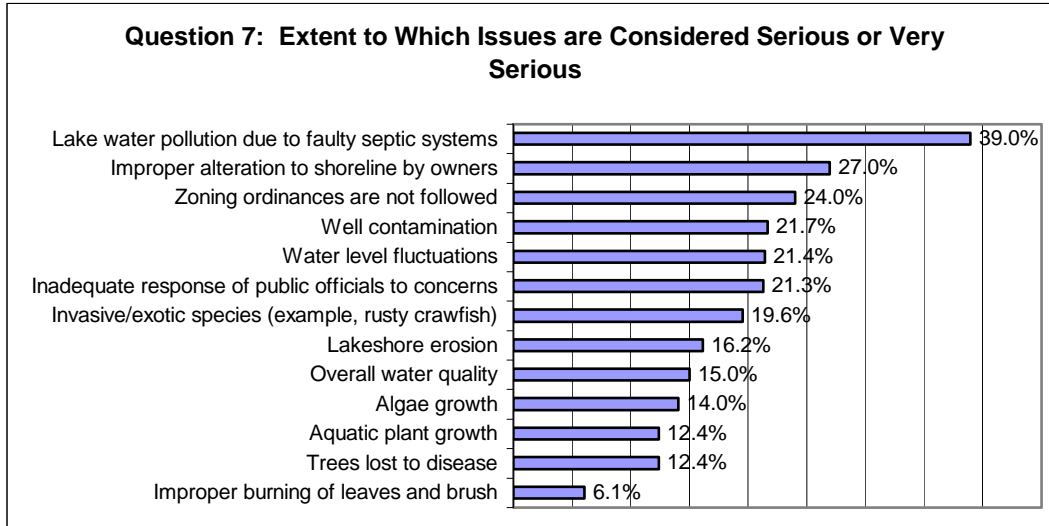


1. A Household to which a survey was sent was considered “viable” if it was not eliminated due to a bad address, death, property being sold, a known refusal to return the survey, or other circumstances which precluded getting a returned survey.

WICOLA Survey 2006 Report of Findings and Summary

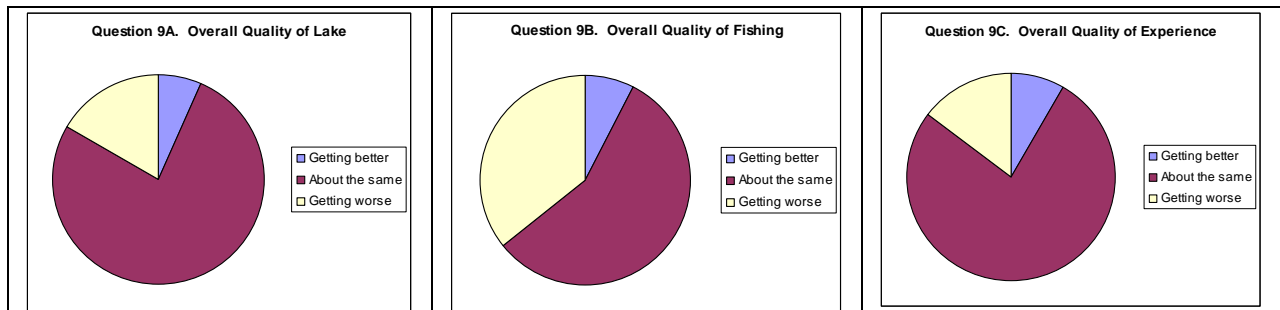
But They Have Concerns Also

The survey asked a number of questions both about the use of the lakes in the Chain and issues of concern to people on the lakes. The core question (Question 7) asked people to indicate their feelings about the severity of several pre-defined problems.



