

‘They don’t call me Frank for nothing’: Frank Pratt talks watershed, raindrops and what COLA needs to do

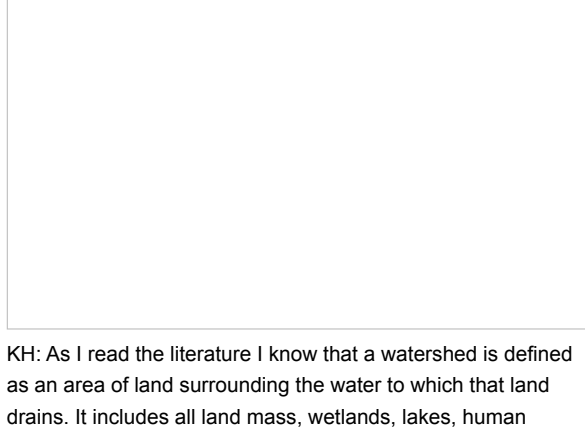
By Kathy Hanson
Contributing Writer

What follows is part 1 of an interview between Kathy Hanson (KH) and Frank Pratt (FP), a well-respected fisheries biologist who worked with Sawyer CO for many years. Part 2 will be published in Short Ears, Long Tales on September 15.

KH: Frank Pratt—I’m not sure which is more familiar—your name or your face to people in Sawyer County, but to start this off, tell us your qualifications and what you do. What are your ties to Lac Courte Oreilles?

FP: I used to be the WDNR Fisheries biologist for Sawyer County, for almost 40 years. LCO was in my jurisdiction from day one, going all the way back to 1974. I have fished it hundreds of times (not well) and surveyed it with boom-shocker and all sorts of nets more than probably anyone ever has. Maybe Russ Warwick my fisheries technician can come close and Max Walter, the current biologist might surpass me if he hangs around Hayward for thirty more years. I retired from the Agency in 2011, but not from the fisheries profession. I took aquatic and angler education and educational outreach with me when I left. Good thing too. Is anybody familiar with what has been done to one of the best environmental education programs on the planet? Gone. I am one of the last men standing, I guess. Bring it on. Besides angler education I do lots of work with watershed groups—COLA, the Couderay Waters Regional Land Trust, Namekagon River Partnership, Sawyer County Lakes Forum, Wild Rivers Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Sons and Daughters of Zebedee, etc.

I have been blessed with a job and community I love all those years, and now it is time to give it back. The whole fishers of men theme. I am twice as busy now, 10 times more effective, and 100 times happier, too. When I get up in the morning and look in the mirror I kinda like my new boss. ‘Meet the new Boss....(NOT) the same as the Old Boss!’



KH: As I read the literature I know that a watershed is defined as an area of land surrounding the water to which that land drains. It includes all land mass, wetlands, lakes, human development—everything including soil surface and those soils and substrates underneath through which water drains. What did I miss and tell me about watershed in Lac Courte Oreilles and why people should get excited about this.

FP: LCO has a huge watershed of about 69,000 acres. It includes watersheds of all the upstream tributary lakes: Grindstone, Round and Osprey to the northeast and Siss, Sand and Whitefish to the southwest. Depending on how the lines are drawn, seepage lakes like Windigo and Stone might also be considered part of that watershed. This watershed is basically the headwaters of the Couderay River, which feeds the upper Chippewa, which flows to the Mississippi, which eventually flows to the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans. All the pieces are connected to the water and the waters are connected to one another. Plus the atmosphere is connected to the land and surface water via rainfall and evaporation. When rainfall hits the land it either runs off quickly, runs off slowly, or seeps into the ground to become groundwater which flows downhill to the nearest lake or stream very slowly.

The best land management practices for watershed slow down and capture run-off and encourage infiltration into the groundwater. Forest is good. Wetlands are great. Any type of human development, whether residential development or agricultural, risks tipping the balance over to the not-so-good side. At about 15% development in a watershed, without due diligence to best management practices, a healthy watershed starts to show signs of wear and tear. LCO is a little over that degree of development and warning signs are beginning to emerge. The land is connected to the quality of the water and the fishery is totally dependent on a healthy watershed.



KH: Whenever I read your stuff I see your love affair with raindrops. Talk about that, if you would. And why do you say each resident owns hundreds of trillions of raindrops? What are they supposed to do with them?

FP: Yes, I am fascinated with raindrops because, first of all, all the water and watershed stuff starts with rain—all in the water cycle. Rain falls to the ground and either runs off immediately or slowly, or infiltrates into groundwater—both of which end up as surface water which flows downhill to the ocean, or goes back to the atmosphere directly through what scientists call evapo-transpiration (a combination of plant respiration and direct evaporation). Clouds build up in the atmosphere and eventually it rains again—somewhere many miles away, usually east of us. We may receive water droplets which came from evaporation of the top of Lake Mill Lacs in Minnesota, or maybe Oahe Reservoir in the Dakotas. Our evaporation may end up in Lake Michigan or the Finger Lakes in upper New York State.

But my main point is this: there are a lot of water drops involved. On an annual basis we average about 31 inches of precipitation in Sawyer County. That is nearly three feet of water on top of that huge landmass we call a watershed. How many rain drops might that be? It is a staggering number—some number x QUADRILLION. Per year no less! What is a quadrillion? A quadrillion has 15 zeros in it. I once calculated it for the Namekagon watershed and came up with 76 quadrillion raindrops.

