

Lake Heather Narrative



Lake Heather source: USF

The following narrative is based on an interview with Lake Heather resident, Steve Chreptak, in his home on June 16, 1999. The perspectives articulated by Mr. Chreptak help to illuminate the realities of life on Lake Heather in the past and present and to highlight some issues to be addressed by humans regarding their interaction with the natural environment in the future.

Family History

Steve and his family have resided on the shores of Lake Heather for eleven years. When asked about his reasons for choosing Lake Heather to live, he comments, "I wanted a place on the water and convenient to downtown for my wife's job. The price was right. It was a new house located near interstates and near bus stops."

Steve had previously owned a cabin on a lake that he used for boating and fishing, and enjoyed the contributions the lake made to his quality of life. He was the LAKEWATCH monitor for Lake Heather until a heart attack intervened but continues to represent its interests as the lake's representative for the community's special taxing district. He comments "I am on the board of trustees that budgets for and maintains the water. I am the project chairman for that, for the upkeep of our waterways."

Lake History

Lake Heather is located in Central Hillsborough County in the Rocky Brushy Creek Watershed. The lake is home to a spate of wildlife, including as Steve comments, "The usual ducks, mallards and muscovy... [The muscovy] get overpopulated and they are a problem because they are quite a dirty duck. We even tried to get the zoo to take some but they said, 'No, they are too dirty for us.'" He comments about the alligator population, "There are usually one or two each year that come and visit for a while and then leave. They seem to be nomadic... They have [posed a threat] in the past and some neighbors have become alarmed and have called to have them removed, but those of us who know and understand alligators are not worried."

The lake was extensively dredged in the past to expand its boundaries into 'fingers' that have been the site of additional residential development. Steve comments about the wildlife supported by the extended portion of the lake along which he lives, " We have a protected island area, so you have the usual raccoons, possums and armadillos. There are ...large mouth bass, bluegills, we have a few catfish, we have the bowfin, or the mudfish, the large Chinese Carp, the Nile perch, alligator gar and occasionally a few crappie."

The residents around the lake use the water for few activities because of the restrictions, such as no gasoline-powered motors, put in place by the Lake Heather Homeowner's Association. Fishing is one activity that

remains open to the homeowners of the community. Steve comments, "More young people fish [than older people], but in the summer there are not as many because it is pretty hot to be out there fishing." When asked if he felt comfortable eating the fish that were caught from the lake, Steve explains, "We have checked the mercury and we were told that, like most lakes in the area, there is mercury on the bottom. If you regularly eat the catfish that stay on the bottom, you might have a problem, but if you eat the fish just now and then, there is no problem."

The lake is the home of both Carp and Nile Perch, two vegetation eating fish well known to lake residents living on water bodies that have become infested with hydrilla, an exotic and rapidly multiplying plant that has plagued many of Hillsborough County's lakes. Steve comments,

"When we had hydrilla the water was clear, however it started looking like a swamp because of the growth to the top. You could hardly get through it with a boat. We had to do something... In 1992 we first treated it with Sonar, an environmentally approved herbicide. Then, fifty sterile Chinese Carp were put in to help the process. We have not had any return of hydrilla since we did that in 1992."



Vegetation on the shoreline of Lake Heather. source: USF

Development



The shoreline of Lake Heather is dotted with single and multi-family housing. source: USF

The area in which Heather Lake is situated is densely developed. Approximately 15-20 years ago, the natural lake was dredged to expand the waterfront property available for development. The developers created the artificial lake and peninsula on which Steve lives and also the three 'fingers' of the lake that extend off of the north and west shores. The neighborhood, known as Lake Heather supports about one hundred and fifty homes, approximately 60% of which Steve estimates are directly on the waterfront. The remainder of the residents have access to the water only through vacant lots or through the permission of waterfront property owners. There are few remaining vacant lots around the lake, and those are being developed quickly, at the rate, Steve estimates, of one house per year.

The neighborhood organization operates on two levels: A Hillsborough County regulated special taxing district, and a homeowner's association. The special taxing district represents all households in the community. Each homeowner in the district is assessed an extra 150 dollars per year that is added to their tax burden. Steve comments,

"It is [governed by] seven trustees. We are the local government and help the County govern this area... The County controls our tax district and rules, so we have to abide by County guidelines when we do our budgeting.

When we submit our budget, we have to tell them what the money will be used for... including the waterways, which is approved when they approve the budget."



Development increases run-off through the increase of impervious surfaces such as pavement and rooftops. Source: USF

The Lake Heather Homeowner's Association deals with, "...social activities, communication, deed restrictions and that sort of thing. Membership is voluntary and costs \$20 a year. We usually have a yearly get together of

some sort and we put out decorations at the Fourth of July and at Christmas. We have a night out, in August, with the County Sheriff's Office to 'Take Back Our Streets'."

Initially it was a challenge to get money from the special taxing district for the good of the lake as only a slight majority of members of the Lake Heather Community live on waterfront property. Steve explains,

"When we first started to budget for the waterways and to get something done, there was opposition from those not living on the water. Those living on the water prevailed because, we argued, that we had upkeep of the wall [surrounding the community] and that not everybody lived by the wall. The upkeep of water really benefits everybody, because everybody's homes and their values are dependent on the beauty of the water and its availability."

The Future

The Lake Heather Community is well represented by its two types of community organization. The special taxing district has enabled the group's use of revenue to facilitate maintenance measures for the lake. For example, Steve comments, "We try to have the lake inspected and treated as needed once a month by Applied Aquatics out of Eagle Lake. I think we pay \$150 dollars a month." In addition, the bi-monthly newsletter for the Homeowners Association helps to mediate some of the negative impacts dense development around lakeshores may bring through education. Steve, formerly the LAKEWATCH monitor has passed the ball on to Marvin (Gunny) Sachs, who continues the monitoring of the lake and the provision of updates in the newsletter concerning water resource education.

Unfortunately, apathy on the part of community residents hinders the overall efficacy of the two community organizations. Steve comments, "There is some community spirit, but it is probably no better or no worse than other communities. I don't think the lake has anything to do with that." Hopefully the good health of the lake will be maintained with the continued action of a dedicated few.