

Summary

On Thursday, March 22, 2018 the University of Florida convened a Lake Istokpoga Public Meeting in Sarasota, FL. Project principal investigator Kai Lorenzen, limnologist Mark Hoyer, research scientist Chelsey Crandall, and lead facilitator Joy Hazell designed the meeting. The public was invited through a press release, direct contact with interview subjects, and distribution of a meeting flyer.

Approximately 75 people attended the meeting including members of the public, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation commission staff, and county staff and elected officials. The meeting was facilitated by Joy Hazell. The meeting objectives were to:

- Inform Lake Istokpoga supporters on the development of the management plan and the stakeholder engagement plan process
- Open communication building community and trust
- Gather input on the engagement plan

Before entering, meeting attendees were asked to place a star on a map of Lake Istokpoga to indicate the place that is most important to them. The meeting began with 30 minutes of activities designed to set a positive collaborative tone for the rest of the meeting. Activities included introductions, an explanation and clarification of the meeting agenda and objectives, and participant generated ground rules for the meeting (Appendix A). Participants were asked to identify their category as stakeholder through a show of hands as an icebreaker.

Dr. Chelsey Crandall gave a presentation summarizing the Lake Istokpoga Stakeholder Engagement project activities and objectives. Project activities include in depth exploratory interviews and an internet based and/or mail survey of stakeholder perceptions of and experiences with Lake Istokpoga. Project objectives are to Identify stakeholder groups' interests, values, knowledge base and preferred methods of engagement; reach a shared understanding about habitat and habitat management in Lake Istokpoga; and create a habitat management plan where stakeholders have ownership. Mark Hoyer then gave a presentation on the history of Lake Istokpoga. The presentation overviewed changes in lake hydrology, water quality, and habitat trends.

During the presentations, participants were asked to write questions or thoughts on index cards which the presenters would answer at then end of the presentations. Due to time constraints not all questions were answered but each one is listed below and will be addressed in the near future.



(Facilitator Joy Hazel introducing the meeting and presenter Mark Hoyer talking about the history of Lake Istokpoga)

Questions or comments written on index cards (all questions and comments are verbatim, including emphasis):

- What are your measurables going to be?
- FWC has been very inflexible and unwilling to compromise. How can we be sure this is going to change?
- Can less spraying be adopted in the interim while the study takes place?
- How about stocking (Bass etc.)? Fishermen would be willing to help fund.
- Is boating an issue? I hope you are not planning to make Istokpoga a water ski lake.
- Hurricanes did not cause 4 feet of dead vegetation underwater on all three sides of my dock or sea wall, did it? No exaggeration, 4 foot, 2008 when I bought property there was white sand
- 20 years ago water management drew the lake down and cleaned the bottom for spawning fish and created islands, what changed that program: possible dead vegetation from excessive spraying?
- What happened to the SOS management group from past years?
- As of year 2012-2013 the long-term plan for Istokpoga was trophy bass lake. How many 12 lb+ have been recorded since 2012?
- Is there any testing of muck on bottom of lake to see if any chemicals deter growth of submerged weeds?
- It's not fun to fish on the lake anymore.
- Muck build up is horrible – tough to navigate.
- Midge – blind mosquito outbreaks becoming longer and more severe.
- Number and quality of bass is shameful!
- Cannot understand spraying schedules, where, when, why?
- Bass stocking plan needed.
- Ok, so there is a plan developed, who is the do'er – i.e. who does the implementation of the plan?
- Why isn't wildlife management making strategic decisions regarding wildlife conservation instead of ignorant bureaucrats? – For example a decision was made in the past to spray herbicides during spawning season! Idiotic!
- What is the state purpose of the spraying problem?
- What makes a good lake?
- Are tributaries monitored for pollution sources?
- What did the Orange Lake plan at this time result in?
- What are the bubbles coming up from the bottom of the lake when you stop your motor? Could be methane from decaying vegetation. Do fish thrive with methane or oxygen?
- Do fish spawn in muck?
- Do live plants add oxygen to water? “fry cover” “fish food”
- Is it possible to remove dead bottom vegetation?
- Address to FWC – several years ago it had been reported in one year period the FWC biologist weight add tournament weigh ins that 1,000 largemouth bass were weighed in at tournaments that were over 8 lbs, since then how many over 8 lbs have been caught?
- Nothing is going to work as long as the spraying daily is going on.
- Spraying why? Excessive?
- Spraying when fish are trying to spawn
- Spraying with crop spraying planes!
- Spraying when temp and wind were not considered
- Rumor has it that the lake may be drained, if so, how are you disposing the debris? Burning or landfill?
- What happens to fish, wildlife during this time? Is it in stages?
- Worst speck fishing season I've seen this past year. Is this because lake bottom is not sufficient for fish to bed? Water quality poor?
- Stop the never ending spraying.

