Land Shaped by the Glaciers

For centuries waterways have been usable long-distance “trails and highways” prior to other forms of transportation. They played a key role in the exploration and settlement of North America. Early European settlers and Native Americans used the area for fishing, hunting and transportation. Mail at one time was delivered by boat on the Yahara Lakes. Now only some of our major rivers are being used for commercial transportation as railroads, highways and air transportation carry the majority of commercial traffic. The waterway trails described within are for recreation, giving you a chance to enjoy the local blueways (paddling trails) and explore the vast array of wildlife, commune with nature, and learn about our area’s rich cultural heritage.

The Yahara Watershed, or land area that drains into the Yahara River and lakes, covers 359 square miles, more than a quarter of Dane County. Much of the watershed is farmed; however, the watershed also contains most of the urban land of the Madison metropolitan area. In addition, the Yahara Watershed includes...
some of the largest wetlands that are left in Dane County. The lakes’ watershed includes all or parts of five cities, seven villages and sixteen towns, and is home to about 350,000 people.

Glaciers primarily shaped this area. About 15,000 years ago the glacier ice reached its maximum with the Madison area covered by about 1,000 feet of ice. About 12,000 years ago Glacial Lake Yahara connected all the present lakes, stood about 12 feet higher than present Lake Mendota, and encompassed about twice the current water area. Moving glacial ice also widened the valleys, created hills in the shape of elongated teardrops (called drumlins) and created poorly drained areas where wetlands formed. Sometimes called “the Yahara River Valley,” the area represents the far western edge of the last glacier advancement.

The ice also left glacial deposits of silt, sand, gravel and rock up to 350 feet deep. These deposits dammed up the existing, larger pre-glacial valleys, and formed the Yahara chain of lakes. The region is typically flat with gently undulating hills, a result of the glaciers flattening hills and filling former valleys. The gentle relief resulted in slower-moving streams and rivers than those found in the southwestern Driftless Area of Southwest Wisconsin that was not covered by glacial ice. The watershed area has rich, young (less than 15,000 year old) soils.

The First Humans

Humans first inhabited this area about 11,500 years ago, living first by hunting and gathering and more recently by agriculture. The Native Americans left behind many artifacts, including hundreds of earthen mounds, many shaped like animals (Effigy Mounds). By periodically setting fire to the land, they shaped the prairie-oak savanna landscape that greeted the European settlers. When European-style farming began in the 1830s, dramatic transformations to the land and water began. Soil eroded from the new farms and washed into the lakes. People began to notice nuisance algae blooms as early as the 1880s. Draining and filling the surrounding wetlands exacerbated the problem, because wetlands had kept the sediment and nutrients from entering the lakes. Since pre-European settlement we have lost about 50 percent of the wetlands around the Yahara Lakes.
Problems and Promise – The Lakes in Modern Times

Local water quality is a direct reflection of land use. As the 20th century progressed, water quality in this area declined in direct proportion to the population growth. Sewage from growing villages and cities, along with manure and fertilizers running off from farms, added bacteria and more nutrients. As the urban and suburban areas grew, so did the area covered by streets, parking lots, roofs and sidewalks. This has increased the amount of runoff, which erodes waterways, increases flooding frequency and intensity, and carries contaminants directly into the lakes.

Recent years have brought progress as well as challenges. Municipal sewerage is treated and the effluent diverted away from the lakes. Wetlands are better protected, However, population is increasing rapidly, generating much new construction while farms support ever-greater numbers of livestock. Recognizing these trends, county and state officials have been partnering with other local units of government, farmers, developers, and citizens to reduce non-point or runoff pollution. This kind of pollution includes excess nutrients, sediment, pesticides and toxic chemicals that are washed into the water from farms, fields, developing land, and streets. It is the greatest threat to the Yahara River and its lakes.

Adoption of conservation farming practices such as grass waterways, contour farming, safe manure storage and handling, minimal tillage, crop rotations, and buffer strips greatly help pollution reduction in rural areas. In developing and suburban/urban areas, reducing erosion from construction sites and reducing runoff are essential to water quality improvement. The use of proper seeding and mulching, rain gardens, bioinfiltration, filter fabric fencing, storm water detention ponds, and other conservation practices all assist in the effort. You will probably see some of these practices as you paddle on the Yahara waterways.

Traveling the Yahara waterways offers a fresh perspective of the physical character of this famous water resource and the histories behind present day landmarks. This guide is designed to aid your planning and enrich your travels from Cherokee Marsh to Lake Kegonsa.