As can be seen from the chart, the top three issues as well as the sixth issue all focus on what can be interpreted as weak or lacking enforcement of current regulations and concerns, including the response of public officials when problems are reported. In a follow up question people were asked to provide more details about their concerns. As examples of the responses, people said, “Authority and/or help too far away—Two Harbors—Town Board just shuffles papers—needs more people here to be involved who have authority”; ‘There are “night” alterations being done by property owners’; and ‘Contractors know how to “get around” a rule and are pretty crafty about it.’

Three questions were also asked about perceived changes over the past five years: whether the overall quality of the lake itself (Question 9A), the overall fishing quality (Question 9B) and the overall quality of people’s experiences using and being on the lake (Question 9C) was better, the same, or worse. For about 75% of the people, the quality of the lake and the quality of their experience is about the same as it was five years ago.

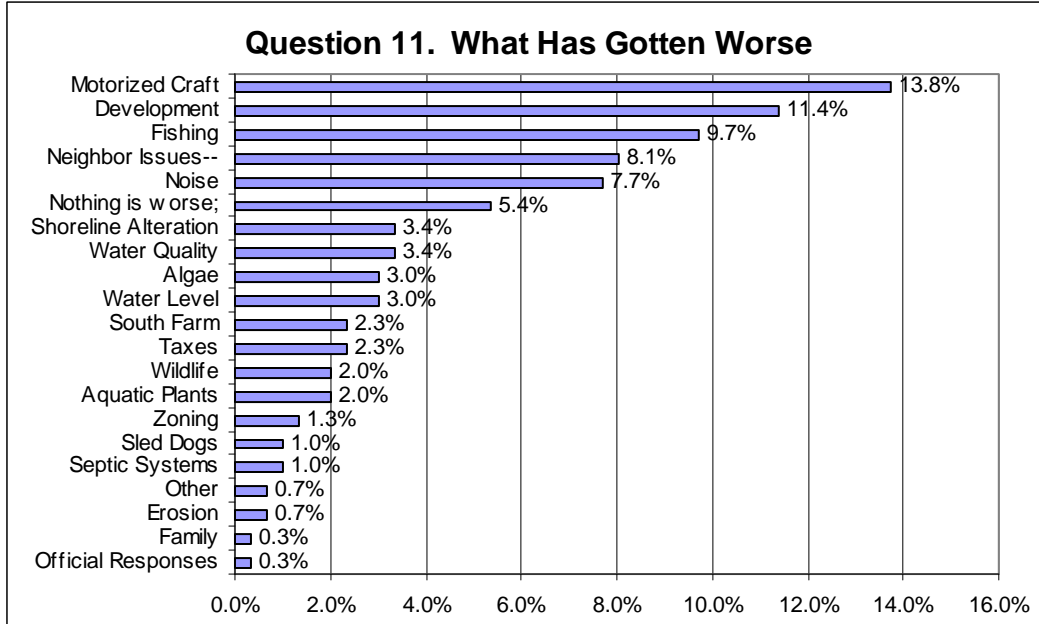


However, over half (57%) of the same respondents (see Question 9B above) think that their fishing experience is about the same, but over one third (36%) think it is getting worse. In Questions 11 and 12 the respondents were asked to provide written responses to what they thought was getting better or worse. Eleven (3.7%) of the surveys had comments from people who thought fishing was getting worse and twenty-nine (9.7%) had comments from people who thought it was getting worse, mirroring fairly well

WICOLA Survey 2006
Report of Findings and Summary

the response to Question 9B above. As one person said, ‘Sadly—I believe the fishing is down. I’m happy about the new “slot” program. I’m pretty much a “catch & releaser” (but it is nice to catch!).’

Other responses to Question 11 about what was getting worse are summarized in the following chart.



This open question also elicited new issues which had not been identified in the pre-defined list of concerns for Question 7, notably the use (or mis-use) of motorized craft, including boats, jet-skis, and even airplanes. “Perhaps the WICOLA assoc can help establish a way to keep larger boats & larger motors from overtaking this chain & all lakes up north. We don’t want a Lake Minnetonka. Keep the habitat healthy” said one respondent summarizing the concerns of many.

