POSITION PAPER:

Oneida Lake Water Levels

Date: *circa 1995*

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It's Your Lake—Help Us Preserve It!

For many years, New York State's Department of Transportation regulated Oneida Lake's water levels. This agency used the 1950's "rule curve" as a guide and the department's managers were somewhat responsible to public and environmental needs.

However, since the New York State Thruway Authority assumed water level control several years ago, regulations have been set "by the book." This agency follows the rule curve without considering the thousands of sportspersons who use the lake. In addition, by ignoring the guidance standards set by the Department of Transportation, the Thruway Authority diminishes the ecological values and functions that nurture the lake.

Oneida Lake's lowering begins in late August or early September. This action causes a premature end to much pleasure boating because launching, in many locations along the lake's shoreline, becomes difficult. Even boats berthed in marinas must take care when entering the lake. Danger is inherent within this situation.

When the navigational buoys are removed, the lake's water level is further lowered to 368.5 BCD. Boating hazards, normally covered by adequate depths, pose new threats. Late season fishermen and duck hunters have trouble launching and navigating. We maintain that there is no valid scientific justification for the lake's early draw down.

In spring, around ice out, the Caughdenoy Dam's gates are manipulated in order to restore minimum navigation conditions (370.4 BCD) while the buoys are remoored. This usually occurs around April 20. Walleyed pike, however, usually spawn prior to this date. Their spawning shoals maybe exposed by low water conditions. Our walleye population is at a critical nadir and everything must be done to restore it. Low water levels may aggravate the problem.

The lakes winter drawdown creates a "dead zone" between elevation 368.5 and 370.5. Aquatic vegetation's roots freeze, killing invaluable plants. Years of drawdowns have eliminated macrophytes that sheltered young walleyes. Billions of invertebrates are destroyed when the mud in which they burrow solidifies in an icy tomb. Fast drawdowns can trap fish in bay areas. All of these occur yearly – and for no justified environmental reason.

We now have the technology to scientifically manage the lake's level.

Barring catastrophic storms, we can forecast wet and dry weather periods. We can calculate rain run-off from Oneida Lake's
Watershed. We can remotely control dam gates and quickly respond to any emergencies. The hydroelectric industry is deploying pneumatic crest control devices (inflatable rubber dams) to reduce pond fluctuations. New York State should examine deployment of one at Caughdenoy to allow rapid water level control during the non-navigation season.

The OLA would like to see the current winter draw down of Oneida Lake commence when the ice forms. This lowering would descend to the targeted level which would be reached by late February, in plenty of time for the spring thaw. This action would create a more gradual draw down of the lake while benefitting recreational users and the flora and fauna. The winter draw down would cease when ice leaves Oneida Lake and the elevation of water is below 370.4 BCD.