For LCO the first number is less—maybe 20, but all 15 zeros go behind it, too. Suffice it to say that every person in the watershed owns a significant portion of quadrillion drops each year. One little water drop—not much on its own. But the sum total of all those drops is a force to be reckoned with. A force which floods and shapes river channels, washing away everything in its way. A force, which determines a lake’s water quality. That is why I like the term ‘Human Watershed.’ It is a metaphor for collaborative community action. One person is like a raindrop; barely a speck on dry ground, but lots of people working toward the same goal is the force.

KH: There are a lot of watershed terms. Briefly, what is surface water, run-off, groundwater, evaporation, riparian, and anything else you deem important for COLA to understand. Would you tell us what “impervious” and “pervious” mean to Lac Courte Oreilles?

FP: Surface water is water that you see actually sitting in the lake, river or stream; as opposed to surface run-off which is water running across the top surface of the land, to become surface water in a lake or stream relatively quickly; as opposed to groundwater which is rain that infiltrates deep into the soil and flows through the soil very slowly to reach a lake or stream as what we know of as a ‘spring.’ Groundwater is cold. If you are on a trout stream like the Upper Namekagon, you want as much groundwater in the watershed as possible to maintain cold surface water temperatures for trout. Riparian is just a fancy name for ‘living on or adjacent.’ So a riparian landowner is someone who lives on a lake or on the banks of a stream. For those of us that are not riparians, we also call you guys the ‘lucky ones.’

One of the key emerging watershed principles though is that everyone in or on or using a watershed is functionally a riparian. Even people living five miles away or 10 miles upstream. If water from those sites flows to the lake, then they are in the watershed and what they do on the land influences the water and watershed. We need to expand the concept of watershed ownership past the thin veneer of traditional riparian. We are ALL part of a watershed. And not just the physical land ecosystem watershed, but also the local community—what I call the human watershed. It hasn’t got much traction yet. But when it does get to critical mass, stand back, because amazing things are going to happen.

Pervious is a softer surface which water can infiltrate through and not run off in one fell swoop. As opposed to impervious which is so hard and impenetrable that all the water runs off immediately. A bed of pine needles over sandy soil would be pervious (very good) and an asphalt roadway, roof, driveway, concrete slab, airport runway, parking lot are all impervious and very, very bad.

KH: What is the percent of the Couderay watershed in forested land versus wetland? What’s the good and the bad news with that?

FP: I think the percent forest and water/wetland is about 70 percent/14 percent. Both types are incredibly important to a healthy watershed. Wetlands slow down run-off, capture nutrients, and act as lenses for groundwater infiltration—all good. Forests slow down run-off, encourage infiltration into ground-water, pump water back up into the atmosphere via respiration, and probably more important than anything else right now, convert carbon dioxide to organic carbon. Forests are a big machine working to slow down and counteract climate change by gobbling up and sequestering the number one greenhouse gas. Not enough, but at least something/somebody.

The whole initiative with shoreline buffer zones is really a reforestation program. We are trying to replace golf-course lawns with trees, shrubs, and other native plants. This may be the most promising tool out there for personal involvement and community action where individual landowners can make a real difference in preserving watershed and water quality. Managing that 14 percent developed so that it functions less like a piece of city and more like a natural forest or a wetland is what we are trying to accomplish.

Part 2 of this interview will appear on September 15.

[More information on the Upper Couderay River Watershed](#)

Kathy Hanson is a free-lance reporter for the Sawyer County Gazette, the Sawyer County Field Editor for Our Wisconsin magazine, and Copy Editor for the Bayfield County Journal. She has also served as Staff Reporter, Business Feature Writer, Columnist, and Copy Editor for the Sawyer County Record.

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NOTICES

Native Aquatic Plants are Good!

Native aquatic plants play a key role in the ecology of a lake. They can help to maintain water quality, prevent shoreline erosion and provide habitat for a wide diversity of species from fish to amphibians to mammals. A few things to note about aquatic plant control in our lakes:

1. It is illegal to use any herbicide on aquatic native plants unless a permit is obtained from the WDNR.

2. The maximum area someone can hand pull or rake aquatic plants is 30 feet by their dock or along their shore. If more area is to be cleared, a WDNR permit is required. Plants must be removed from the water and disposed of on land.

3. Eurasian Water Milfoil (EWM) has been found in Little LCO. Invasive plants like Curly Leaf Pondweed (CLP) or EWM can be hand pulled without a permit. In fact, immediate action is encouraged to limit weed increase. However, CLP and EWM can spread by plant fragments, so great care is needed to remove all plant material.

Some helpful resources for hand-pulling EWM can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Are your neighbors and extended family members of COLA?

If not, please ask them to [join](#).

Support COLA by contributing to the Lac Courte Oreilles Foundation

Why “Short Ears, ...?”

Lac Courte Oreilles, or Lake Short Ears, was the name used by the first French traders who visited what was then known as Ottawa Lake. A local band of Ottawas observed the custom of cutting off a portion of their ears.

Tales of Lac Courte Oreilles

This book, edited by Tom and Sue Burgess, together with COLA’s history committee, compiled a detailed history of Lac Courte Oreilles. The book is available through [COLA](#) and the Sherman & Ruth Weiss Community Library in Hayward.

History Comes Alive

This 2004 publication, compiled and written by Caryl A. Pfaff and Ann Marie Penskov, is a compilation of community and history center photographs available from the [Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community Library](#).

COLA Mission: 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the interests of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA’s membership.

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