

If you've got a pond or lake on your property, management assistance from a DNR biologist can fix troubled waters.



(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Making the Most of Ponds

Story By Joe McFarland

One of the lesser-known turning points in U.S. history was the day in 1993 when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter decided to seek guidance on a matter of deep, personal significance. The man who'd helped negotiate peace between Egypt and Israel—the third U.S. Presi-

dent to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—had built a new pond on his Georgia property, and it needed fish.

Carter wasn't the first of our presidents to profess a penchant for fishing; but he is one of the most active sportsmen, routinely seeking the pastoral rewards of fishing and hunting as a means of rural life. Yet Carter isn't a fisheries biologist. And so he did what any wise pond owner does, which is to consult an expert.

That expert in 1993 was Shawn Hirst, a recent Auburn graduate who'd responded to the request for a fisheries biologist to consult with Carter at his Plains, Georgia property.

"It was a brand-new pond and he wanted advice about what species of

Goldfish released into ponds can stir up sediments, drastically changing water quality. In such cases, killing the fish and restocking the pond with appropriate species can be the best option.

fish to stock in it," recalled Hirst, now a Department of Natural Resources district fisheries biologist in southern Illinois. "He basically knew what he wanted to stock, but he was getting a second opinion."

Hirst met Carter at his property one day in early summer. The former president hopped into Hirst's truck, and they drove out to the new pond where the biologist and former president strolled the shoreline, exchanging questions and answers.

"I essentially told him what I tell everybody, which is that fishing ponds should be bluegill ponds with large-mouth bass stocked to control the bluegill," Hirst said.

Satisfied with the professional direc-

Anyone can get free advice about pond management from a local DNR fisheries biologist. Former President Jimmy Carter sought advice from biologist Shawn Hirst when Hirst lived in Georgia.



tive, Carter agreed to stock the pond according to Hirst's suggestions, then bid farewell with a presidential handshake.

These days, such advice-giving is routine and one of the free public services provided to pond owners by DNR's Division of Fisheries.

For example, when Jackson County retiree Dale Wisniewski built a new, 0.5 acre pond behind his home in 1998, he and his wife envisioned a clean swimming hole for leisurely summer afternoons.

"It was like that for the first few years," Wisniewski said, "until I threw a bunch of junk fish in there." When the pond became a perpetually turbid mud hole, Wisniewski called the local fisheries biologist.

Wisniewski mentioned to the biologist his goldfish, a fact which led to a quick diagnosis.

"Goldfish are related to the common European carp, and carp can muddy-up a pond and keep it muddy, which leads to all sorts of problems," Hirst said. One problem is the lack of sunlight, which prevents vegetation from growing. Few macroinvertebrates exist in such waters, and the dense, opaque condition reduces the ability of predator fish to find prey.

Realizing the pond's fishery was beyond salvage, Hirst recommended the application of a specific treatment to kill the fish, which would allow the sediments to settle and help the pond return to its swimmer-friendly clarity.

In mid-March 2006, after Hirst treated the pond with the EPA-approved rotenone chemical, more than 60 goldfish and a few emaciated bass floated to the surface—but not a single bluegill.

"Killing a pond isn't always our first choice," Hirst said. "But sometimes it's

Bullfrogs breed in most permanent water bodies and eat nearly anything—fish, invertebrates and even other frogs.



(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

really the only feasible management option."

Small ponds might suffer from a range of management issues, from excessive plant growth to stunted fish populations to leaky dams. When trouble arises, or to prevent trouble before it happens, pond owners have at their disposal the wisdom and experience of DNR biologists.

DNR fisheries biologist Chris Bickers said many pond owner's inquiries can be resolved on the phone, but sometimes a visit to the pond is required. And while the advice is free, there is a relatively small fee for stocking new and otherwise fish-free ponds (\$25 per pond, plus \$1 per surface acre). Chemicals prescribed by DNR biologists for fish removal or vegetation control must also be purchased by the pond owner.

Bickers reminded pond owners that conflicting expectations requires choices to be made.

"People should understand that they can't have trophy-size fish of all species in a pond that also is a watering hole for cattle, a septic lagoon and a swimming

In highly turbid water, predator fish such as largemouth bass become emaciated due to their inability to locate forage species.

hole all at the same time," Bickers advised. Often times—as with Wisniewski's muddy goldfish mess—the trouble could have been averted if a DNR fisheries biologist had been consulted.

While no pond is free from natural catastrophic influences, pond owners can avoid self-inflicted disasters by sticking to what the experts advise. It's the best thing you can do to ensure a healthy pond.

Just ask Jimmy Carter.



The first thing pond owners should do is consult the handy booklet, "Management of Small Lakes and Ponds in Illinois," available from the DNR Clearinghouse (217/782-7498 or www.dnr.state.il.us/publications/index.htm). An additional booklet, "Aquatic Plants: their identification and management," helps pond owners recognize the various water plants and how they can be managed.

(Photo by John Muchow.)

