

# Lake James puts focus on land issues

*Large subdivisions have begun to crowd a jewel in Western North Carolina*

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**LAKE JAMES** - Nowhere along the Catawba River does the debate over the land stir such passion as on Lake James.

It has been called the most beautiful lake on the East Coast, and you can see why. Blue-green water quietly laps the shore, and in the distance the Blue Ridge Mountains rise majestic: Table Rock, Hawkshill, Shortoff and Granddasher Mountain.

Only recently have big subdivisions pushed in, the way they have for years on Lake Norman and Lake Wylie. There are so many houses on those two lakes, there's only one beach left on each where the public can swim.

Here, 30 miles or so below the headwaters, a parcel of land 10 times the size of Central Park has been set aside for our use, and we have an unlikely hero to thank.

## Anger takes shape

That's Paul Braum.

In the mid-1970s, Lake James was often so deserted that the few night boaters needed not fear running into anybody else.

Paul Braum was in high school then and would ride his horse 10 miles from Morganton to fish and swim. The woods nearby were used for timber and hunting, and locals pretty much had the run of the land.

"No Trespassing" signs eventually went up, followed by "For Sale" signs.

A few months ago at a boat landing, Braum recalled two things that happened one afternoon in 1998 that turned him into a crusader.

## UNDERSTANDING LAKE JAMES

■ Lake James is named for James B. Duke, one of the founders of Duke Energy. It was built over seven years beginning in 1916 and required three dams - at the Catawba River, the Linville River and Paddy Creek.

Islands in the lake were once hiltops.

■ The lake is currently more than 9 feet below full pond.

■ It covers 6,812 acres and has 150 miles of shoreline west of Morganton.

■ It is the cleanest lake on the Catawba.

He said he took off from the landing in a boat with his wife and son. They were drifting in a cove, watching for wildlife, when two bald eagles flew overhead.

Braum had never seen eagles in the wild in Western North Carolina. He followed them ashore, hoping to see their nest. He found instead a new road and survey tape marking lots. Eight hundred lots, he discovered.

Someone was about to put a development the size of a small town on one of the most beautiful spots on Lake James.

Braum was furious. He motored back to the landing, where the second thing happened that changed him: He heard a wildlife officer tell a mother to get her two boys out of the water. Of 150 miles of shoreline, the public was allowed to swim along only 100 feet.

"They just shut us all out," Braum said. "It's a public lake that became private. It makes me sick."

Braum, who is 47, works sec-

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Two organizations dedicated to protecting Lake James are:

Lake James Environmental Association, established in 1973. [www.ljlea.org](http://www.ljlea.org).  
Footfalls Conservancy of North Carolina. [www.footfallsconservancy.org](http://www.footfallsconservancy.org) or (828) 437-9930.

ond shift as an electrician. He's outspoken. He's more likely to show up on his motorcycle with a bandanna around his head than in a business suit.

With only his passion as a guide, he became the voice of the lake.

## Agitation pays off

He founded Citizens to Save Lake James and started agitating. Other groups joined in, and after six years the state and federal governments had allocated more than \$30 million to buy land. Crescent Resources, a Duke Energy subsidiary, made a one-time gift of \$12.5 million off the price of some of the land to help the deal go through.

About 9,000 acres were set aside for the public.

What Braum did for Lake James, other people are doing for the headwaters, and along a stretch of the Catawba south of Lake Wylie, and in other less populated sections of the river basin. They are racing to raise money to buy land before it's all gone.

In April, when Braum showed a visitor around Lake James, he pointed out of the car window more than a dozen times and announced with glee:

"This is your land."

Next, he steered the visitor through a new subdivision where the streets are so steep, it felt as if the car would run down into the lake. Riding through another development, he pointed out a sliver of sandy beach. That's where he taught his son to swim.

On a poplar tree was a dainty yellow sign decorated with pink flowers: "This beach is private property. Thanks!"

Braum didn't notice the sign at first, and when he did he turned quiet.

"This should be your land," he muttered.

It's important, Braum said, to remember how Crescent Resources came to own the land. Duke Power bought the property in the early 1900s for as little as \$1 an acre to build the lake and create electricity.

Landowners gave up their homes for the public good, some against their will. A lot of the land was never used for electricity, on Lake James and on down the Catawba. Braum thinks it should be public.

"We don't want," he said, "another Lake Norman."

Lake Norman is 65 miles and a world away from Lake James. To get there, the Catawba travels east through Morganton, widens into Lake Rhodhiss and Lake Hickory, then takes a dramatic turn south through Lookout Shoals Lake.

Lake Norman was dammed in 1963, the last and biggest of the lakes Duke Power built, 40 years after Lake James. Unlike Lake James, much of its natural shoreline has disappeared.

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