- Replant all the eelgrass, pepper grass, hydrilla that is almost gone.
- When will they stop overspraying?
- How large is Orange Lake compared to Lake I?
- Why do you say water quality does not need to be looked at?
- Are the fish safe to eat?
- What was the trigger that got UF involved in Lake Istokpoga?
- Once a plan is developed what kind of oversight will there be?
- Why do you call hyacinth a problem?
- How much influence will this have with FWC?
- What will spraying come to management, not overkill?
- No one in charge of lake DO NOT FISH – and yet do not listen to people who do and do nothing we ask, they say they want our input but do NOTHING we say and lie to us all the time about major projects and things they are or are not doing.
- No one is overseeing it all, we are trying to fight mother nature for our interests
- How did the hurricane affect fishing and habitat?
- How did spraying affect fish population?
- Does this plan affect other lakes?
- Fish population over the years?
- How do you plan to improve the fishery, wildlife and plant life of the lake?
- Who dictates water levels?
- If this takes two years the lake will be completely dead
- Is FWC able? Lake got this way on their watch.
- Who has final say, FWC, Commissioners, Senators, Congressmen?
- What can be done about...
 - There is no longer any submerged vegetation in the lake (formerly abundant)
 - The marshes of Istokpoga have been destroyed
 - The bird population of the lake have been devastated
 - These conditions are not improving

Gathering Stakeholder Input Activity

Meeting participants were given an activity to complete after the presentations. They were given 3 large post-it notes and asked to write their top 3 Lake Istokpoga issues.

Answers are listed below.

Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Istokpoga catch and release only	Poor water quality (levels)	Spraying
Fish population decline	Needless spraying	Listen to us
Less spraying for more weed beds	Decline of fish population and supporting eco-diversity	Too many tunnel vision agencies controlling lake supervision
More fish habitat	Better bass fishing	Keep water levels constant

Better crappie fishing	Lake bottom silt – fish can't bed	Lack of progress in reducing Ag run off and excessive nutrients pouring into the lake
Less spraying (real targeting)	Lack of vegetation	More bass and specs
Sustain biodiversity	Would like better crappie fishing	Why to get rid of some water hyacinths did they destroy ever marsh?
Crappies have few minnows and grass shrimp to feed on/eat	Why is the fish declining?	Access to main lake from rim canals
More ducks	Fisheries management – biological studies of fish #s and growth, fish mortality rates	Less spraying
Not enough bass	More submerged vegetation	Will lake have to be drained?
Better fishing	Management accountability	Better bass fishing
Increase fish population	Lake front property management, trees and access	Wildlife management
More marsh	Maximize native plant communities	Harvesting as much as possible instead of spraying
Stop spraying	More vegetation	Not enough room for boats at Windy Point
Creation of more muck due to overspraying	More submerged weeds in open lake	Public lake access, ex. Parks and ramps
Bring back ducks	Not enough vegetation (hydrilla, eel grass etc.)	More bass for fishing
Much less midges	Bass catch rate	How did hurricane affect fish habitat?
No spraying herbicides	Control spraying	Water levels
Decline in fish population	Why spray in bedding areas at bedding time	Better bass fishing
Less spraying More vegetation More birdlife	How to control spraying	Cooperation
Spraying too much at one time	More big bass	Would like to see better fish numbers
Less spraying	Better natural balance in ecosystem	Better speck fishing
Better spray management	Habitat	Increase bird/snail population
Better explain spraying – when you spray, time of year you spray, look at age of your audience	Better spec fishing	Improved shoreline area at Windy Point for boats to pull up before loading on trailer
Lack of fish	Pay attention to the fisherman. Listen to the people who use the lake. It is not a recreational lake.	Bass stocking plan

