

'Fish sticks' aiming to bolster

Dead trees put in Kangaroo Lake to restore habitat

By **DON BEHM**

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Members of the Kangaroo Lake Association in Door County have decided the best way for them to catch more fish is to drop a few dead trees into the water.

So in bitter cold wind chills of 20 below zero Saturday, a group of eight volunteers wrestled 14 red pine and spruce trees into place atop the ice of the largest lake in the county. A pickup truck with a plow pushed through drifting snow as the trees were moved onto the lake, association president Tom Schneider said.

When the ice melts in spring, the trees will settle to the lake's bottom in shallow water. There they will become host structures for an entire web of aquatic life — from algae to insects, snails and little fish — that will attract bigger fish.

Such projects are popularly known as "fish sticks" in Wisconsin, and this is the first in Door County.

State Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologists recommend adding woody habitat to lakes if there are fewer than 200 trees in the nearshore water per mile of shoreline.

The reason: Nearly all fish species use the branches and trunks for a least one stage in their life cycle. When woody debris is absent, fish populations decline.

Adding trees to the water of lakes reverses decades of work by owners of shoreline cottages throughout Wisconsin who pulled wood out for aesthetics or recreation.

Kangaroo Lake Association property owners now understand they removed too many trees from the shallow, 1,138-acre lake, Schneider said. A few untouched pieces of shoreline are visible on the north and south ends of the lake, as well as along a 15-acre island.

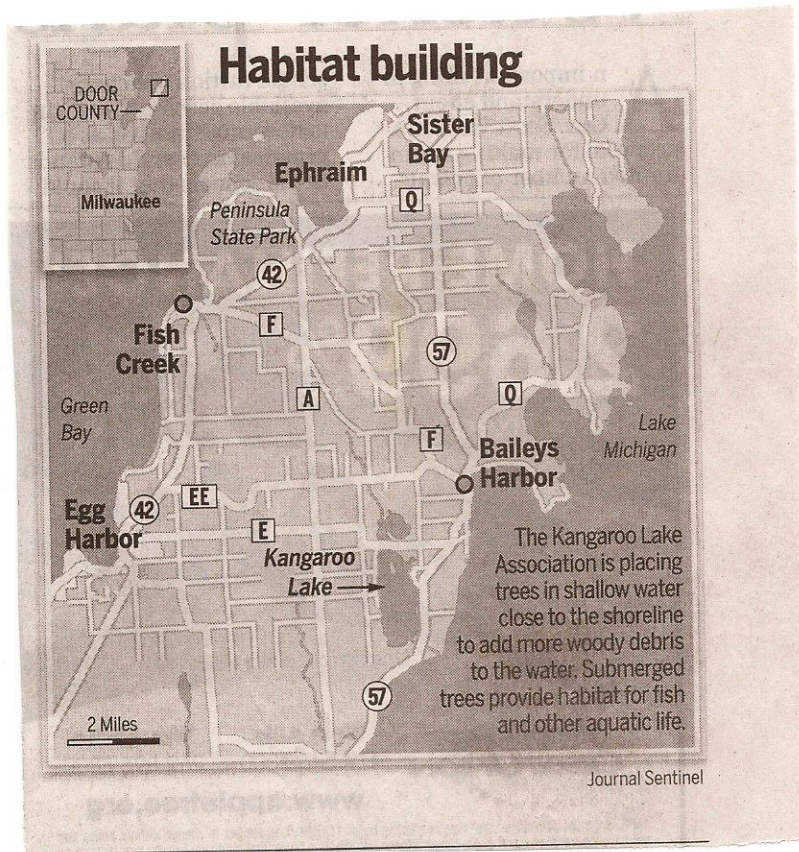
So this "fish sticks" project is a compromise between the desires of cottage owners for an open shoreline and the needs of fish, insects, frogs and other creatures for places to grow, hide or even soak up some sun, Schneider said.

Algae are the first organisms to colonize the submerged trees, according to Mike Grimm, a conservation

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aquatic life



ecologist with the Nature Conservancy in Door County.

As algae grow on the bark, small insects and snails arrive to feast. Then larger insects — beetles and dragonfly larvae — show up to eat them. Small fish find the insects.

Want more perch? Yellow perch drape eggs on submerged wood during spawning. Bluegill use woody debris as a refuge from predators. Largemouth bass are looking for them.

Saturday's sticks included red pine and spruce cut from a nearby Nature Conservancy property and donated to the project, Grimm said. The conservation group is thinning a dense evergreen plantation on the property east of the lake along N. Kangaroo Lake Road.

Two loggers from Harbor Lumber of Baileys Harbor cut the trees Friday and then dragged them onto the ice at a public boating landing on the east shore of the lake.

Saturday morning, four of the trees were placed on the west shore while 10 were pulled across the ice to the southeast shore, Schneider said. Two trees were dropped at each of seven sites where property owners agreed to participate in the project.

The cut end of each tree was lifted and pushed onto the shore. Then the volunteers set one tree across the other in the shape of the letter X.

A cable was tied around the trunks where one pair of

trees cross to prevent them from shifting once they sink to the lake bottom in spring, Schneider said.

A separate cable was used to tie each cut end to the nearest live tree on land so the fish sticks do not float away in open water.

Volunteers will return to the lake on a less windy day later this month to tie up the other six sets of "fish sticks."

"It was crazy cold," Schneider said of Saturday's working conditions.

The lake association intends to place more of the "fish sticks" in the lake in each of the next two years.

The association received a \$3,000 shoreline preservation grant from the DNR to help pay for the three-year project.

In addition to sinking trees into the water, the grant is partially funding a hardstem bulrush restoration effort on the lake bed, Schneider said.

In late summer of 2014, 11 lake property owners planted bulrush, a grasslike plant that grows in shallow water. After the "fish sticks" settle to the lake bottom this spring, volunteers will plant bulrush around the submerged trees, he said.

Native hardstem bulrush helps protect the shoreline from waves and erosion, while the stems provide spawning and nursery habitat for northern pike and other fish.

Waterfowl eat the seed heads, known as nutlets.

