

Mother Nature likes a messy home

I read an article in a lake management journal (August 2009) that compared "natural" vs "developed" shoreline and the wildlife using that shoreline.

The "natural" shoreline supported up to 500% more wildlife. The most common wildlife included dragonflies, damselflies and frogs. The "natural" shoreline supported more different species (biodiversity) and more quantity of individual animals.

While this is not surprising, the magnitude of the difference was staggering. The sterile, "grass to the water" shoreline was of little value to nature and wildlife. On the other hand, the "natural" shoreline is the most important habitat to nearly all wildlife.

There were three striking differences between "natural" and "developed". One was underwater (submerged) vegetation. These underwater plants offered food, shelter and oxygen to uncountable tiny creatures. Oxygen was particularly important to many aquatic species.

The next significant factor was the quantity dead twigs, branches and leaves in the water. Most of this plant litter was completely underwater. It gave many frog, fish and insect species a place to lay their eggs above the bottom of the lake. The very bottom of the lake usually has very low oxygen and isn't a very healthy place for most air breathing animals.

The last significant factor was the quantity of trees near the shore. These trees provided much needed shade. The shade kept the water cooler, allowing the water to hold a little more oxygen. The shade also provided safety from birds of prey. It's harder for hawks and herons to see potential prey in shady water.

So, what can we learn from the research? Mother Nature doesn't like a clean and tidy house. Sticks and leaves under the water near the shore are a haven for millions of tiny and baby creatures. And these tiny creatures are the basis for all the big creatures, including humans. It's not surprising that trees overhanging the water are the source of all this healthy "mess".

The next time you're motivated to "clean up" around the lake, remember you are removing some creature's home.