Mag. Spraying	Better bass fishing	Will the lake ever come back to its glory of the past?
Why won't submerged vegetation grow in the lake?	Replant grasses	Beauty
Less spraying, let the public know where and when, have certain days with no spraying.	Communication Communication	Recruit knowledgeable professionals to carry out plan
How do you plan to approve the quality of the fishery?	Control spraying Does spraying affect people and fish? (Bass)	Enforcement
Less spraying	Balance	No concern for the fish
Unnecessary spraying and muck buildup and its negative impact on ecosystem and navigation	More hydrilla – 50% of the lake at all times	Maintain good aesthetics to maintain lake and property values
Less spraying so more seaweed	An interim plan. Change something now!	Why is the state trying to kill all vegetation in the lake and then replant?
Less muck on the bottom	Destruction of habitat due to over spraying	Find a balance with the vegetation, quit spraying as if its going to get out of control
Maintain wildlife habitat, bald eagles	More grasses near shore	No knowledge of when and where spraying will occur
Habitat management – (something?) plants, focus on planned spraying, regrowth of vegetation	More native plant life	Lying to us
Too much spraying has taken away eelgrass	Will the lake ever be in the top twenty-five bass fisheries again?	Stop spraying poison (herbicides) into the lake
Less spraying	Bass tournaments need to release all fish where they're caught	Airboats need mufflers
Fish population decline	Over spraying	Water levels too low in summer
Spraying less	Explore alternates to spraying	Alligator levels – cull
Habitat – vegetation for fish reproduction and cover	More hydrilla	Better coordination between all people that spray the lake
Submerged plant management (not eradication) Hydrilla, eel grass, pepper grass, milfoil, etc.	Listen to fishermen because fishing is 98% of what the lake is used for and brings in most money for our county	Gates that open from top – will not loose as many fish
Invasive vegetation removed	Shallow water plant overgrowth and sedimentation	Protect Arbuckle creek/Istokpoga's water supply
Bass stocks	Lake must be managed for all stakeholders	
Don't allow special interests to result in violating best BMPs. Don't be afraid to spray invasives!	No over spraying on non-invasive plants	
Less spraying	Better fish limits (specks) and tournaments	

Water quality, is lake dying?	Winter resident taking too many fish	
More bird life	Rehabilitate ecosystems back to balance	
Manage for fish cover with native plants/manage shoreline for good wading bird habitat		
More rule enforcement by fish and game – fish limits		
Dead (sprayed) vegetation piling up on lake bottom		
Wildlife habitat preservation and conservation includes birds, animals, fish (stop spraying poison)		

After the exercise it was requested that FWC staff provide their top 3 Lake Istokpoga issues too. In order to preserve the relative anonymity of the exercise the facilitator requested this information the following day via email. A copy of the email request is attached as Appendix B.

