

What'SUP with Lake Recreation in the Mid-Atlantic Region?

Lisa Borre

Stand up paddle boarding growing in popularity

When a call went out for articles on the recreation theme for this issue of *LakeLine*, the responses from NALMS Region 3 highlighted the many ways we recreate on lakes and some of the challenges lake managers face. Lake recreation in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. ranges from reservoirs managed for drinking water where recreational use is banned or restricted, to private lakes where paddle sports reign, to popular resorts where recreational use and user conflicts abound on busy summer weekends.

Many lakes in the region are man-made and face problems associated with sediment and contaminant accumulation. The threat of aquatic invasive species (AIS), an abundance of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), algal blooms, beach closures and other water quality concerns further impair recreational use and enjoyment. Climate change exacerbates some of these problems and further complicates lake restoration and management efforts, as described in a previous *LakeLine* article (Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2016). Despite these concerns, lake recreation continues to thrive.

Of the trends in lake recreation in our region, one stands out: stand up paddle boarding, or SUP. It has become one of the fastest growing non-traditional sports on land or water (*SUP Magazine* 2016). This article explores why the act of standing on a long board and using a paddle to move through the water is growing in popularity and what the trend means for lake recreation and management by examining case studies in three locations: (1) Lake Wallenpaupack, PA, (2) Reston Lakes, VA, and (3) Spa Creek in Annapolis, MD, a relevant

example from the author's hometown on the Chesapeake Bay.

Lake Wallenpaupack, Pennsylvania

Lake Wallenpaupack, located in the heart of the Pocono Mountains' lake region, is a popular recreation destination for boating, fishing, swimming, snowmobiling, and other activities. With 52 miles of shoreline and an overall length of 13 miles, Lake Wallenpaupack boasts 5,700 acres of open water, making it the third-largest lake in Pennsylvania.

Lake Wallenpaupack is within a day's drive of many major metropolitan areas, making it a prime vacation destination for millions of inhabitants of the Mid-Atlantic States (LWWMD 2017).

Maggie Lehrian, owner of Roots Yoga Studio in Hawley, PA (<http://rootsyogahawley.com>), teaches SUP yoga classes twice a week during the summer on Lake Wallenpaupack, one in the evening near sunset and the other on Saturday mornings (Figure 1). She also hosts SUP yoga group sessions and private parties, including bachelorette parties. Limited by the number of boards



Figure 1. SUP yoga classes on Lake Wallenpaupack, PA. Photo courtesy of Maggie Lehrian, Roots Yoga.

available to her at a local marina, her classes typically have three to seven people. “Everyone who tries SUP yoga loves it,” said Lehrian.

Lehrian first heard of paddle boarding in 2012 while on honeymoon in Rehoboth Beach, a popular beach resort on the Delaware shore. She got the idea for SUP yoga when someone requested that she offer a class. She had been involved with yoga for a long-time – it’s her life’s passion – and grew up on the water at a smaller lake near Wallenpaupack. “It was a perfect fit for me,” she said, “so I reached out to others in the yoga community to learn more about it.” Lehrian ended up organizing a SUP yoga teacher’s training on Lake Wallenpaupack, put on by Bliss Paddle Yoga (<http://blisspaddleyoga.com/teacher-training/>), a company based in California that offers teacher training around the country and sells their own line of paddleboards specifically designed for SUP yoga. About 15 other teachers attended.

“Practicing on the water takes yoga to another level,” she explained. “Balancing on a paddleboard forces your body and mind to be connected. It forces you to be in the present moment without distractions like text messages or dinner plans.” This reinforces the principles of what she teaches in her yoga practice. People don’t realize how much exercise they get while practicing SUP yoga, Lehrian says. Some of her students are nervous at first about trying yoga on the water. “Paddleboards are more stable than you might think. Very rarely do people fall in.”

Other than a lake-use permit Lehrian needed for the teacher training session, there are no restrictions for SUP yoga on the lake. For her classes, she prefers quiet water and uses a cove in the marina, but she says paddle boarding is not restricted to calm water. So far they have had no complaints from other recreational users, but occasionally they need to move to allow a boat to get in or out of its slip in the marina. With paddle boarding becoming more popular, the Lake Wallenpaupack Watershed Management District (LWWMD) informally advises paddlers to avoid busy weekends.

