

## RESPONSE TO LAKE ODESSA

Here is “Lake Odessa for the People’s” response to the document Lake Odessa that has been floating around for a year. The original document is in black and the response is in blue. There are other responses coming from the newly formed organization Lake Odessa for the People (and friends). This response was authored by Ken Purdy on 10/5/07. [www.kenpurdy.com](http://www.kenpurdy.com) [kenpurdy@lisco.com](mailto:kenpurdy@lisco.com) It might be noted that the author (Bill Ohde) of LAKE ODESSA can be found under the File menu under Properties.

“Lake Odessa for the People”, is a newly formed proactive group organized to communicate a message to our local, state, and federal legislators and selected people who might be able to help revitalize Lake Odessa and thus the economic situation of the area. The message from the group is the need to maintain an adequate minimum water level in Lake Odessa to enhance fishing, hunting, boating, and recreational activity all year round.

### LAKE ODESSA

(by Bill Ohde ,with response in blue by Ken Purdy on behalf of  
“Lake Odessa for the People”

Lake Odessa was originally a series of shallow backwaters and chutes of the Mississippi River. It was separated from the river by a levee, drained and farmed in the early 1900s leaving only the drainage ditches for the water to collect in. About 1936 the United States Army Corps of Engineers acquired property along the Mississippi River in preparation for the construction of Lock and Dam 17. (Note Lake Odessa was created by the levees damming up the water in the chute, not by a cooperative agreement or because of migratory birds) This included the Odessa bottoms. Management responsibilities of this land was largely assigned to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). In 1946, the Iowa Conservation Commission (ICC) and the FWS signed a cooperative agreement giving the ICC management of a portion of the area. The FWS retained management on the rest of the area, and continues to manage it as the Louisa Division of the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge. At that time Odessa was still a shallow slough that fluctuated with the Mississippi River level. (This doesn't tell the whole story. One might jump to the conclusion that if the river went up a foot, the lake would go up a foot. Not true. The Lake only got water coming into the Lake by seepage through the levee. The lake didn't raise as fast or as high as the river, thus there were more stable water levels in the lake. Levels that could be trusted by people who wanted to use the Lake to fish or boat all year round. The only cabins were a couple “duck shacks,” and during dry years water dwindled to the drainage ditches with only a few small pools. Ten men from CJ, Washington, Wapello bought 20 acres now called the Lake Side Club and built cabins there. A few cabins were built at Schafers and Sand run. Most were built by duck hunters and fishermen. A group of interested Lake people, including, Bill Orr's dad, were concerned that the COE more or less ignored Lake Odessa, thus petitioned the Fed and State to give responsibility to the state (then the state game commission or something like that, the predecessor of DNR). It was then a document was written which "loosely" stated the purpose was to "promote water fowl". Dan Nichols was game warden and pretty much left Lake levels alone. In recent years DNR has treated the document as though it was delivered by Moses and gives them license to claim missions necessitating draw.(This paragraph donated by Bill Orr).

In 1954, the ICC's (Iowa Conservation Commission) Wildlife Section constructed inlet and outlet structures to allow water level manipulations for waterfowl management. This gave the ICC the ability to regulate Lake Odessa's water level. Water level management has been a cooperative venture ever since between the state and the FWS since it's all one big system. After the 1993 flood destroyed the old inlet and outlet, the FWS funded the construction of the new inlet and outlet. Many local residents and visitors have taken advantage of recreational opportunities created as a by-product of the structures built by the ICC and FWS. This paragraph doesn't mention there was better boating, fishing, hunting, and recreational activities before the controllable inlet and outlet tubes were constructed. These opportunities already existed before 1954. In 2007 there is very little fishing and boating compared to before 1954. There are not as many ducks and geese at the Lake now compared to pre-1954.

