

# The Role of Lake Associations: Connecting People for the Good of the Lake

Terry Rees

Lake associations are groups of enthusiastic volunteers who have come together with a great goal in mind: to protect an asset of mutual value – the lake experience. The genesis of these local groups may be a slow organic process of community-building, or a sudden jarring need for a united voice. In Ontario, there are literally hundreds of lake associations, scattered across the landscape. These groups benefit from access to peer mentors and best management practices to steward their lakes and their communities, and that is where FOCA comes in.

## What is FOCA?

FOCA is the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations, a not-for-profit membership organization representing volunteer associations across Ontario. FOCA was formed in 1963 by a small group of people in a handful of cottage associations; more than 50 years later, FOCA represents 50,000 families in more than 500 associations across the province.

## Why a Provincial-level Organization Exists

FOCA sits at the table where individuals cannot, and acts as an information bridge between policy-makers and property owners on significant issues, including:

- the long-term environmental integrity of Ontario's freshwater resources
- effective land use planning
- risk management for volunteer groups
- fair property taxation
- rural safety and emergency preparedness, particularly in the face of extreme weather developments in recent years.



FOCA's mission is "to protect thriving and sustainable waterfronts across Ontario." Our primary tools are communication, education, and advocacy. We encourage and empower positive environmental stewardship among property owners. We promote and provide leadership for sound public policy on key issues. And we align with other key partners that support like goals and objectives.

Our members are lake and road associations, some very small and some quite large, with every size in between. Ontario borders on four of the five Great Lakes, and is blessed with over 250,000 named inland lakes in need of care and protection. FOCA's members live within this landscape, and are an integral part of the rural community in close to 300 of Ontario's 444 municipalities.

## Why Cottage Country Matters

"Cottage country" matters to Ontario's economy. Billions are spent each year by waterfront property owners in the province – on watercraft, septic systems, furnishings, food and drink, cottage maintenance, and much more.

Waterfront property owners are a self-reliant and adaptable bunch. Despite the often casual clothes and dock-side meeting locations, these are dedicated and passionate folks who are vested in the future and are intimately familiar with the

resources, special attributes, and changes happening on our lakes and rivers. Some live on relatively undeveloped land in low density regions; others live where lake capacity has already been reached, or even exceeded.

## What FOCA Does

FOCA encourages property owners to join their local lake association; in turn, we encourage these groups to be members of FOCA (Figure 1). We believe there is strength in numbers, and we want everyone to be part of the solution for waterfront Ontario!

One of our primary functions is to communicate about and facilitate the network of best practices already underway at the lake level. Each year, FOCA celebrates these successes through the FOCA Achievement Award, presented to a member Association in order to recognize, share, and celebrate the leadership role played by these groups across Ontario. The most recent award went to the Pike Lake Community Association (Figure 2), for their efforts to protect their lake, engage their local community, and establish working relationships with municipal and regional partners. Find out more online at [www.foca.on.ca/FOCA\\_Achievement\\_Award](http://www.foca.on.ca/FOCA_Achievement_Award).

FOCA acts as a clearing-house for information on subjects as varied as blue-green algae, the Municipal Property

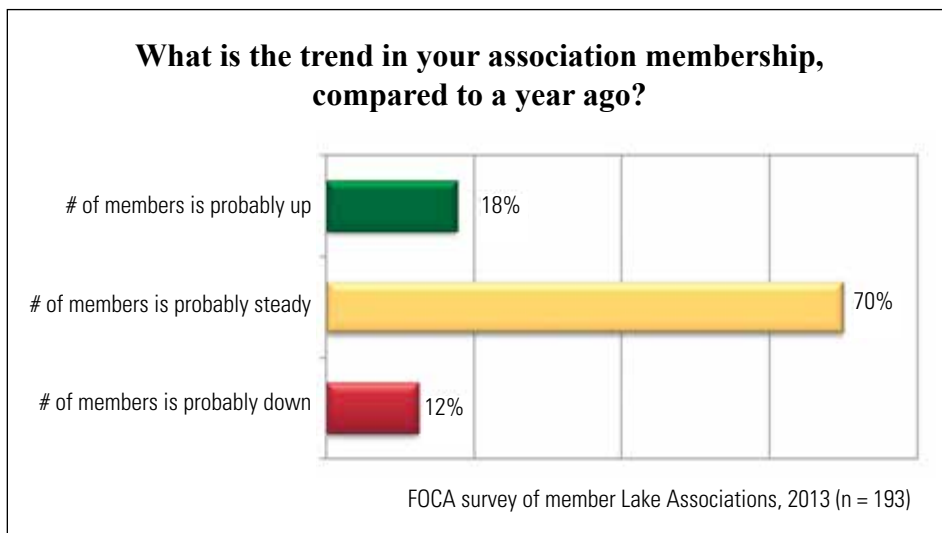


Figure 1. Member association memberships are holding steady and even growing, from FOCA survey 2013.



Figure 2. Terry Rees and Tracy Logan of FOCA present the 2013 FOCA Achievement Award to representatives of the Pike Lake Community Association.

Assessment system, rural fire safety, cottage succession issues, and much more. There is no need to re-invent the wheel when we can learn from each other's experiences. FOCA maintains relationships with private, public, and institutional partners to connect the dots between science and action at the lake level.

