

Monday, July 18, 2011

A new way to see the lake

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Reporter

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It is morning, and at the eastern end of Long Lake the water is quiet and smooth. It is summer - July - and the sun, even at this early hour, should be high in the sky. But on this day, clouds muddle the light and threaten rain.

Most people would stay indoors on a morning such as this, or at least stay away from the water's edge. It seems so obvious - the sky could open at any moment.

And yet a small group of women push out into the lake. From a distance, it looks as though they are walking on water. They stand erect, after all, and glide over the glassy surface with little effort.

But they aren't walking. They are paddling. Each holds a tall oar in her hands.

The women, it turns out, are standing on paddle boards.

Stand up paddle boarding is, perhaps, the newest sport to hit Minnesota lakes. And thanks to three Lake Minnetonka area women, the sport seems poised to hit that magical tipping point that will carry it from fringe to main stream.

Stachia Fey, Holly Evans and Christine Thompson are doing everything in their power to introduce stand up paddle boarding to the west metro.

They have encouraged friends and family members to buy stand up paddle boards, they have organized group paddle boarding excursions down Minnehaha Creek, and they have started a stand up paddle boarding club called Wai Nani Surf & Paddle.

Each Sunday, members of Wai Nani meet to explore a different area of Lake Minnetonka.

The club also holds full moon paddles that push out into local waters at 9 p.m.

"We wanted to create a community where people could come together to have an experience that would



Wai Nani Surf & Paddle co-founders, from left, Stachia Fey, Christine Thompson and Holly Evans move across Long Lake on a muggy Saturday morning using their paddles and boards, in Orono, July 16. PHOTO: [Mark Trockman](#)

Wai Nani Surf & Paddle

To learn more about paddle boarding on Lake Minnetonka visit www.wainanisup.com.

let them take in nature and feel like an explorer," said Evans.

Stand up paddle boarding, she explained, offers a chance to contemplate a lake's beauty from a new angle.

Much like being in a kayak or canoe, stand up paddle boarding lets water enthusiasts appreciate the shoreline.

However, because a stand up paddle board, which looks like a surf board, is thinner than either a canoe or kayak, one can steer it into even shallower waters.

For example, a stand up paddle board can easily venture into a marshy area, glide over fallen logs and approach a sunning turtle.

It was, in fact, this facet of the stand up paddle board that so sparked Thompson's imagination and convinced her to invest in the sport.

Being on a stand up paddle board, she said, "I felt like a kid again. I kept saying, 'I wonder what's over there.'" The paddle board, she said, lets her easily go and see.

Yet neither Evans nor Thompson would be calling themselves stand up paddle boarders if it wasn't for Fey.

Fey first experienced stand up paddle boarding on Minneapolis' Lake Calhoun. There, on a lark, she rented a paddle board. She enjoyed it so much that she researched the sport and convinced her extended family to give it a try during a Florida vacation.

When she returned to Minnesota, she hooked her friends. Because they were all passionate Lake Minnetonka enthusiasts, Fey knew she could easily bring them into the fold.

Last summer, said Thompson, when the three women were often the only paddle boarders out on Lake Minnetonka, "people would just gawk."

Speed boats, she said, would often pull up along side them to ask questions and then follow them, simply watching.

This blatant curiosity got the three women thinking. They loved their stand up paddle boards, and it seemed others were intrigued. Could they form a business that would bring stand up paddle boarding to beginners?

That's when Wai Nani Surf & Paddle was born.

The name pays tribute to the sport's history. Stand up paddle boarding originated in Hawaii, and "wai nani" means "beautiful water" in Hawaiian.

Wai Nani Surf & Paddle is a business that relies heavily on membership dues. An annual membership costs \$50. Members can then join any excursion for free.

First timers can sign up to join a Sunday excursion. Boards are available for rent. However, the excursions have proven so popular that all of Wai Nani's rental boards are booked for several weeks into the future.

Wai Nani also sells basic stand up paddle boards. The purchase of a board from Wai Nani includes a one year membership.

This is the first year Wai Nani has been in business, and its founders readily admit they have room to grow.

They do not, for example, have a store front. Their inventory of paddle boards is stashed in their garages.

And if this year's interest is any indication of its ability to grow, Wai Nani Surf & Paddle is going to need more boards available for rent.

Plus, those Sunday morning excursions, which are full, may need to expand to include Saturday mornings or time for private excursions.

But two of the women are mothers, and two have jobs outside the home. Expanding Wai Nani hours would mean cutting into their precious free time.

"This is a labor of love," said Fey, who brings 10 years of experience as a yoga teacher to Wai Nani.

Her athleticism recently helped her take first place in a women's stand up paddle boarding race in Wisconsin. Fey plans to continue racing, and hopes that her efforts will bring continued attention to Wai Nani.

Looking toward the future, Fey also wants to organize weekend-long excursions for Wai Nani members, or maybe even week-long events like a stand up paddle board journey among the Apostle Islands.

Going forward, the women also hope to bring an environmental edge to Wai Nani. They'd like to organize excursions in which members move along the shorelines of Lake Minnetonka, or other local waterways, cleaning up debris that has gotten tangled in roots and vegetation.

They also hope to attract corporate clients, as stand up paddle boarding is a team building opportunity.

"You don't have to be hard core conditioned to do this," Evans said. For example, she said, her 70-something grandfather loves the sport as do her young children.

Evans, Thompson and Fey are pleased with the outpouring of enthusiasm Wai Nani has met this year, and they hope they can build on that energy.

"We're really excited about year two," Evans said.

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