Several points should be remembered:

- 1) The intent of the development by both the FWS and the ICC at Odessa was to manage the area for waterfowl benefits, including production, migration habitat and refuge, and public hunting opportunities. (Not at the exclusion of navigation)
- 2) Other uses were made possible because of the structures the ICC and the FWS built specifically to increase waterfowl management capabilities. It's hard to imagine what the other uses would be. Whatever they were, it was at the expense of fish, recreation, and ducks and geese, appearance of the water, and the economy of the county and the city of Wapello.
- 3) All our management and development is funded with sportsmen's' dollars through license sales and the federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, not property taxes or income taxes. This needs to be investigated further. There is a portion of DNR revenue that comes from state tax dollars, not just fees. This statement totally ignores the county's expenditure of property tax dollars to maintain the campground, picnic tables, and pit toilets at Snively's access. These are the only toilets available to the public on the whole complex. County managed ground at Snively's access is the only people friendly location on the lake to the public. The county just spent property tax dollars on putting in electrical hookups for the campgrounds. There is no place to launch a boat here or docks. If we expect people to drive a distance to use the Lake and launch their boat at Schafer's access, they should be provided something more than a tree to relieve themselves. Keep in mind people get to the lake by county roads funded by property tax dollars. Fire and police protection is provided by county property tax dollars.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources and its predecessor, the ICC, establish public wildlife areas so that wildlife can have a priority for management on those areas. Lake Odessa was developed to give priority to wildlife. (Make sure you don't think created. The Lake wasn't created for Wildlife. The lake was created by the levees and the wildlife came.) In addition, the Louisa Division of the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge was established on a portion of the area with migratory waterfowl being their top management priority. Waterfowl have always received top recognition at Odessa, and now more than ever need that continued recognition. This agreement did not say the depth of the water in the lake had to be 2.3 feet. Figure out a way to manage the area without harming the duck and geese population, fish population, looks of the water, recreation, and the economy of the area.

Waterfowl habitat has been severely impacted over the years along the Mississippi River. Most of the floodplain in this area has been levied off, drained and farmed, and much of what remains of the river is impacted by the navigation dams and sedimentation. Odessa represents a small fragment of the vast expanse of shallow wetlands that once covered the Mississippi River floodplain, and its role in providing suitable habitat for wildlife production, resting and feeding has become critically important.

The practice of drawdown, or lowering the water level after the high water of spring, followed by raising the water level in fall, is known as moist soil management and is a common wetland procedure that's value has been proven by extensive research. It copies what often happened naturally before the navigation dams, and produces a profusion of wetland seed producing plants and invertebrate organisms that are heavily fed on by ducks and other wetland wildlife.

The forest resource at Odessa is another concern for our management because of its importance to wildlife. Hundreds of acres of pin oak, swamp white oak, bur oak, northern pecan and shellbark hickory are important mast (acorns and nuts) producing trees that deer, wild turkeys, squirrels, mallards and wood ducks use for food. Many of these trees tolerate periodic flooding but prolonged high water during the growing season is detrimental. The flood years have devastated most of the older trees but there is a generation of younger trees that will only thrive if we can keep the water off them as often as possible during the growing season. Buttonbush (commonly called buckbrush) is another important habitat component that needs periodic drawdowns for long-term survival and reproduction. Many Odessa hunters recognize the importance of this wetland shrub to waterfowl and voice concerns whenever declines are evident. [Many hunters express concern with the buckbrush.](#)

Although waterfowl are the top management priority at Odessa, most all wildlife species that use Odessa are adapted to and depend on the floodplain ecosystem that was created and perpetuated by the water level fluctuations that we try to copy. Odessa receives tremendous use by herons, egrets and pelicans. [\(Almost anything in excess is not good. Many believe the pelicans are harming the lake. They pollute the water with feces and eat the fish and minnows, even as they are being stocked.](#) The state endangered red-shouldered hawk has nested on Odessa the last couple years. Bald eagles are common through the fall, winter and spring and I was recently told of an eagle nest just discovered on the area. [The eagles are here in spite of the management.](#) Ospreys regularly hunt the area during migration and peregrine falcons sometimes do. Birds with unusual names like pileated woodpecker and prothonotary warbler flourish on Odessa, but remain uncommon in most areas. Odessa is a herpetologist's dream with a wide variety of turtles, snakes, frogs and salamanders found there. [As I recall as kid, there were more of the previous mentioned animals there before the extreme water level changes after 1954.](#) A broad spectrum of wildlife species thrive on Odessa because of the habitat that has been maintained there.

