Swimmers to the Rescue!
Part 2
How an organized group of Florida’s open water swimmers are saving freshwater lakes by adding “swimmable” as a water quality parameter.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2016, Florida’s governor declared a State of Emergency in response to “the algae explosion”.1 Citing green algae-infested waters on Florida’s Treasure Coast as a threat to the region’s tourism-driven economy, angered residents and disgusted visitors complained loudly. National media attention followed, successfully making nitrification a trending topic across the country. In Orange County Florida our all-volunteer group of swimmer-scientists organized a 501(c)3 called the Lake Cane Restoration Society (LCRS) to prevent our favorite swimming-hole from the green slime.2

This paper is Part 2 of our explanation of how we organized a repeatable approach to protecting water quality. Once we had adopted an established water testing regimen for the lake where we swim, we then gathered, organized, and communicated our water resource data through participatory conversations. Our facilitated LCRS Board meetings were attended by lake-basin landowners and other stakeholders including representatives of the City of Orlando, Orange County, and various non-profits. In this paper (Part 2) we describe our 1.) overall purposeful organizing, 2.) engagement and communication approach, and 3.) alignment with strategic partners. Taking these three steps, we believe, offer an exemplary solution to mitigating the nitrification of urban/suburban water resources.
An Example for Others

Our motive for sharing our approach with utility directors is to strengthen water resource protection capacity between citizen networks and institutions, as called for in Effective Utility Management practices. There are potentially hundreds of people who consider clean water resources a top priority in any given neighborhood, which features a body of water (the Florida atlas of lakes lists 5,460 freshwater lakes). Mobilizing lake-basin constituents to become active takes work. Lake swimmers are a community resource possibly not thought of before. But as swimmers we come to the table already motivated. Mainly because we cannot help but to drink the water in which we swim.

Incremental building of relationships with non-swimmers and neighbors is where our effort becomes sustainable. The LCRS operates at the nexus of where sport and science meets the art of persuasion.

This follow-up paper (Part 2) describes how we initiated participatory, meaningful conversations among swimmers, the fishing public, and lake-basin residents to build a strong clean water constituency.

In Part 1 we described:

- How we created a community-run science and education non-profit to encourage clean lake and charitable behavior in the community
- How we conceived our Vision, Mission and Goals
- What you can do: Planting a green ring around the lake
- Our application of the Balanced Score Card in four Areas of Responsibility (AOR):
  - Water Quality
  - Fellowship
  - Learning and Training
  - Finance

Purposeful Organizing

Dr. John “Lucky” Meisenheimer is passionate about swimming. He is a devoted husband, loving father of three boys, dermatologist, philanthropist, decades-long volunteer coach for Orange County Special Olympics, national title holder in Master Swimming. He also owns a beautiful house on the banks of an 80-acre freshwater lake called Lake Cane.
Every weekday and Saturday mornings Lucky opens his backyard to skilled swimmers able to swim a kilometer non-stop. His offer attracts up to two hundred swimmers on any given Saturday! Since 1989 people park on his lawn, walk to his backyard, and take the plunge. There is no fee.

Marking the swim’s 25th year, the Historical Society of Central Florida enshrined this social-sport-environmental phenomenon called Lucky’s Lake Swim as “historical”.

Most of the lakes in the area are similarly small, non-distressed, private access only. Unlike some of their large, public, eutrophic neighbors they receive minimal attention. Development, meanwhile, intensifies.

A fifteen-minute walk from Lake Cane are the 444 acres occupied by the ever-thriving Universal Studios. Storm water overflow from Orange County-owned roads, neighboring lawns, businesses, a nursery, and multiple impervious surfaces mean quite plainly that the lake’s water quality could deteriorate without much notice.

Development surrounding Lake Cane has meant the accumulation of high concentrations of nitrogen in the water because of fertilizer draining from roads, lawns, streets, and driveways. In many Florida lakes this begins a cycle. The more plants growing, means the more plants dying. When they die they decompose; in the process oxygen is consumed and the nutrients are released. Plants growing on the surface sink to the bottom where they decompose. Lakes then become supersaturated with oxygen. The oxygen surplus is then released to the atmosphere and no longer available to decompose organic matter. This causes acute oxygen depletion or anoxia in the deeper layers of lakes.

