

ACCESS!

FISH AND GAME HELPS THE PUBLIC FLOAT THEIR BOATS



© LINDA SAUCERMAN PHOTO

One October morning, just as the sun was starting to warm the air and the mist was rising from the surface of Winnisquam Lake, a man in a motorized wheelchair rolled along Water Street in Laconia and put on the brakes at a pier. As he separated the coupons and circulars from his Sunday newspaper, his buddy walked up carrying a Thermos of coffee and a bag of doughnuts – all they needed for a perfect lazy Sunday by the lake.

A couple of years ago, these two friends might have been frustrated in their search for a spot along this lake that a wheelchair could navigate. Today, not only can they enjoy a waterfront view, but if “nature calls” there is a handicap-accessible portable restroom nearby. Such amenities are part of the Winnisquam Lake Boat Access Facility built by New

Hampshire Fish and Game and opened to the public in July 2008.

“Having quality access for people with disabilities, senior citizens and kids, and having it for free, are big parts of the equation when it comes to public access,” said Dick Smith, as he eased his sparkly blue bass boat that morning into one of the facility’s two launches. Prior to 2008, if Smith wanted to motor around this 4,264-acre lake, he would have had to pay to launch at a private marina.

“The City of Laconia definitely had a hand in getting this launch developed with Fish and Game because they realized it would be a plus for the community. It would be good not only for anglers like me, but also for pleasure boating,” said Smith.

BY LINDA SAUCERMAN

In 1993 there were fewer than 10 Fish and Game public access sites. Now there are nearly 140.



FREE PUBLIC ACCESS

There were several pleasure boaters on Winnisquam Lake that day, including Kelly Dyer-Rawlings of Laconia, who guided a 22-foot sailboat as her husband backed their trailer into the ramp.

"I'm so grateful to have this launch," she said. "I bought the sailboat for my husband as a wedding present, and now we've been coming to this launch every weekend. We're very lucky to have this launch here." Their 11-year-old son Jordan was also helping to skipper the sailboat.

Seeing kids enjoying the lake brought a smile to Smith's face, especially because he is the Conservation/Legislation Officer of the N.H. Bass Federation. "What a great way to get kids back into nature – they are our future conservationists," said Smith. "But this can happen only when we have real public access."

When Smith stresses the word "real," he's emphasizing that access to New Hampshire's lakes and rivers should be free. This idea is central to Fish and Game's Public Boat Access Program, which strives "to provide safe, user-friendly, and free access for all people on all public water bodies." Such a goal isn't taken lightly by Fish and Game. In fact, it is an appointed mission to promote the program under state law. New Hampshire's waters are owned by the public and N.H. Fish and Game has legal authority and direction to provide access for all people to all "great ponds" – lakes and ponds 10 acres or larger in area.

This task involves not only building new boat ramps, but identifying opportunities to maintain or improve existing ones, even ones not owned by Fish and Game. "At Nubanusit Lake in Hancock there is a town-owned ramp recognized to be in poor condition," said Richard Fink, Chief of the Facilities and Lands Division of Fish and Game. "We'll be meeting with the town about the possibilities of acquiring leased control of the land for no fee. In exchange we will improve the ramp. If that happens, then after 30 years the launch will become the property of the town."

Towns aren't the only ones who look to Fish and Game for help with their ramps.

Private landowners, too, often turn to Fish and Game to offer land with boat ramps as a conservation easement, a donation, or to negotiate a sale. Identifying ramp sites with such potential for public enjoyment is just one aspect of Fish and Game's Public Boat Access Program.

ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS

"Fish and Game is a conservation organization that is looking to maintain our natural resources, so we take the time to recognize any environmental challenges," said Fink. In other words, in building boat ramps, Fish and Game takes exceptional care to protect the natural aspects of the very lake that they want the public to



© LINDA SAUCEMAN PHOTO

Jordan Audet of Laconia guides his family's sailboat onto a trailer at Fish and Game's new boat ramp at Winnisquam Lake. In 2009 the Laconia access site earned the N.H. Engineering Excellence Award in the Water Resources Category from the American Council of Engineering Companies.

enjoy. For instance, when repairing or building a launch site, Fish and Game implements lighting that isn't disruptive to wildlife and designs storm water systems with porous pavement and other solutions that control or even prevent runoff and its pollutants into the lake.