Another new item was a cluster of concerns which might be characterized as “neighbor issues” including traffic and speeding on roads; noise pollution from parties, “weed wappers” and fireworks; trashing of public areas such as landings, islands, and even the lakes; night pollution from security or lakeside lights; and generally not being considerate of others.

A continuing issue, which this chart also highlights, is concern about development on the lakes, whether for new structures or upgrades of older ones. As one respondent so aptly put it, “Buildings built close to the shoreline appear more numerous and definitely more visible. Destroys the wilderness type experience.” From the comments received, it appears that people aren’t so much against all development as wanting more appropriate developments, including enforcement of setback regulations, shoreline use that is both legal and enhances the lake water quality, and buildings that respect the natural environment.

In Question 6 we asked people when their septic system was installed or last upgraded. Over one-fifth (21%) reported septic systems over 20 years old. (Twenty years is generally considered the “half life” of a septic system.) This finding supports the high level of concern survey respondents expressed about faulty septic systems in Question 7 above. As one person said, “The county is very strict on new development. You must have two septic sites on every lot. I feel all old septic sites should be given two years to bring them up to code. I feel old septic systems may be a big pollution problem. The county does force septic approval for homes being sold but there are many that are not for sale!!!”

WICOLA Survey 2006
Report of Findings and Summary

Year Septic Installed or Upgraded	Total	Farm	Garden	White Iron	North Kawishiwi
Before 1986	44	6	10	27	1
After 1986	165	36	16	93	15
Totals	209	42	26	120	16
% before 1986	21.1%	14.3%	38.5%	22.5%	6.3%
% after 1986	78.9%	85.7%	61.5%	77.5%	93.8%

One of the issues in Question 7, water level fluctuation was very much related to the lake the household was upon. People who live on White Iron Lake are very much concerned about water level fluctuation while the issue is of low concern for owners on the other lakes surveyed. Given that the survey was conducted within weeks of major flooding for White Iron Lake owners, this finding is not surprising.

Commercial Survey

Although 8 responses from Commercial establishments represent a sizeable portion (42%) of the Commercial lodging operations (19) on the Chain, no question received a statistically significant response from which any conclusions could be drawn. A review of the textual responses, however, shows a close correlation to the issues raised in the Household survey, indicating a high level of agreement between the Household and Commercial enterprises on the White Iron Chain of Lakes.

Demographics

The survey process collected a large amount of data about the properties on the lake, including access to one of the lakes, persons in the household, septic issues, and seasonal/year-round use of the property. In addition we learned about which activities people engage in during the winter and summer months and their ownership of licensed watercraft. Public parcel information from both Lake and St. Louis Counties was captured to compare survey returns with the ownership of taxable dwellings on the property to create a complete mailing list for the surveys.

Conclusions

People come to live and enjoy the White Iron Chain of Lakes because of the natural beauty and also because they want to have a place where they can enjoy the tranquility, peace and solitude that a home on a lake in northern Minnesota can provide. Thus, the issues that are of importance to them are those which intrude upon the reasons why they come to these lakes: degradation of the water quality; destruction of the shoreline and natural environment; motorized craft which impinge upon their sense of tranquility and peace. They also have high expectations that they will be supported by local township, county, state and other officials in their efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of the White Iron Chain of Lakes and their enjoyment of their life upon them.

Next Steps

The White Iron Chain of Lakes Association has selected four areas where it will concentrate its future efforts: land development and alteration; septic problems; zoning and the response of public officials; and identification of some smaller problems which can be worked upon easily. Over the winter and into next summer it will be formulating plans and calling upon volunteers to help address these issues.

Thanks to: Watson Mason for the analysis of the survey data and to Roger Powell and Jo Kovach for providing excellent advice on the process and good support on the progress of the survey.

For further information: please contact Charlene Mason at wsmason@cpinternet.com (after March 15, 2007) or Jim Pinckney at jmp468@frontiernet.net.