Another dimension of the algae bloom problem(s), or, the problems of disproportionate growth of plants, is the reduction in transparency in the water. Murky, unclear or low-visibility water reduces the recreational value of lakes, particularly for swimming, fishing, and boating. Water hyacinth, hydrilla, and Nile cabbage can cover large areas of a lake’s surface and floor. These organic mats block light to submerged plants and produce large quantities of dead organic matter that progress, again, toward anoxia and, worse, the production of unwanted gases and odors.

Amidst the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the swim, Lucky and friends of Lucky began to plot for the future. The potential for Lake Cane to become the green goop of an algae bloom was real. Nitrification was the danger for this lake and all those connected by source to the aquifer. We began asking ourselves how do we protect the quality of this lake, creating conditions making the long-term, the 50-year swim possible? The answer, we knew, had to involve the 540+ people who owned property in the basin draining to the lake.

Give them something to talk about: ToP

The one-time protest group called the Lake Cane Restoration Society (LCRS) decided to re-organize as
a tax-exempt 501(c)3 organization. This required attracting enough do-ers and thinkers to meet the challenge of providing sustainable lake management practices. Employing the Technology of Participation (ToP©)9 approach to facilitation, we managed to successfully establish and begin to execute their agenda.

The first step in initiating the ToP approach, is facilitating participatory conversations. This began with our first Board meeting in August of 2015. Almost entirely composed of people dedicated to swimming in Lake Cane, LCRS established an 18-person, all volunteer Board.

We started each Board meeting with an agenda prepared to direct the meeting to both a Rational Aim and an Experiential Aim.10 Both were new practices to the Board members. Finding a linear goal-driven direction toward the purpose of keeping the lake clean was new to our swimming enthusiasts. Equivalent importance was placed upon tying the “material” outcomes to the “experiential” ones. A morning swim at the lake brings joy to participants. Those swimmers who were kind enough to volunteer their time to the Board love to swim in the lake. Those volunteers who were not swimmers had a relationship to the lake which may have included bee-keeping, or regular walks or simply proximity and the views we share. Regardless of the particulars, Lake Cane seems to have a power to inspire and promote personal rejuvenation. It is not alone. The bestselling book, Blue Mind: The surprising science that shows how being near, in, on, or under water can make you happier, healthier, more connected, and better at what you do, by marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols,11 focuses on the proven scientific evidence that being close to bodies of water promotes mental health and happiness. We wanted our Board meetings to reflect this reality.

Moreover, as our Board meetings were facilitated using the ToP approach, everyone attending was included and each given a chance to share (or decline to speak). In subsequent meetings over the past three years the tacit goal of the facilitator was to ensure each attendee participate, and to exemplify profound respect for each person and point of view in doing so. Although this was not always achieved, it provided a foundation from which we could take decisive action.

Our adaptation of the ToP approach allowed us to structure our limited Board time most effectively, staging each discussion according to the steps described by the acronym “ORID”:

- **Objective**: Facts, data, what can be known through the senses.
- **Reflective**
- **Interpretative**
- **Decision**

The questions associated with the agenda are facilitated, usually prepared in advance, and relevant to the Rational Aim agenda. They are open-ended, encouraging more than one-word answers, and they are specific. Easy questions on less challenging issues begin each meeting. Each participant is asked to give one idea or response to a question or an issue (to encourage participation from as many people as possible). Ideas, comments, and reactions to remarks of others may be recorded on flip charts or other means to keep track of them and summarize them for clarification.

**Objective**: Facts, data, what can be known through the senses.

Our Board meetings were based on data reported by subject matter. We began by reporting and
discussing objective questions related to the objective information. Did the water look clean this week? Did anyone complain? This is the time when we attempt to draw out observable data about the experience of swimming or water testing or plating a rain garden. This is when our Board members learned different perspectives on observable reality.