In 2013 alone, FOCA had another busy year of policy and environmental initiatives. Partnerships continued with the Ministry of the Environment (MOE)

for the Lake Partner Program (the largest volunteer water monitoring program of its kind), and the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) to deliver FireSmart messages. In 2013 alone, 630 Lake Partner volunteers sampled 820 locations at more than 540 lakes across Ontario. This year, even more kits will be sent out. Total Phosphorus and Secchi data are available via a link on the FOCA website at [www.foca.on.ca/lake-partner](http://www.foca.on.ca/lake-partner), as well as from the Dorset Environmental Sciences Centre website at <http://desc.ca/>

programs/LPP. Over the past year FOCA has facilitated workshops and meetings on the subject of a pilot blue-green algae monitoring program, and an aquatic invasive species monitoring program (Figure 3). We help to bring the tools to our members to enable them to take up the cause at the lake level.

FOCA continues to work with partners in Provincial government to augment the existing Lake Capacity Assessment (LCA) tool. The existing LCA, while somewhat useful, is limited in its application and is insufficient as the sole source of legitimate guidance for good waterfront planning. The Handbook cannot and should not be applied in isolation of other emerging and more sophisticated, modern consideration regarding sustainable waterfront development in Ontario, such as those under development by the MOE, with the support of FOCA, including but not limited to:

- site plan control
- site alteration by-laws
- increase lot sizes, zoning or by-law amendments
- best phosphorus removing septic technology implemented on sites

Other resources that might be referenced include FOCA's *Lake Planning Handbook for Community Groups*, which received the Ontario Planners Institute award (Figure 4). Some elements of consensus-building found within this guide may, in fact, be used within a future lake capacity/lake planning approach employed by the Province and land use practitioners.

FOCA participates in many speaking engagements and numerous committee, partnership and policy meetings. FOCA also conducts membership surveys annually, and shared the results with members about trends in lake association issues and engagement.

### Looking at the Year Ahead

At the March, 2014 Annual General Meeting of Members, we identified the following priorities for lake associations, this year:

1. Civic Engagement: Associations are encouraged to get members connected online, to receive late-breaking news, to stay in touch during emergency situations



Figure 3. FOCA hosts a workshop for lake stewards as part of the new Aquatic Invasive Species Monitoring Program, March 2014.

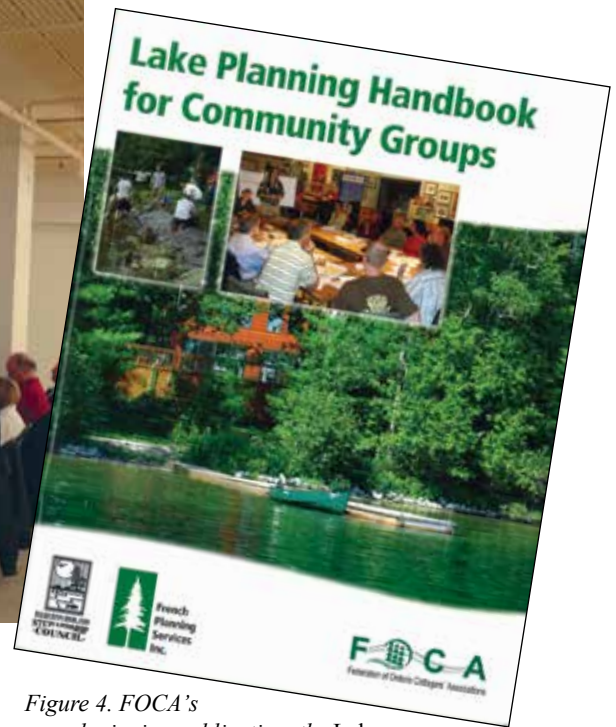


Figure 4. FOCA's award-winning publication, the Lake Planning Handbook

(including flood events) and simply to strengthen the community. FOCA will continue to provide updates in our monthly electronic newsletter (the "Eler"); subscribe for free on the FOCA website today, to stay in the know!

2. Municipal Elections: Ontario will hold municipal elections in October 2014. FOCA wants members to commit to vote at their rural municipality, to get to know their local candidates, to get other members involved, or even to run for office! The first step is to confirm your name is on your voter list, via this link: [www.voterlookup.ca](http://www.voterlookup.ca).
3. Good Governance: FOCA encourages our member associations to review their bylaws now, in advance of changes due under the new Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, as well as anti-spam legislation expected this year.
4. Risk Management: FOCA reminds members to review and understand insurance coverage for your association. Lake associations are being increasingly relied upon to deliver important services in Ontario's waterfront communities, and volunteers provide the energy and leadership for these groups. A risk management review is important, augmented by appropriate liability insurance protections. To this end, FOCA worked with a broker partner

5. Water Quality: Get involved with FOCA in our new aquatic invasives plant monitoring program, and keep up the effort to sustain long-term water quality science through the Lake Partner Program.

As we met with members and partners across the province over the past year, a recurrent theme emerged: the need for informed and active involvement by all stakeholders, at all levels of government, at the community level in strong local associations, and by each of us as individuals on the waterfront. Success will depend upon everyone working together.

**Terry Rees** is an active representative on more than a dozen province-wide and bi-national committees related to water, the environment, and other community and sustainability issues. An outspoken advocate for the protection of Canada's freshwater systems, Terry has been the executive director of the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations (FOCA) since 2004. FOCA is the largest waterfront landowner organization in Canada, representing over 50,000 member families in 520 community associations. 🐾



### Why FOCA? A Testimonial . . .

FOCA acts as a bridge between property owners and regional partners. As one example, in 2013, FOCA received a question from a member Association, curious to know how Hydro One manages trees and brush to keep power lines clear, and concerned about the use of herbicides.

We solicited and received a response from Hydro One, explaining the protocols followed.

The note of thanks in July from our member Association President was gratifying:

*"...once again FOCA has been instrumental in connecting lake associations with resources to help educate and answer questions. I will use this as yet another example of the benefits of FOCA during our AGM tomorrow!" ~ D.A.*