Reston Lakes, Virginia

Reston Association (RA) is a not-for-profit corporation that serves a community

of about 60,000 people in Reston, VA and is one of the largest community associations in the United States (www.reston.org). Reston’s four human-made lakes (Lake Anne, Lake Thoreau, Lake Audubon, and Lake Newport) cover 125 acres and provide recreation and storm-water management for the community. Swimming and ice skating are not permitted, but fishing, boating, wildlife watching, and lakeside picnicking, and walking on the pathways near the lakes are available to RA members and their guests (Reston Association 2017).

The types of recreational uses on Reston’s lakes are more limited than the other examples in this article, and the lakes themselves are privately managed in accordance with a community management plan. The Association restricts gas motors and only allows electric motors no more than three horsepower, eliminating most of the user conflicts and recreation management challenges experienced on other lakes. RA works in partnership with Surf Reston (<https://www.surfreston.com>), a local business that offers SUP sessions guided

by certified instructors, including special sessions for SUP yoga, yoga acrobatics, parties, whitewater, and race training. Surf Reston maintains insurance and requirements to RA’s specifications and contributes 10 percent of their revenue to the association every year. In addition, Surf Reston supports the annual Lake Cleanup, the Lake Swim and Reston Triathlon with paddleboards for the lifesaving team (Figure 2).

Surf Reston is a part-time endeavor for Steve Gurney, who is also publisher/founder of *Retirement Living Sourcebook* magazine and an adjunct professor at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) School of Aging Studies. Gurney was introduced to paddle boarding by Surf Reston founder Chris Higgins, who worked with him on weekends as a snowboard instructor at Liberty Mountain Resort. Gurney was “hooked” and took over the business after Higgins was relocated due to his full-time job.

“I love being outside and introducing a healthy activity to Reston residents,” said Gurney. “Paddle boarding is not difficult, but like all sports there are



Figure 2. Surf Reston supplies paddleboards for volunteers to participate in the Reston Association’s Annual Lake Cleanup. Photo courtesy of Surf Reston.

some key fundamentals that can make it safer and more enjoyable. I am proud that everyone who paddles with us has gone through our introduction to the sport, which provides a good overview of safety, equipment, and technique. We feel like we are building a community of responsible paddlers.” After leading most of the on water sessions in the first few years, the Surf Reston team has grown to nearly a dozen certified instructors, most of whom are current or former RA lifeguards or Reston swim team coaches. Gurney is particularly proud of Sabrina Grove, one of their instructors who recently entered her first paddleboard race and won first place overall, beating all the men, too.

From June to August, about 10 paddlers participate in several sessions per day on Saturdays and Sundays (Figure 3). Every Thursday night there is a concert at Lake Anne, so a group paddles down and listens to the music on the water. Paddle boarding in Reston is intentionally not a full-time operation to avoid interfering with other ways of enjoying the lakes and balance commercial usage. “Paddle boarding is great for family and friends to enjoy a healthy activity and experience Reston’s lakes from a new perspective,” said Gurney.

Spa Creek, Annapolis, MD

Annapolis is the center of Maryland’s recreational boating scene and has long been known as “America’s Sailing Capital.” Maryland’s capital city and home to the U.S. Naval Academy sits on the shores of the Severn River and four creeks, including Spa Creek, Back Creek, College Creek, and Weems Creek, all tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. In the midst of its rich maritime history and yachting culture, stand up paddle boarding is growing in popularity, with entrepreneurs like Brian Meyer and Kevin Haigis of Capital SUP (<http://capitalsup.com>) leading the way.

Operating from a marina on Spa Creek, just across the bridge from historic downtown Annapolis, Capital SUP offers rentals, lessons, guided tours, special events, corporate wellness, race training, and SUP yoga (Figure 4). As fitness enthusiasts, their vision is to create a “gym on the water experience” and share their passion for SUP, the outdoors



Figure 3. Paddle boarding on Lake Anne, one of the Reston Lakes in VA. Photo courtesy of Surf Reston.