Water-related Groups

Several dozen water-related and conservation groups are active in this area of the county. If you would like to get involved in local projects that can make a great difference in the community, contact them. You can find links to their websites and more information about their missions and projects by going to: www.danewaters.com (Click on Lakes and Watershed Commission and then Partners.)
Safety Tips

To ensure you have a safe and pleasurable trip, please note the following boat trip and safety information. Remember that your personal safety is your responsibility!

- **Always wear a Personal Flotation Device (PFD)** that is approved by the U.S. Coast Guard – a PFD is legally required for each person on board and can save your life!

- **Bring an extra paddle.**

- **Dress appropriately for the weather** and anticipate weather changes. Bring a hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and extra clothes stored in a waterproof bag.

- **Wear brightly colored clothing** to improve your visibility to other boaters.

- **Review your exit points and portages** before launching and be aware of hazards (i.e. dams). Fish icons on the trail maps indicate not only shore fishing locations but also non-motorized boat launch sites. Some improved sites have a launch fee.

- **Boats are not allowed to come into swimming areas to land.**

- **Official lake location numbers** are posted on many piers (blue reflective signs with white numbers and letters). These can be used to help provide your location to emergency response crews if needed. See Lake Property Numbering and Slow-No-Wake section below for more detailed information.

- **Bring drinking water and safety equipment** (1 gallon of water per person per day, first aid kit, rain gear, lashing line for both bow and stern – about 15 feet long – and dry bags).
• Carry a map and trail guide, and signaling device (whistle, mirror, etc.)

• Check the weather forecast before you head out. Review the weather and wind conditions. One can usually find a quiet place to paddle no matter what direction the wind is blowing.

• Stay nearer to shore – it is not advisable to paddle across the lakes. Prudent boaters always keep a watch on changing weather and water conditions. The wind conditions can suddenly change, and waves on the large lakes can present a serious hazard. Heavy boat traffic can also make the crossing unsafe. Additionally, the vast majority of the interesting features are found along the shorelines.

• Be aware of blue-green algae blooms. These native algae can produce toxins harmful to humans and pets, therefore it’s best to be cautious where algae are visible (e.g. pea soup, floating mats, scum layers, etc.) or the water is discolored. Don’t swim in or drink this water or inhale it into the sinuses, and keep your pets from drinking or swimming in water wherever algae is visible.

• Be aware of the water temperature and wind conditions. Consider how the current winds will affect your trip – Will it add more time or take more energy? Will you be fighting whitecaps?

• Does your group have the experience and strength for the planned trip or should your plans be altered?

• Stay out of the way of other boat traffic and turn the bow into the wake.

• Keep trip length reasonable for the weather conditions and the type of craft you are in. Allow a maximum of two miles for each hour paddling time under normal conditions. In difficult conditions such as a headwind, the distance per hour may be greatly reduced.

• Let someone know your plans, where you are going, who’s with you, and when you plan to be back.

• Bring food and gear in watertight containers tied to your boat.

• In case of emergency, contact 911.

• To report violations of boating rules, contact (608)255-2345 (Dane County Sheriff’s dispatch) or 800-TIP-WDNR (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources)

Lake Property Numbering System

As you use this water trail guide, you may notice blue reflective signs, with white letters and numbers affixed to many piers. These signs, part of Dane County’s voluntary Lake Property Numbering System, can help you in an emergency.
Each lakeshore property on Lakes Mendota, Monona, Waubesa and Kegonsa has been assigned a unique “lake address.” The Mendota addresses begin with the letter “A”; Monona with “B”; Waubesa “C”; and Kegonsa “D”. These numbers have been cross-referenced in the 911-computer system with the property street address.

A boater in distress can report his or her location by cell phone using the nearest lake property “address” as a reference point. Similarly, a landowner who observes an emergency on the water can dial 911 and the dispatcher will be able to translate the street address to a water location.
Slow-No-Wake

In addition to state boating safety rules, Dane County has a slow-no-wake zone within 200 feet from the shoreline of Lakes Mendota, Monona, Waubesa and Kegonsa. Slow-no-wake means the minimum speed at which a motorized watercraft is able to move and maintain adequate steerage control. There is an exception to this requirement on Lake Monona from Law Park to a point 1,000 feet due north of the intersection of John Nolen Drive and Lakeside Street. Beware of water skiers practicing and performing in this area.