

Watershed Community Recognition: Camp

Casowasco

The Owasco Lake watershed is a 208 square mile area that is home to a variety of families, farms, businesses, and unique establishments. Our watershed community continues to progress in recognition of the importance of protecting the water resources of Owasco Lake through collective, conscientious efforts. Protecting our water resources and critical drinking water sources requires constant observation, recognition, and special care for our individual corners of the watershed. The activities we conduct on land within our watershed will ultimately impact neighbors and resources downstream. One of the unique, established landmarks that has adopted this philosophy, and has demonstrated a proactive approach towards water quality protection, is Casowasco Camp and Retreat, nestled in the western shore of Owasco Lake.

The original property surrounding Casowasco was purchased in 1946 from a family with the last name Case. The property was purchased at a significantly reduced price by The United Methodist Church to be converted into a summer camp and year-round retreat. The Case family offered this sale with two conditions; that “the land be used in ministering to youth and children”, and that the Case name be carried with the property. Hence the name “Casowasco”. The initial sale included 73 acres, eventually expanding to 273 acres, descending from the Highland camp on the west side of Route 38, through a deep, scenic ravine, to nearly a mile of shaded Owasco Lake shoreline. The camp’s amenities include interpretive hiking trails, cabins, yurts, ropes courses, a beach, a

soccer field, an archery range, a lakeside chapel, and two houses which have remained on site since the Case family resided in them.

The Casowasco staff recognize the inherent spiritual connection visitors have with the camp’s scenic, natural surroundings. Preservation of the property and its natural features continues to be at the forefront of Casowasco. The camp’s property is typical of many lake side properties with a backdrop of steep slopes and deep ravines, which can result in constant threats to infrastructure, water quality, and the aquatic community. As such, opportunities to implement resilient practices, retention structures, and stream protections exist throughout the property. A stroll from the upland portion of the property down to Owasco Lake surely illustrates the practices incorporated.

Of the water management structures constructed at Casowasco, perhaps the most visible to passersby is the small reservoir located at the camp’s main entrance, adjacent to route 38. The pond, currently empty, was initially constructed by the Case family to function as a control structure to supply water for hydroelectric power generation at their residence on the lake. Through the years, as the need for the on-site hydroelectric diminished, the pond has performed as an effective sediment retention basin, capturing tons of sediment, preventing nutrients and soil from entering the lake. Recently, a mechanical issue with the dam gate drained the pond, revealing the effects of its sediment retention capabilities

(photo). Interim camp director, Anne Horton quickly recognized the exposed material was neither stable material, nor aesthetically pleasing. She decided to add stability and color to the exposed soil by simply broadcast seeding the area with native wildflowers. This small, but important act, will prevent the retained sediment from sliding to the lake until final decisions on maintenance and repair of the structure are agreed on.

Continuing down the steep gradient of the access road, at times overlooking the ravine, it is apparent that camp staff has worked hard to invest in the protection of their most important infrastructure components by incorporating dozens of stone velocity controls, or “check dams,” along the steep access road ditches. These structures will protect against damages and costly road failures that result from erosion. The check dams will slow water velocities, filter nutrients, and retain sediments on the land.

Nearing the lake, noticeable efforts are evident for streambank stabilization on the lower portions of Casowasco’s main stream

which were likely subject to years of destructive flows chiseling away the bank. Hundreds of feet of heavy rock armor have been installed to stabilize the streambanks and protect the lake, nearby vegetation and property.

Within yards upstream of the shores of Owasco Lake, a culvert was replaced a few years ago to provide safe emergency vehicle access to a camp building. During the planning of the culvert replacement, camp staff recognized the opportunity to add to the project and eliminate an aquatic passage barrier to allow fish access beyond the culvert.

Anne Horton recounted many visitors over the years who have found a deep spiritual connection to the lake and the beauty of its surroundings. She stated that it truly is “a place to appreciate God’s creations, which are amazing.” This resounding sentiment is a big part of why the caretakers of Casowasco have continuously emphasized protection for future generations. For more information about Camp Casowasco visit their website at <https://casowasco.org/>.



1: Sediment Retention Basin - Before Seeding



2: Sediment Retention Basin - After Seeding