FWC staff answers are listed below

Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Aquatic habitat management	Fisheries management	Better stakeholder engagement
Relative lack of water level fluctuation compared to the historic, NATURAL regime and associated lack of physical ecological disturbances (over-cypress-ridge flooding and dewatering of the littoral zone) = need for managed drawdowns to or below 36.5 ft. NGVD for at least 3 months (mid-February through May) on at least a 20-year cycle, 10-year cycle preferred. This is doable by FWC because we can provide necessary water supply to downstream permittees by installation of pumps @ S-68 structure during drawdown. This would also address my next two concerns.	Lack of natural submerged aquatic vegetation (eel-grass, pondweed, etc.); periodic drawdowns would facilitate recovery of native SAV, as well as hydrilla for hydrilla-lovers	Proliferation of primrose, specifically <i>Ludwigia peruviana</i> and <i>L. octovalvis</i> , with associated accumulation of organic sediments in littoral zone. Key is herbicide treatment while plants are small and periodic drawdowns with associated mechanic removal of noxious plants and associated organic sediments.
Water quality (i.e nutrients, chlorophyll a, and their interrelatedness) and its role in the lack of submersed plants	CONSTANT presence of applicators. This causes 99% of the problem and hinders the ability of managers to do other projects and work constructively with the public	Zone management mentality in regards to submersed plants. The whole of the lake should be considered, not just certain areas, independent of each other. Not a good way to manage a <i>system</i>
A general agreement between FWC, management partners and Lake Istokpoga stakeholders on strategies to effectively control and manage aquatic vegetation	A plan and agreement between FWC, management partners, and Lake Istokpoga stakeholder to conduct a whole lake drawdown within the next 5 years	A better understanding of what stakeholder's expectations and desires are related to the fisheries, fish populations, and habitats (aquatic vegetation) on

		Lake Istokpoga
Improve communication. In addition, we (FWC) need to make sure we are listening to our stakeholders	Addressing short-term management desires/outcomes. How do these support long-term management goals?	Receiving Funding for Restoration Projects
Develop stakeholder engagement process to serve as a guide for future habitat management	Propose habitat management activities as per #1 above	Inform and educate the public on aquatic plant management
Promoting expansion of desirable aquatic plants while containing/controlling invasive plants	Managers and stakeholders reaching agreement as much as possible, and reaching tolerable compromise on the rest	Dealing with stabilized water levels – how can we mimic natural processes that used to occur when waters fluctuated? Floods, droughts/fires,...
Low quality littoral zone (shallow water) marsh	Fast growing exotics - primrose willow and burhead sedge	Water stabilization and not enough total fluctuation in Lake levels
Increased emergent plant species richness and increased plant densities relative to openwater within the littoral zones lakewide	Increased submersed plant species coverage and density lakewide	Increased stakeholder partnerships, communication, input, support in the plant management process
Ownership/commitment long term (stakeholders and managers)	Trust/honesty (stakeholders and managers)	Consistency (stakeholders and managers)
Angler dissatisfaction...whether it be perception or reality	Lack of effective two-way communication/trust between stakeholders (specifically anglers) and FWC	Managing habitat with considerations for various stakeholder desires (trying to balance what the stakeholders want with what managers think needs to be done and have the tools to do)
Water level stabilization	Nutrient loading	Invasive species