**Reflective:** Reactions, feelings, impressions.

Although not as emphatic as a data presentation, our Board members reliably participated in reflective, often emotional responses to the business at hand. Moods, hunches, intuitive approaches all have their place in how we proceed. Examples of the facilitator’s questions to the Board members included: How did this experience affect you? What was the high point? What was the low point?

If individuals have difficulty identifying feelings, the facilitator would, for example, ask “During the experience were you surprised/angered/curious/confused?”

**Interpretative:** So what? What difference does it make?

In this instance, the facilitator often invites participants to consider the experience’s value, meaning, or significance for them. Asking, what was your key insight as a result of our fundraising? What was the most meaningful aspect of the charitable event? What can you conclude from hosting the YMCA event? What have you learned from this experience?

**Decision:** Now what?

The LCRS Board is characteristically action-oriented. In this step, Board officers, directors and the group itself determine future resolutions and/or actions. For example: How, if at all, has this experience changed your thinking? What will LCRS do differently as a result of the experience?

Our organization is committed to evaluating our experiences quickly yet with detailed reflection and learning. This helps us get to the heart of the matter efficiently. O.R.I.D. is simple, follows a naturally affirming process, and ensures that each step of our agenda is taken seriously, so that the group can reach conclusions based upon the widest possible base of data. This is our means to formulate a common strategy.

*Hector Torres, owner of Tri Peak Athlete LLC and a team member.*

**Engagement and Communication**

On any given Saturday there will be 100 or more people swimming in the lake. During the week we amass in substantial numbers. In a year we are likely to see 8,000 swims (many repeat swimmers). While acting locally, we think—and swim—globally. There are more than 60 million tourists who arrive in Orange County every year. We propose something a little different for them to enjoy—Central Florida’s unbridled nature. We are happy to report that every week a visiting swimmer from a different continent attends the swim, making Lake Cane a sort of water ambassador for the region, and even the state.
Visualize the crowd you’d see at a popular 5K— that’s the number of swimmers which the Meisenheimers host every week in good weather. Each first-time swimmer signs a waiver, receives a bright-green swim cap (to keep), the use of a “safe-swimmer buoy” and instructions on the 1K crossing. Upon completion, swimmers have the opportunity to ring a bell, sign the “wall of fame”, and get some freebie swag. The first-timer is likely to have their photo on Facebook and offer others encouragement to join the swim. Currently there are over 1,800 Facebook friends of Lucky’s Lake Swim, in addition to over 2,000 folks who signed up for Lucky’s blog, and another 1,200 include on the mailing list.

Over the years, we have continued flexing our communication muscle. Swimmers lead the way in bringing this local community together to declare water quality a priority. We make it clear that LCRS is eager to talk, present our ideas, attend City and County Council meetings, and generally find a way to end run-off and associated nitrogen/fertilizer contaminants from reaching the lake. We’ve spread the message that a vibrant lake is a local treasure.

Alignment with Strategic Partners

This group also accomplishes water quality goals through data collection, education, and action. Complementing the overarching vision of the Central Florida Water Initiative for decreasing dependence on the aquifer, LCRS demonstrates how individual property owners and public entities can define their respective responsibilities. Environmental improvements in the watershed, such as low nitrate counts, the elimination of hydrilla and improving water clarity are documented. Additionally, swimmers have provided Central Florida a tangible example, as well as templates, tools and expertise to help others manage their
The key to LCRS’s success is our formula for gathering water quality data, setting improvement goals, establishing, and communicating improvement strategies to our stakeholders in charitable, fiscally responsible, and community-building ways.

Embedded within the northernmost headwaters of the Everglades, Lake Cane’s watershed includes a massive constituency of interested parties, including colleges, universities, native plant enthusiasts, the American Water Works Association, the YMCA and local government and businesses.

LCRS’s motto is to keep Lake Cane “Swimmable, Fishable, and Lovable”. Borrowed from the Environmental Protection Agencies’ original mandate to protect environmental and human health, LCRS’s vision also includes keeping Lucky’s Lake Swim going at least until 2039. That’s long-term for most of us! Though we wonder if we will live that long, we are determined to make conditions possible for everyone to swim Lake Cane well into the middle of the century.

Sources

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