

Seeing Beyond the View

By Patrick Berry, Commissioner, Department of Fish and Wildlife

For many Vermonters, the shorelines along lakes and ponds are synonymous with ducks and geese flying in low, with shorebirds walking delicately among the grasses, feeding and raising their young, and with schools of hungry panfish waiting for a young angler's cast. Indeed, shorelines provide some of the richest, most valuable aquatic habitat for countless species of fish and wildlife. These vital areas are also home to many Vermonters, some of whom have made investments to afford views of the water and the critters that live there.

So how do we balance the needs of lakefront dwellers of all species? And how do we enjoy the view without compromising the wildlife and water quality that are integral to the enjoyment of that view? That discussion is currently taking place across Vermont, and is manifested in the form of bill H. 526. From a fish, wildlife, and water quality perspective, there is much at stake.

The boundary between lake and land provides critical habitat for a wide diversity of terrestrial and aquatic organisms – from fish, to aquatic insects, to birds and mammals. Vegetated shorelines support these forms of life by fostering a variety of bottom types with boulders and cobbles, woody snags, and a healthy diversity of aquatic plants. When they are protected, shorelines help create interconnected habitat types that provide greater mobility and cover for the fish and wildlife that live there, and minimize exposure to predators and disturbance from some types of human activity.

While clearing trees from a natural lakeshore to create a lawn, wall, or beach may seem harmless to us, the resulting biological changes are profound. The historic reluctance of Vermont towns and state government to regulate lakeshore development has led to a situation where more than 80 percent of Vermont's large lake shorelands have been found by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to be in fair or poor condition, a statistic that puts us behind most other northeastern states.

Sites without shoreline tree cover provide less habitat in the form of woody structure and leaf litter along the lake bottom that serves as the basis of the aquatic foodchain. And if not filtered by a buffer of natural vegetation, silty and nutrient-rich runoff from cleared shorelines can flow unchecked into lakes and ponds which are sometimes only a few yards away. So as we acknowledge the difficult work ahead to ensure that all sources of sediment and pollution are checked before they reach the state's public waterways, we are recognizing that the regulation of shorelands should not be part of that comprehensive effort.

The flooding of 2011 illustrated the value of natural lake shoreland vegetation in preventing shoreline erosion. Most of the sites where erosion occurred on Lake Champlain were areas where the native vegetation had been removed and replaced with

lawn or even retaining walls. A diverse mix of woody vegetation provides bank stability and flood resilience, important factors in adapting to a changing climate.

The shoreland protection legislation, H.526, was created with the importance of shoreline habitats in mind. The foresight that created Act 250, and now underlies this legislation, has been critical in protecting not only the wildlife and birds within these habitats but also in working to protect the Vermont quality of life we all treasure.

Lakeshore habitats provides more than just a window onto the elegance of aquatic ecosystems—they provide a home to the species who depend on it for their survival. We are not meeting our own environmental standards along many of our lakeshores, and it is time to take action to protect this diminishing natural resource. Remembering this should inform our support for the lakeshore protection bill, and strengthen our commitment to preserving more than just the view for future generations to enjoy.