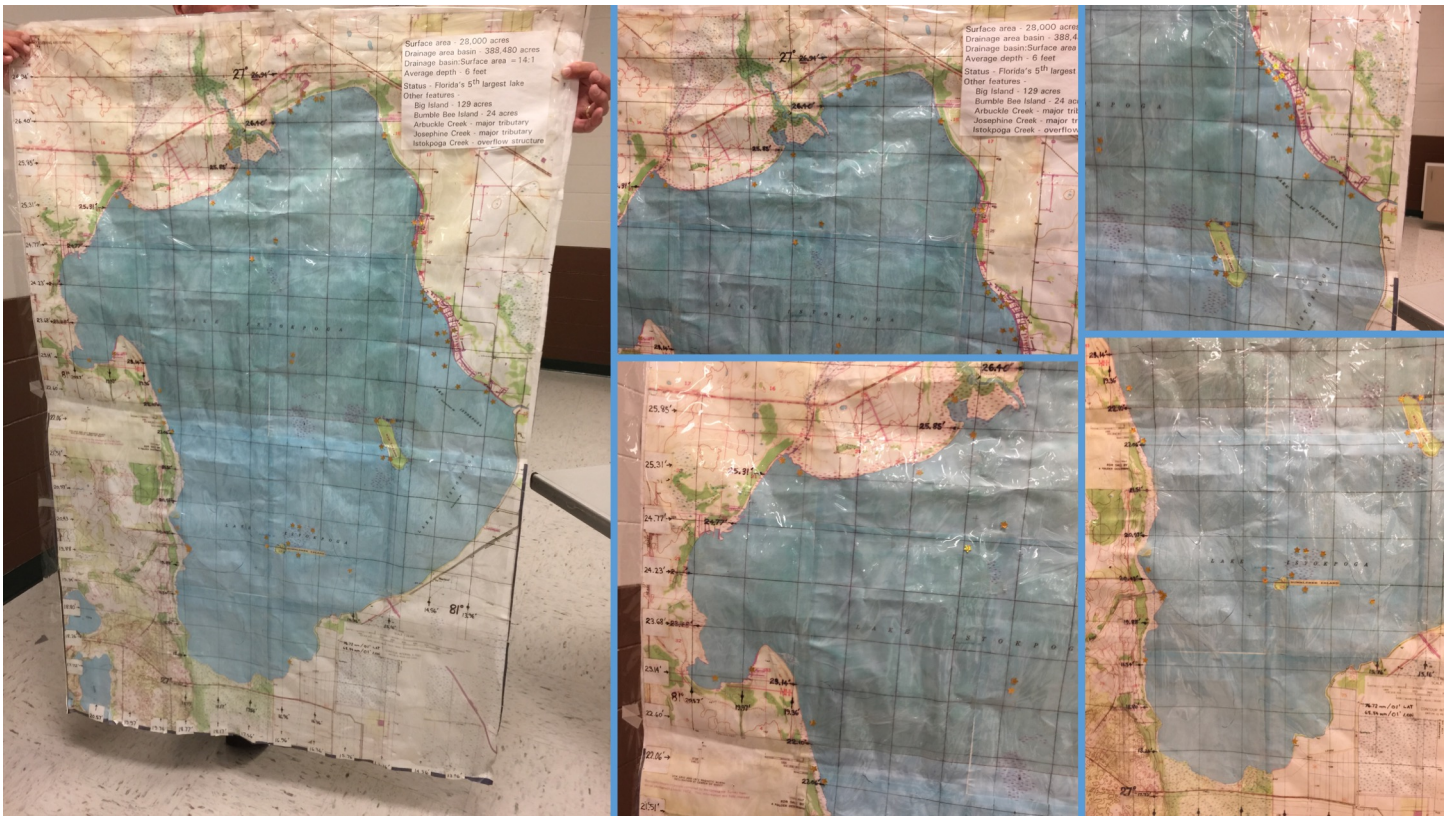
(Facilitator Joy Hazel reviewing the post-it note responses, and responses posted for each category)

Wrap Up/Next Steps

The meeting officially closed with a description of next steps in the process. Immediate next steps include continuation of interviews, the development of a situation analysis, and formation of a representative stakeholder committee. The next public meeting will be held after two committee meetings, and the University of Florida will use suggestions from meeting participants on increasing awareness of the meeting including posting flyers at boat ramps and contacting more RV parks. Information about the process, upcoming events, and meeting reports will be uploaded to the project website at lakeistokpoga.wordpress.com.

Following official closing, discussion continued between attendees and program staff. Discussion included concerns about fishing and the impact of a decline on fishing on the local economy and on whether people remain in the area or move away. In addition, it was brought up that there has been a lot of bad press about fishing in the lake that is impacting how many people come there to fish, and the question was raised as to whether word could get out about this habitat management plan and how it might improve conditions in future.

Before leaving, participants were asked to fill out an evaluation, which will be used to evaluate how the meeting went as well as determine who attended and what groups may have been missing.



(Map with stars indicating the most important place to each meeting participant)