Figure 4. SUP yoga class led by Capital SUP on Spa Creek, Annapolis, MD. Photo courtesy of Capital SUP.

and a healthy lifestyle. They opened the business in 2014 and have experienced steady growth from 3,000 people on the water in their first year to 8,000 in 2016. On a busy day, they will get 50-100 people on paddleboards. From a business standpoint, Meyer sees great opportunity for continued growth. In addition to his own business, he noted several other area SUP businesses and 12-15 SUP races in the Delmarva (DE-MD-VA) region alone. There is even talk of SUP racing becoming an Olympic sport in 2028.

Capital SUP is going “full throttle” to get as many people on the water as they can by offering a range of SUP classes and events, including dance class, yappy hour for people and their dogs, and SUP yoga. They organized events to watch the 4th of July fireworks (Figure 5) and 70 people joined them on the water to watch the solar eclipse in August.

Meyer grew up in Salisbury, MD and was introduced to paddle boarding while at college in Hawaii. He is a surfer who also took up outrigger paddling. He got into SUP racing, becoming a professional

racer and traveling the world. It’s a great “total body” work-out, even at a leisurely pace, he noted. Meyer no longer races professionally, but paddle boarding remains the main part of his fitness program. “I’m in the best shape of my life,” he said. In addition to SUP racing, yoga, surfing, and whitewater, a new trend in the sport is SUP foiling, paddling downwind on hydrofoil boards.

With the growing popularity of SUP on the busy waterways in Annapolis, Capital SUP business partners have heard some complaints about their programs causing congestion on Spa Creek, a designated no-wake zone. They are committed to educating customers about safety and rules of the waterway, says Haigis, who also points out that anyone could go out on the water without any briefing at all. They run classes outside of the main channel and feel that paddlers may be getting unfairly singled out by shoreline property owners and boaters who would prefer to keep others from using the public waterway. Meyer has started to attend city meetings when

waterway issues are being discussed to make sure that SUP interests have a voice in any decisions that affect their business.

Capital SUP’s business model is to open locations in urban areas. Last year they expanded to a new location in Washington, D.C., and they have plans to open another location in Baltimore, in 2019. Their main target audience is a younger generation that enjoys the outdoors, but programs are offered for all ages, including race training for ages 13 to 60-plus. They are also targeting people who otherwise might not have opportunities to get out on the water. In the Chesapeake Bay region, access to the water is limited for people who don’t own waterfront homes, live in water-privileged communities, or own their own boat.

Haigis, who is from Annapolis and serves on the board of the Spa Creek Conservancy, sees another opportunity. “It creates more access to the water and a deeper connection with the environment when people get out on a paddle board or kayak,” he said. Meyer added, “Once you create communities of paddling



Figure 5. Paddling event to see the Fourth of July fireworks in Annapolis, MD. Photo courtesy of Capital SUP.

enthusiasts, you have a group of people who are more likely to become clean water advocates and volunteer to protect the waterbodies they enjoy.” At a recent trash pick-up event at their D.C. location, volunteers collected 34 bags of trash.

Because of the potential for paddlers to fall in the water, Haigis asked local officials, “Is it safe to swim?” He found out that no one could really answer the question and started a weekly monitoring program for the creek. As a result, they don’t allow paddling for 48 hours after a rainstorm (and 72 hours after rain in DC) due to high bacteria levels. “Although we lose out on a little bit of business, safety comes first,” he said.

Summary

Both high-speed water sports such as wake surfing and quieter activities such as paddle boarding are reported to be on the rise in the Mid-Atlantic region. While there is a hint that these trends may create the potential for recreational user conflicts on some lakes, the growing popularity of SUP activities is widespread. The sport has the potential to increase access to water-based recreation in ways that are low impact to the environment and provide fitness and wellness benefits for SUP enthusiasts. Paddle boarding also has the potential to get a younger generation and people who might not otherwise have access to water sports out enjoying the water, and in the process, becoming more aware of water quality and other environmental issues. Business owners

and watershed groups are finding that SUP enthusiasts gain more awareness about the waterbodies they enjoy and are also more likely to volunteer for water clean-up programs. Stand up paddle boarding has experienced a growth trend in the water sports industry, and in the case studies examined for this article, lake and watershed management programs welcome the trend.

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