The general water level plans have not changed much over the years. We've always tried to get the water off the trees as soon as possible in the spring, then started a slow drawdown at various times in the spring to hit a low by mid-July, keep it there for about a month, then start bringing it back up slowly throughout the fall. An important point to remember is that the drawdown is dependent on gravity flow at the outlet. When the river stays high, we can't let water out. [That's nature at work. This is when clean water filters into the lake without the silt.](#) That happens more than 5 years in 10, so it may have **appeared** that we managed differently some years, but that

was only because the river made it impossible. The frequency when that occurs makes it even more important that we carry out our draw downs every year conditions allow. More often than

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not, we will not be able to follow our plan because of the Mississippi River. Another point to remember is that as long as the river is higher than Odessa, the lake continues to rise from seepage, sometimes surprisingly fast. [That's a good thing – a natural occurrence. This is filtered water, no silt.](#)

Our specific levels are given in mean sea level and are read from the gauge at Schafer Access. A reading of 4.7 on the gauge actually means 534.7 mean sea level. The water level plans are part of our cooperative work with the FWS and arrived at jointly. Every year we have to make adjustments because of river fluctuations, and in high river years these plans are meaningless. In addition we circulate water through the lake on a regular basis in the winter to promote fish survival, and also in the summer if the lake is low and our fisheries staff recommend it. Water level management plans are as follows:

534.5 throughout the winter.

Always raises in the spring from seep water, usually 2 or more feet.

Start letting water out as soon as the river drops lower than the lake and drop to

532.5 by mid-July.

Maintain at 532.5 until mid-August.

Raise gradually to 535.5 to 536 by mid-November.

Lower to 534.5 after most waterfowl have left.

[Above is the problem. The lake has silted in. People seem to treat these levels as being etched in stone, and thus Bill Orr's statement "This came down from Moses." These levels need to be revised. The other option is to let the lake elevation change naturally via filtered water seepage through the levee. A 534.75' minimum gauge reading at Schafer's access year round is recommended. This would help the fish winter over and survive the summer heat. You could now get a boat in the lake in July and August. Duck and Goose populations may go back to the previous higher levels. Again, these are goals that can almost never be followed to the letter because of all the variables involved.](#)

There is a statement that applies to the situation at Lake Odessa. "You can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time." [How about changing these words a little: "The lake cannot be all things to all people, but it can be more things to more people than it is now." How about pleasing most of the people all the time with deeper water. There is a saying "You get what you tolerate". The ruining of Lake Odessa and the economy of the area has been tolerated too long. Lake Odessa is a valuable resource for the state of Iowa; however, it cannot be all things to all people. Managing the area to maintain high stable water levels will lead to unsatisfactory waterfowl management conditions, dissatisfied duck hunters and waterfowl enthusiasts, and increased timber loss, much the same as our current management displeases cabin owners and pleasure boat enthusiasts. The management philosophy at Lake Odessa is one of managing the area based on primary and secondary uses, because all uses cannot be accommodated to an equal extent. The ICC, as much as 50 years ago, as well as the Department of Natural Resources today, felt the current management of Lake Odessa was appropriate. The development of Lake Odessa and its primary management thrust has been, and will continue to be for the management of waterfowl and public hunting. Fishing, boating and other recreational activities will continue to be of a secondary nature. \[The local governments \\(city councils and board of supervisors\\) and the majority of the residents want the lake to be people friendly. They want a deeper minimum depth of water in Lake Odessa - A minimum of 4.75 feet on the Schafer's access gauge.\]\(#\)](#)