

Introduction to OWLA



What is OWLA?

OWLA is the Owasco Watershed Lake Association. We are a citizen-based, 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporation founded in 1988. We are a group of concerned citizen volunteers. Our guardianship extends beyond the lake basin across 208 square miles of watershed, the land area where every drop of falling, flowing water eventually reaches Owasco Lake.

What are OWLA's Mission and Values?

We are the Voice of Owasco Lake and its Watershed and will actively engage in ongoing processes for coordinating, documenting, and tracking all the strategies and activities that are designed to restore our watershed and improve water quality for both drinking and full recreational use of Owasco Lake and its watershed.

OWLA is a hands-on, boots dirty, take-action, not-for profit organization! We do whatever we can to protect and restore Owasco Lake. That includes testing cutting edge technologies, funding watershed erosion prevention projects, fighting invasive plants and insects, and tracking down sources of excessive sediment and nutrients entering the lake. OWLA is:

1. **Flexible:** We will carry out **a wide range of small and large clean-up and restoration projects based on our capacity and resources that are designed to make a long-lasting improvement to the quality of Owasco Lake.**
2. **Data Driven:** We will measure our progress on an ongoing basis. We will put our time, money, and energy where it is best used to move us towards our defined goals. We will be flexible and change directions quickly when necessary.
3. **Teamwork Inclusive.** We need everybody to volunteer to work together to carry out restoration activities. We will recruit volunteers of all ages to be members of teams to get the work activities done.
4. **Science-based:** We will find and use proven scientific, research-based projects to restore each of the sub-watershed areas of Owasco Lake, including the streams and creeks and wetland buffers of the watershed.
5. **Enthusiastic and Optimistic:** We will expect and celebrate success and overcome all hurdles and remove all barriers in our way.

What OWLA Isn't.

While OWLA can do a great deal towards improving the health of Owasco Lake, it is important to remember that we are a non-profit organization. We are hands-on and willing to take on any volunteer project, implement grants, and help collect and analyze data. However, we are not the "lake police" and we leave the watershed regulation and enforcement of businesses and landowners to the appropriate government organizations, such as the Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council (OLWMC). While our acronyms may look similar, it is important to remember that OLWMC has the proper authority to adopt rules and regulations and to enforce them. OWLA stands ready to assist OLWMC when they need volunteer support.

Research. Mitigation. Outreach

What has OWLA done in the past?

1. Shoreside harmful algal bloom (HAB) surveillance and reporting. The OWLA HABs program volunteers monitor their assigned shoreline zones once a week from July through early October.
2. Projects to reduce nutrients and sediments entering waterways from farms and homeowners.
 - Planted buffers near streams to reduce runoff. In April 2021, OWLA volunteers and a local boy scout troop planted 2500 willow tree canes and grass to create a natural buffer between a large crop field and a watershed stream. After a few years of growth, this buffer will prevent much of the soil runoff and substantially reduce a major deposition source and ugly plume of runoff in Owasco Lake.
 - Initiated a roadside ditch erosion reduction program. OWLA partners with the County Soil and Water Conservation District to reduce erosion that reaches the lake from roadside ditches.
 - Conducted watershed stream sampling and analysis to determine sources of runoff and to track the success of erosion reduction and buffer efforts.
3. Projects to prevent and suppress invasive species.
 - Committed to an all-in campaign to suppress hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) in critical watershed areas. Hemlocks are key to suppressing soil and nutrient runoff into the lake.
 - Partnered with the Rotary Clubs of Auburn and Moravia on an HWA campaign to inform landowners and raise funds to suppress HWA in the watershed.
4. Public education and outreach in middle schools in Cayuga County. Volunteer OWLA members developed taught a lesson on Owasco Lake water quality to seventh grade science classes.

What new projects are we looking forward to?

1. Research, conservation, and remediation projects.
 - Plant Rain Gardens in lakeside areas to help absorb and reduce nutrient-heavy runoff.
 - Organize summer surveillance of HABs in 27 zones around Owasco Lake.
 - Sample and monitor critical tributaries in the watershed.
 - Identify and suppress HWA in watershed-critical hemlock trees.
 - Fund roadside ditch remediation projects.
2. Public forums and outreach.
 - Inform the public on key issues affecting the watershed.
 - Expand classroom presentations in school districts within the watershed.
 - Increase OWLA membership to strengthen our voice on behalf of Owasco Lake.

What organizations are OWLA's partners?

OWLA is part of a large network of governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned with Owasco Lake water quality. This is a testament to how important the lake is to our daily lives and the area's economic well-being. We list here some of the organizations you may hear about, but this list is by no means exhaustive.

