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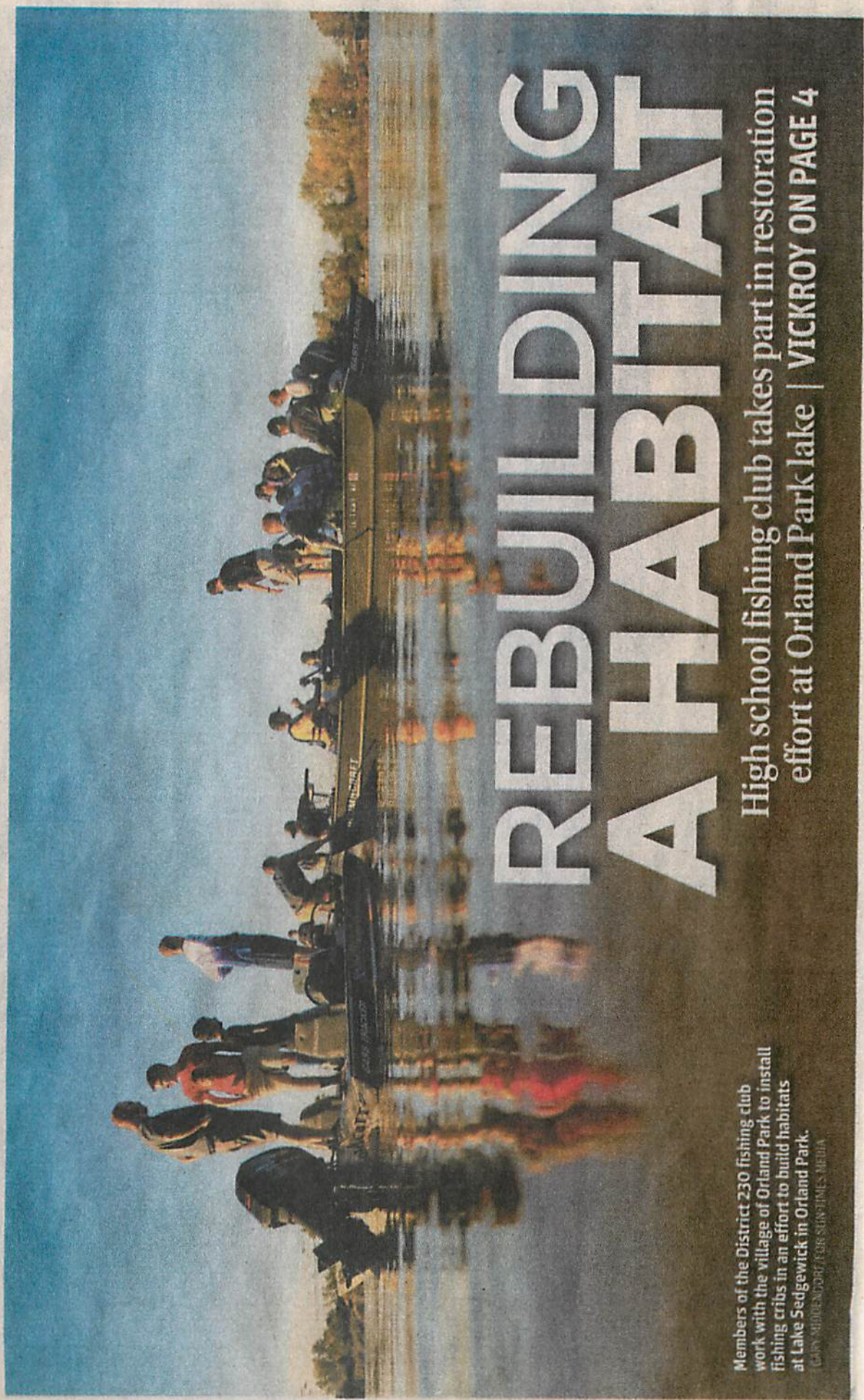
PEOPLE UP NORTH JUST DON'T GET IT

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REBUILDING A HABITAT

Members of the District 230 fishing club work with the village of Orland Park to install fishing cribs in an effort to build habitats at Lake Sedgewick in Orland Park.

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High school fishing club takes part in restoration effort at Orland Park lake | VICKROY ON PAGE 4

SD 230 fishing club casts eye toward future



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Fishermen often brag about what they take out of the water, but on this beautiful afternoon, the pride was all about giving back.

About 20 members and their coaches from Consolidated High School District 230's bass fishing club trolled across Orland Park's Lake Sedgewick on Tuesday in the first wave of a long-term project to help advance the habitat of its fish population.

Led by John Bartgen, head bass fishing coach and a social studies teacher at Andrew High School, the group, which was scattered across six sleek bass boats, dropped 14 fish cribs into the water. Half of them formed a simulated weed line, or reef, while the others made an underwater cluster.

