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Enjoy the lakes from underneath

There's a whole world of activities going on down there, from simple sightseeing to hockey games.

By CHRIS FLEISSNER
cfleissner@madison.com

Warm spring weather is already luring watersport enthusiasts out onto Madison-area lakes. There they cast lures, shred wakes, harness winds and pull oars. Yet while many skim across the surface, reveling in these visible and traditional activities, they are enjoying only a fraction of what the lakes have to offer.

Beneath them lies another world altogether.

At the bottom of many local lakes, scuba divers have the opportunity to see northern pike in their natural habitat and explore the ghostly wreckage of sunken ships. For many involved, diving rivals any above-water recreation imaginable.

"It's the only experience I've had that's both relaxing and exhilarating at the same time," said Ellen Evans, president of Four Lakes Scuba Club. "It's my one chance to be weightless."

Getting involved is simple but the equipment can be a significant financial investment. It is possible to get an entry level certification in

two weekends, Evans said, but sometimes the process can be completed even more quickly. "I've known people to do it in three days," Four Lakes vice president Deb Brookhyser said. "It is intense training, but the instructors are gentle and it's a non-frightening thing."

Four Lakes Scuba Club, a Madison nonprofit organization founded in 1980, organizes scuba diving trips for divers of every skill level and connects members to resources and experts in the field.

"We have members in our club who are instructors and members who have very recently done their

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Four Lakes Scuba Club photo

Members of the Four Lakes Scuba Club prepare for dives in intense underwater environments like this one by playing underwater hockey Monday nights at McFarland High School.

Lakes

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initial training," Evans said. "It's a great place for new people to learn more and experienced people to compare notes on dive sites, destination, equipment and techniques."

Many members are currently staying fit playing weekly underwater hockey games at the McFarland High School swimming pool. Games are \$4 and are open to the public. There are three underwater hockey games remaining and no diving certification is required to play.

After the final underwater hockey game on May 8, members will prepare for the first big club event of the spring season: the annual Take a Stake in the Lakes area cleanup, a Dane County community service project in which members will dive in the four major lakes of Dane County — Mendota, Monona, Waubesa and Ke-

If you go

- What: Underwater Hockey
- Where: McFarland High School, 5101 Farwell St.
- When: Mondays (tonight, May 1, May 8)
- Time: 7:30 to 8:30 p.m.
- Cost: \$4 pool rental fee (first game free)
- Bring: mask, fins, snorkel, swim suit, towel and a glove to protect your hand (no certification required)
- Info: www.fourlakesscubaclub.org or Danny Aerts at 821-0048

gonsa — to remove the accumulated bottles, cans and pieces of fishing and boating paraphernalia they find.

Members often repair and sell the outboard motors, anchors, rods and reels they raise from the depths.

The club will meet with Dane County Watershed Management Coordinator Sue Jones on May 10 to plan for the proj-

ect, which will begin three days later. Club meetings are typically held at the Coliseum Bar, 232 E. Olin Ave., at 7:30 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month.

As the season unfolds, members will be able to enjoy a variety of underwater excursions to sites in the Great Lakes and to scenic spots like Jackson County's Wazee Lake, a 355-foot deep former iron mining quarry known for its exceptionally clear water. In past years, members have also arranged trips to Florida and the Caribbean. Night dives, muck dives, ice dives and wreck dives are a few examples of the various types of dives.

"It's hard to say what a typical dive is like," Evans said, "They are all so different. I find it very relaxing and quiet. The best dives are when I see something new: a new shipwreck, a new animal in the Caribbean."

Brookhyser said that if she didn't have to refill her oxygen tanks, she would rarely return

to the surface. "It's the most fun thing I do in my life," she said. "It's so beautiful. It's serene and awe-inspiring. You become one of the fish."

Conceivably the best part of the experience, however, derives from the camaraderie of the people involved. Evans even met her significant other while diving.

"It's a better story than meeting in a bar," Evans said. "You don't know what you're going to drag up from a quarry at night."

To minimize the risks inherent to the sport, Four Lakes divers practice the buddy system and use hand signals on every dive. Brookhyser said that it can be scary when the boat is out of sight upon surfacing or when a mask is knocked off while submerged.

"Diving is one of the most dangerous things you can do, but with the right training, it is one of the safest sports," she said.