- **Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council** consists of representatives from municipalities throughout the watershed with a mission to coordinate actions for protecting and restoring the health of Owasco Lake and its watershed. The council directs the Watershed Inspection and Protection Division to identify and stop activities within the watershed that may result in a decrease of water quality. The council recently developed updated watershed rules and regulations to protect Owasco Lake. Those rules are being considered by the New York State Department of Health.
- **Cayuga County Chamber of Commerce** facilitates collaboration that supports economic development for the greater good of Cayuga County. The Chamber assists OWLA with getting out our message that Owasco Lake's health is critical to the county's economic health and growth.
- **Cayuga County Water Quality Management Agency's (CCWQMA)** mission is to protect and improve the quality of water in Cayuga County. This Agency is made up of the County Legislature's Environmental Advisors, non-County Local Officials, and Representatives from Waterbody Associations in Cayuga County. Water in Cayuga County includes not just Owasco Lake, but the east side of Cayuga Lake, some of the southern shoreline of Lake Ontario, and Lake Como.
- **The Finger Lakes Institute (FLI) at Hobart and William Smith Colleges** is dedicated to the promotion of environmental research and education about the Finger Lakes and surrounding environments. A few of its activities include sponsoring studies of invasive species, hosting regional conferences, training citizen scientist volunteers, and providing educational materials and expertise to area school districts. The Finger Lakes Partnership for the Regional Invasive Species Management (FL-PRISM) is hosted by FLI and coordinates all invasive species programs.
- **New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Division of Water** provides statewide oversight and regulation of various programs that track the quality of the waters, identify and investigate sources of pollution, control these sources, and develop strategies to address water quality threats. DEC programs regulate and provide guidance on water supply withdrawal. OWLA commonly interfaces with DEC personnel located at the Finger Lakes Water Hub, a DEC field office dedicated to management of water resources in the Finger Lakes Region.
- **Friendly Living Coalition of the Finger Lakes** encompasses numerous lake and watershed associations in the Finger Lakes region. The purposes of FLRWA are to bring together the members, expertise, and desires of the Finger Lakes watershed associations to preserve and protect their watersheds with a collective regional voice; to join forces to advocate for mutually beneficial regional changes, backed by sound research; and to promote collective actions that represent the desires of the entire Finger Lakes region. OWLA actively participates in FLRWA's annual May educational series on lake friendly living and encourages Owasco Lake watershed citizens to take the Lake Friendly Living pledge.

- **New York State Department of Health** reviews and approves local rules and regulations for the protection of water supplies. Regulations intended to address water quality in Owasco Lake must be approved by the Department of Health.
- **New York State Federation of Lake Associations** gathers and disseminates environmental expertise and information to promote the sound management, study, protection, preservation, enhancement and wise use of the lakes, rivers, streams, watersheds, and shorelines of New York State. OWLA members attend NYSFOLA's annual conference at Lake George each May.
- **Cayuga County Soil and Water Conservation District**
The SWCD's mission is to enhance and protect the natural resources of Cayuga County through "hands on" implementation of best management practices. SWCD completes a wide variety of projects ranging from work with the agricultural community to aquatic vegetation control. OWLA has worked with them on several projects, but most notably in recent years assisting with the identification of roadside ditch stabilization projects and providing matching funds for the work.
- **Cayuga County Planning and Economic Development**
OWLA has partnered with county planning on several important projects including updates to the *Owasco Lake Watershed & Revitalization Plan (including the EPA 9 Key Elements)* and revisions to the *Owasco Watershed Rules and Regulations*. The County Planning Department also provides advice and support for invasive species management and has periodically helped with geographic information system mapping tasks.
- **Upstate Freshwater Institute**
UFI is a not-for-profit 501 (C) (3) research corporation dedicated to the improvement of water quality and the advancement of freshwater research. UFI maintains a certified lab and OWLA has paid for their services to process lake and stream samples for years, but UFI has also provided a great deal of support, knowledge, and advice in understanding water quality and sample results.
- **New York State Hemlock Initiative (Cornell University)**
Integrates research, management, and outreach to conserve New York State's hemlock resources in the face of multiple threats, particularly the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA), an invasive insect. Helps coordinate state-wide efforts of landowners, state and federal agencies, government officials, and concerned citizens to partner in hemlock tree conservation throughout New York.
- **Non-profit Environmental Organizations** such as the Nature Conservancy (NC) and the Finger Lakes Land Trust (FLLT). Both these organizations focus on purchasing and preserving lands critical to watershed health in the Finger Lakes. The Nature Conservancy partnered with the DEC in 2020 to buy a 203-acre parcel of streams, forests and wetlands that protect the inlet to Owasco Lake. The Nature Conservancy recently hired EVIDN, a behavioral science company from Australia, to work with farmers in the Owasco Lake watershed to develop feasible, sustainable farming practices that also protect water quality. The Finger Lakes Land Trust operates the Owasco Bluffs, a 74-acre parcel protecting a stream and over 1100 feet of shoreline on the east side of Owasco Lake.