Plus, materials used to construct boat ramps continue to improve. "In general, the first and second generation of boat ramps that were built had problems with planks sheering off," said Fink. "The planks we use now are 2½ times the size of those original ones. They are significantly heavier and a darker pigment, which helps them to endure the winters and the ice."

Such cutting-edge design features of the ramps at the Winnisquam Lake launch did not go unnoticed by Jeff Gandolfi of Laconia as he pulled his boat up to the floating pier.

"This launch has been done correctly. I haven't seen any erosion, which is amazing, especially because of all the rain we've had since it opened in '08," said Gandolfi, who works as a commercial towboat captain and recovery diver on Lake Winnepesaukee.

"They did a great job of grading it. We were very happy when we learned this launch was being built because we've been coming to this lake for 20 years," said Frank Wallent of Nashua, who was pulling into the launch after a morning motoring around Winnisquam Lake in his 18-foot powerboat with his wife and daughter-in-law.



© JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN PHOTO



© NHFG / ERIC ALDRICH PHOTO

on the Winnepesaukee River in Northfield. Around 15 other launch locations have design plans drawn up and are undergoing the permit process.

“In 1993 there were fewer than 10 Fish and Game public access sites. Now there are 137 or more,” said Thomas Quarles, chairman of the Public Water Access Advisory Board (PWAAB). “Fish and Game is doing a nice job of giving people public access opportunities right where they live.”

PWAAB is made up of 19 members representing interests ranging from non-motorized and power boaters to anglers, hunters, conservation organizations and several state agencies. Two State Senators and two House members also sit on the board.

“Our board is totally comprised of volunteers who represent the constituents. We serve as an advisory board to help coordinate efforts of various state agencies for all public waters,” explained Quarles, a former whitewater kayaker who has been on the board since its inception in 1993. “We are a part of anything having to do with people having access to public waters, from roadside views of waters to shorebank activities like fishing, hiking, swimming and picnicking, to hunting and boating.”

Through the Public Boat Access Program, guided by PWAAB, there are now nearly 140 Fish and Game launch sites currently being enjoyed by the public. Each of these sites is as unique as the body of water it sits on and offers experiences that are just as varied: You can launch a kayak at Swain’s Lake in Barrington and sneak up on turtles sunbathing on a log; motor around Squam Lake marveling at young bald eagles in their nests; or test your balance with an exhilarating ride on water skis around Upper Suncook Lake.

“New Hampshire has about 900 lakes and ponds and over 12,000 rivers and streams, so we’re water rich,” said Smith. Thanks to Fish and Game’s Public Boat Access Program, the public can enjoy the riches of these beautiful waters for years to come.



Along with erosion and other environmental impacts, the history of a site is considered when analyzing a possible boat launch site. “Native Americans would often congregate near waterbodies,” said Fink. “Ten years ago at Turee Pond in Bow, when the area was first being reviewed for a ramp, arrowheads with residue were discovered. It was determined that these arrowheads had come into contact with game. Fascinating! So we had to look at the environmental and archaeological impacts of a ramp at the site before going forward.”

USER-PAY, USER-BENEFIT

Reviewing sites and studying impacts, plus constructing new launches and maintaining and refurbishing current ones, keep Fink and his crew busy. They also install creature comforts at public access sites, such as portable restrooms and information kiosks. No trash receptacles are provided, as access sites are “carry in – carry out.” The money that pays for all this work comes from boat registration fees and federal Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration funds generated by an excise tax on fishing and hunting equipment and motorboat fuels, a true user-pay, user-benefit program.

The Public Access Program has had many successes in its 17-year history and continues to make strides, including recently built launches at Turtletown Pond in Concord and the soon-to-be completed boat ramp

Linda Saucerman is a freelance writer based in Somersworth, N.H., who specializes in environmental journalism and travel writing.

NEW FOR 2010!

For a listing of the boat access sites owned and maintained by Fish and Game, visit www.wildnh.com. A printed map of these access sites is now available at Fish and Game offices and other locations statewide.

