

Eternal Vigilance and Diligence: The Price of a Clean Lake
by Bill Walker

Wednesday, December 9, 2009.

Little did I know that when I passed up my Wednesday aerobics class to go fishing I would get my exercise in another way. But, I get ahead of myself.

That night, I was awakened by a rare December thunderstorm, and next morning the fog was so dense that I couldn't see land on the other side of my cove. The rains had brought the lake up to full pond for the first time in years. The forecast was for 20-25 mph winds in the afternoon as the weather cleared out. I figured that as soon as the fog cleared I'd go fishing and see what I could catch along banks overhung with bushes at the highwater level and be sure to get back in before the wind reached full strength.

Suddenly it was 9:00 a.m. and the fog had lifted. I loaded up my pontoon boat and set out in the vicinity of Mile Creek Park. After an hour and half I had managed to boat a scrawny 13-inch spotted bass caught on a Carolina-rigged green worm along a shore in about 25 feet of water and a nice fat 18-inch spotted bass on a weighted Zoom super fluke cast right to the bank under some overhanging branches. By this time, I had worked my way northward to where Crow Creek enters the main lake, and there I saw it. Floating by the shore ahead of me was a huge piece of unencapsulated Styrofoam, rubbing up against the shore in the waves and grinding off small pieces on the rock. The last thing I wanted was to have that big block all ground up into little pieces and polluting our clean lake, so I used my trolling motor to pull up to it and to see what I could do. I started by pulling it away from the shore so the waves wouldn't grind off any more pieces. Then I tried to lift it out of the water, but it was far too heavy for me to lift. As I looked at it, I realized it was at least 4 feet by 8 feet and about 1 foot thick in the center, although around the ends, it had already been ground down to about 9 inches thick. It was low in the water, appearing to have absorbed a fair amount of water from floating a long time.

Now the question was, what should I do with it? Leaving it floating there to be ground up along some rocky shore was not an option I wanted to consider. My first thought was to get it out of the water and to a place where someone better equipped could come and get it. I saw a gently sloping point with waves breaking on some shallows. I pulled out my boat hook to push the Styrofoam and, using my trolling motor, slowly moved the Styrofoam to the shallow point where it just barely ran aground at the shore. Then I tied my pontoon boat to a tree and walked over to the Styrofoam. I guess it was Archimedes who said, "Give me a place to stand and I can move the Earth." Well, I wasn't Archimedes, or Hercules. Standing on terra firma, I couldn't budge the Styrofoam enough to even begin to get it out of the water. I could, however, walk out onto the Styrofoam because it was quite stable resting there on the shallow sand just under the water. I stood on it looking down. Now what?

It occurred to me that if I could cut it up into small manageable pieces I could get it at least out of the water. I remembered that I always kept a Buck knife with an 8-inch blade in my fishing equipment. I pulled out the Buck knife, walked out onto the

Styrofoam and tried to slice a 2-foot strip off the end. To my delight the knife cut through the Styrofoam pretty well. It was hard, but I could keep the blade moving with a sawing action. The blade, however, wasn't quite long enough to go all the way through. After I sliced all the way across, I kicked down hard on the 2-foot strip. It broke off, but it was still too heavy for me to lift. I cut the strip in half getting two pieces about 2 feet square. Those pieces I could just barely lift. I estimated them at about 50 lb. each. I dragged them up onto the shore and returned to cut another slice.

The next slice was thicker. I cut it a little less than 2 feet wide to make the pieces easier to carry. After I cut all the way across, kicking it hard didn't break it off. So I then cut it in half and started kicking the smaller squares. That didn't work because the sand underneath supported the pieces against the kicks. I knelt on the big part and pulled up hard on one of the smaller pieces, and it finally sheared off along my cut. Soon I had two more squares on the shore. I repeated the process a few more times and finally had the entire block of Styrofoam on the shore, ten big chunks each weighing 40 to 50 lb. Now what?

I went back onto my boat and found five old bags left over from previous FOLKS Lake Sweeps and five contractor-strength trash bags that I also carry for picking up trash along the lake when I see it. Hmmmm, 10 bags and 10 pieces of Styrofoam: a happy coincidence. I tried bagging one of the pieces and getting it onto my boat. One piece filled the bag all by itself, and I could barely carry it onto my boat. I proceeded with the rest of the bags, stopping to rest after loading five pieces into bags and getting them onto the boat. I was sweating inside my warm layers of clothing when it occurred to me that showing all the pieces sitting there together on the shore would have made a good picture, but I already had loaded five of them, and there was no way I was going to unload them again for the sake of a picture. I'd just have to settle for a picture of the boat full of bagged Styrofoam.

Then I looked up and saw something big in Crow Creek, looking like another piece of Styrofoam. I finished loading the other five pieces of Styrofoam, policed the area, and picked up all the scraps of Styrofoam I had broken off in this clumsy process. I headed out into Crow Creek to investigate the other thing I had seen. Sure enough, approaching the floating block of white, I saw it was another piece of Styrofoam drifting in the wind. This one was smaller, only about 2 feet by 6 feet and a little over a foot thick. It was floating much higher, so I thought it might weigh less and be more manageable. To my delight, when I got next to it and tried to lift it, it seemed light enough to manage, only about 50 lb. I was able to stand it on its end, lift it a little and leverage it over the low railing at the front of my pontoon boat. Now I really had a boat full!

I looked all around and didn't see any more. The wind was getting stronger. I headed over to the Keowee Town Landing. I tied the boat to a tree on the back side close to the trash bin there, unloaded all the Styrofoam and deposited it next to the trash bin for someone to pick up the next time the trash bin was checked.

So, I got my exercise after all. I figure I left about 500 lb. of unencapsulated Styrofoam there at the landing for pickup. I was glad I had carried the Buck knife and all 10 of those heavy-duty trash bags. If we all go prepared to do our share and keep picking up the trash on the lake as we see it, we can keep Lake Keowee clean. Cleanup opportunities are often unpredictable. I suggest that when you boating, be prepared with trash bags and actually look for trash. When you see it, take the time to pick it up and bring it back out of the Lake. I'm doing my part. Please do yours as well!