The day's mission was to install the cribs on the lake floor so they could start enhancing the feeding cycle for the bass, bluegill, crappie and walleye there, Bartgen said. But the larger, long-term goal is to give students an understanding of lake maintenance and fish habitat, as well as a respect for natural resources, he said.

"We teach kids how to catch fish, but we also think it's important to spend time teaching them to appreciate the lakes and the fish for what they are," Bartgen said. "And it's important to give back to your community."

The service project — a collaborative effort among the school district, Orland Park and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources — will help wildlife experts get a handle on how the fish population is doing in Lake Sedgewick and enable them to set up a more accurate restocking plan for years to come.

Sandburg High School coach Scott Plaisier said the cribs sit on

the bottom and basically act as plant life. Plankton attach to them, drawing smaller bait fish, which in turn attract larger fish.

"It's a cycle," said Plaisier, who also teaches physical education.

And so should be the give-and-take among fishermen when it comes to protecting their environment.

"It's a huge thing for our young people to take part in this project," Plaisier said. "Obviously, we practice catch-and-release. You want the fish to be there for generations and generations, right? So this is a way for students to understand how the lake can be a good product for fish for not only right now but for their kids and their kids' kids in years to come."

In all, about 110 students from Andrew, Sandburg and Stagg, many of them girls, are members of the club, which meets throughout the year but competes primarily in the spring.

Sandburg freshmen Conor Ferguson and Isaac Poofsky joined the club because fishing is big in their families. Conor's uncle is an avid fisherman in Florida. Isaac's family spends a lot of time fishing at Lake of the Woods in Michigan.

John Martin, an Andrew junior, said fishing gives him "peace of mind." Club membership not only helps him learn more about the sport of bass fishing but also helps teens who don't have a lot of equipment earn some by answering questions correctly.

At the end of his freshman year, John said, his coaches presented him with a new rod and reel.

"It's also good to do things like this," he said of the lake project. "(It) will help repopulate the lake with bait fish and predator fish."

Melissa O'Donnell, whose son, Josh, is a senior at Andrew and his team's captain, was among the parent volunteers who lent a boat to the cause.

"I think this project is phenomenal," she said. "They need more structure for the fish, and it's nice for the kids to be involved in the community. They fish these waters. They should help maintain them."

Josh said fishing teaches him patience and life skills. He was only too happy to give back to his



Andrew High School senior Josh O'Donnell loads up his boat Tuesday with fishing cribs to be placed throughout Lake Sedgewick in Orland Park. | GARY MIDDENDORF/FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

favorite pastime.

"There's not a lot of fish on the bottom of lake because it's man-made," he said. "So we'll put in the cribs and give the fish a place to hang out. That will help boost the population."

Matt Catona, a junior at Andrew, was among the students who helped build the cribs last spring.

"We made them out of 5-gallon buckets, cement, PVC and flex tubing," he said. "We're going to drop them in, and they're going to stay in place because of the cement. After a while, they'll gain algae and become a place where the small fish go to feed."

It took just more than an hour to complete the crib mission. After all of them were submerged, Bartgen steered his boat back over the drop area, while Matt Catona and Collin Kusko, also a junior at Andrew, checked the fish-finder monitor to make sure the cribs were in place.

Next up in the ongoing project, Bartgen said, will be a visit from the DNR on Oct. 3. After the wildlife experts electroshock the water,

stunning the fish and causing them to float to the surface, the fishing club members will help collect, measure and weigh them before returning them to the water.

"That will give us an idea of what the fish populations are here," Bartgen said. "And it will help in our long-term goal of ultimately stocking the lake."

Jim Corcoran, Sandburg coach and science teacher, said the lake surveys will be conducted every couple of years.

"We'll do a sampling, and then from there we'll use the data to determine how to stock. We'll also continue to advance the habitat by putting in more cribs and maybe other projects like dredging," he said.

Corcoran said District 230 teachers plan to apply for a grant of about \$5,000 to enhance the current stocking program and pay for more habitat.

Ron Beaudry, who works for Orland Park's parks and recreation department and who places orders for fish each spring and fall, said

working with the fishing club will help make the current restocking program more scientific.

"This is the biggest thing for this lake ever," Beaudry said.

Bartgen, who grew up in a family who fishes, said the secret to success in a sport that may seem to the onlooker to be one of hit or miss is practice.

"Fishing is more than just sitting in a chair with a bobber. There's a whole science to it. Wind, air temperature, sunny or overcast, water depth and structure all determine where and how to catch fish," he said. "There's a saying that (Andrew assistant coach) Jimmy Flynn says all the time, '90 percent of the fish are always in 10 percent of the water.' Finding that 10 percent of the water is the science behind fishing."

As the bass boats gathered at the south end of the lake to recap the afternoon's mission and applaud their success, Bartgen said, "This was pretty cool. There aren't too many teenagers in the state of Illinois doing this."