

# Uncertainty flows over thoughts of removing dam

By Steve Engelbert  
The Janesville Gazette Staff

No one alive really knows what Lake Koshkonong would look like if the dam at Indianford were removed.

"We haven't seen the area without the dam, so to say exactly what would happen would be misleading," said Sue Josheff, Rock River Basin engineer with the state Department of Natural Resources.

Rock County owns the dam, which partly controls water levels in the lake. The DNR has ordered expensive repairs, and one of the county's options is removing the dam.

Some say that, without the dam, the river would become a relatively narrow waterway through a vast marsh. Josheff doesn't believe it.

"This was a deep-water marsh even before the dam was constructed," Josheff said. "There was a major waterfowl population. The lake, as it's known now, might not be the same size and depth, but there would be a significant amount of water there."

Maybe not during late summer and early fall. Lucian B. Caswell, Fort Atkinson's first lawyer and one of the first white settlers on Koshkonong, described the lake in 1837:

"At this season wild rice literally covered the entire surface. It looked like a vast meadow. We could see nothing in it for us, but from what we could learn it was everything to the Indians.

"From far and near, they depended largely on the rice they gathered for their winter food; and the ducks (no one can tell or half describe the varieties) came in millions and millions to feed upon the great field of rice of which they seemed so fond. They would light down all over the vast rice fields and feed on the unlimited quantity till they were fat and most delicious food.

"It was only a question of ammunition in the number one would kill at a shooting. When a gun was fired, there followed every time a sight to behold. The noise of the gun would stir them up, and they would rise out of this field of rice in such quantities that the roar was like distant thunder. The atmosphere overhead would be filled till the sun at times would be almost darkened. No tongue or pen can describe the number or quantity."

And Hugh Highsmith of Fort Atkinson, who wrote about Indian mounds around the lake in his book "The Mounds of Koshkonong and Rock River," had this to

say about Koshkonong before the dam:

"Lake Koshkonong and the Rock upriver were very different from the way we know them today. Before the dam near Indian Ford in Rock County was built, the Rock River, now a wide, slow-flowing stream, then justified its name with large rocks, a gravel bed and a swift current.

"Construction of the dam was started in 1846 but had apparently raised the water level little by the time Increase A. Lapham visited Koshkonong in July 1850. He, like Caswell, reported "wild rice growing abundantly over almost its entire surface, giving it more the appearance of a meadow than a lake."

Not a stalk of wild rice remains today.

The lake, with the dam in place, has a maximum depth of 7 feet, Josheff said. On July 2, 1997, the Indianford Dam held back 4½ feet of water, Josheff said.

"That doesn't mean that if you take the dam out the lake would go down 4½ feet," she said.

The Rock River winds northeast for six miles between Indianford Dam and the lake, and its course is very flat. The lake itself, the eighth-largest in the state, comprises 10,460 acres.

The miles of river between the dam and lake and the size of the lake itself make it hard to say what the absence of the dam might mean.

"In some portions of the lake, people wouldn't have the same use of the lake, if the lake dropped," Josheff said.

She wouldn't speculate on the effect on land and business owners on the lake.

But under the present arrangement, with the dam in place, it is not possible to satisfy everyone with an interest in the lake, she said.

"We get complaints on the same day that the water is too high and the water is too low," Josheff said.

"In 1993, you couldn't tell the dam was there. Water coming downstream submerged the dam. That's just proof that, with or without the dam, during floods there would be no difference."

During this summer of heavy rains, the gates at Indianford have yet to be closed, said Don Bush, a DNR fish biologist charged with managing the lower Rock River basin. The flows on the lake and river were high through July, which meant that Koshkonong looked and smelled as fresh as it ever does in late summer.

Low flows and hot days mean algae blooms. But Koshkonong lacks weed beds, which provide shelter and spawning ground for panfish. Abundant carp are partly to blame.

"The dam itself is partly responsible," Bush said. "If we were to manage this lake like a natural system and allow summer drawdowns to promote compaction of these sediments, we'd see vegetation on the lake."

But drawing the water down at the height of the boating season would be politically unpopular and perhaps politically impossible, Bush said.

He sounds neutral on the subject of dam removal.

"It wouldn't necessarily be good or bad," Bush said. "But we've found a system with the dam that we can manage."

Others with interests on the lake are not neutral.

Property values for lake land would plummet, said Frank Micale, president of the Rock River-Koshkonong Association, which exists to improve the river and lake.

"Some of the highest losses would be in Rock County," said Micale, who owns a few rental cabins on the north shore and whose family owned a tavern there for years. "The Newville area alone would be devastated."

Newville is home to marina businesses, resorts, restaurants and hotels.

John Kinnett, who owns the Anchor Inn, a riverside tavern that caters to boaters, wants the dam repaired and improved. Low water is the biggest complaint of his customers, he said.

"I'd love to see a lock at the dam so we'd have access to Janesville people and they'd have access to us," said Kinnett, whose tavern is upstream of Indianford near Lake Koshkonong. "Why not do it right?"

"I think they're trying to scare us by saying they're going to tear down the dam," said Kevin McGrath, who had stopped to gas up his boat. McGrath is a full-time resident of Hindsdale, Ill., and owns a summer cottage on Koshkonong.

"I think it's a great resource, and I hope all parties are wise enough to keep it a great resource," McGrath said.

He, too, called for more water.

"I've dinged up a number of propellers," he said.

Jim Folk, who lives on the lake at Carcajou Point, wants 3 to 5 more inches in the lake.

"If they just held the water in for the boaters," said Folk, a proponent of a lake district.

"The lake is good, but believe me, they need to make it a little deeper," said Ron Adcock, who rents space for his trailer at Lakeland Camping Resort near Koshkonong at Newville.

John Torstveit, who owns Lakeland Camping Resort, depends on Koshkonong to draw residential campers to his business. But the rest of us who live here depend on it, too, he said.

"In Rock County, you have General Motors," Torstveit said. "That can be gone in a heartbeat. Tourism in southern Wisconsin stays forever, if it is taken care of."

Tourists spend \$150 million a year in Rock County and don't use our schools, the

campground owner said. His campers shop in Janesville, Edgerton, Milton.

"The main thing is that if we let the dam go and let tourism slip, everybody's going to pay more real estate taxes," Torstveit said. "Tourism keeps the taxes down. Most people don't understand that."

The county quibbles about rebuilding the dam while dumping money into things that don't help the local economy, Torstveit said.

"The ironic thing is that the county could rebuild that dam every two years and not lose money," Torstveit said.

"They're building a \$16 million courthouse that they'll never get any money out of without batting an eye."

[Close Window](#)