

Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage

Reconnecting with the real

Written by Susan Baur



Channelling the strength of older women and defying expectations in the process, the Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage travel all over Cape Cod, hauling trash out of freshwater ponds as part of their mission to energise both people and planet. For these women, swimming is all about changing the world, one pond at a time.

On a late summer afternoon, I swam, as I had for a dozen years, along the shoreline of a pond in eastern Massachusetts near the Atlantic coast. Wearing a mask and snorkel, I could see a net of refracted light moving across the muddy bottom below. My breathing slowed; muscles relaxed. I felt a sense of gratitude, indistinguishable from hope, spread through my body. How wonderful to swim in a beautiful world crafted by nature, untouched by humans.

Exactly at that moment I spotted what looked like a cluster of poison mushrooms ahead of me. Their puckered white heads just poked through the soft mud. Two more strokes and I realised, in horror, that I was looking at a dozen golf balls. The next day I returned with two swimmers and a kayaker to clean that pond. The Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage was in business.

OLAUG, as we call ourselves, is now composed of 30 women between the ages of 65 and 85 who, 20 times a season, swim for over an hour – collecting rookg of garbage between them on almost every dive. Since 2023, when we got going in earnest, we have collected over 2,700kg of junk. A toilet, the back end of a Corvette, a steel and aluminium dock, lead pipes, a gigantic coil of wire and always, always rotting tires. There is no doubt we have become skilled garbage collectors, but in terms of what OLAUG does for ponds, communities, and ourselves, trash removal is the tip of the iceberg.

From the start, OLAUG has involved the communities it serves. When a pond is scouted in early May and found to have enough trash to make a clean-up worthwhile, the homeowners around that pond are notified and asked to help. Will they provide parking in two or three spots? Kayaks for the trash collection? Hot drinks and home-made cookies? OLAUG is a volunteer organisation; we clean ponds in exchange for cake and cocoa.

On the day of the dive, some eight to 12 swimmers arrive along with OLAUG-trained kayakers and a beach boss who distributes safety equipment, including walkie-talkies. In 2024, we had a full-on medical emergency out there in the pond – a swimmer's life was saved by the decisive action of her kayaker. Since then, we've made sure every pair of swimmers has an OLAUG kayaker as well as a volunteer boater to collect the garbage pulled up from the pond floor.

When everyone is in place around the pond, the signal is given. Swimmers and kayakers move into the water heading both right and left from each launch site. In less than a minute, up go the legs, down go the swimmers, then up come beer cans, dog toys, fishing lures, ropes, cups, a toy gun that hasn't been manufactured for 60 years, a bikini, cell phone, and fishing pole. The hunt is on. Some women want the big stuff – a massive truck battery or a cement-filled tire once used as a mooring. Others want to rid the pond of the chemicals found in spent fireworks and paint cans. My personal favourites are squirt guns, lead pipes, and action figures. It's a good day when I can fasten a G.I. Joe, a Barbie, or, once, a rubber alligator to the kayak working with me.

After 30 minutes of swimming and diving close to shore, the kayakers raise their paddles. This is the signal for swimmers to move some 20 or 30ft offshore and head back. Now searching for trash in deep water, the dives become more strenuous.

'Assistance!' a swimmer shouts, and the word goes out that something too large or numerous for a single swimmer to retrieve has been found.

'I don't know what it is,' the swimmer tells others who have gathered around her and now peer through the cloudy water. 'On the count of three?'

Down go the swimmers, up comes an astro-turf putting green, complete with flag.

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At other times – a waterlogged futon, a crib mattress, or a dozen old whiskey bottles left 100 years ago in an ice fishing hut. The kayaker helps haul whatever she’s handed across the bow of her muddy boat or drops it into a basket wedged between her knees.

Back onshore, the homeowners who have come to watch are amazed. From above, their pond looks pristine, but here is evidence of hundreds of years of misuse. No-one has ever cleaned these ponds before. No-one knew what was in them.

‘We can do better,’ the onlookers say to themselves. Armed with the evidence, they ask their neighbours not to drive golf balls into the water any more and to dispose of cans and bottles in the new trash cans installed on the beach. One after another, OLAUG re-energises pond communities.

In addition to removing garbage, OLAUG inspires women and men of all ages to stay active and engaged. Not only does our waiting list of women who want to join OLAUG far outnumber the group itself, but women in nine US states and two European countries have asked to form chapters of their own. Because we believe that the most underutilised resource in America is, as Margaret Mead put it, ‘the zest of post-menopausal women’, we are working to create the manuals and training programmes needed to take OLAUG into the wider world.

What our admirers want more than a worthy purpose, more than fitness, community, and camaraderie, is the joy that radiates from every member at the end of a dive. Onlookers suspect that the real treasure OLAUG has found is not a thing – not the biggest tire or the most whimsical plastic owl once placed on the top of Trash Mountain. The real treasure is something else.

When swimming, ‘mind and body go off somewhere together in unselfconscious bliss,’

wrote Roger Deakin. ‘The blood sings, the water yields; you are in a state of grace, and every breath gets deeper and more satisfying.’

And this happy state of mind gives us, continues Oliver Sacks in his essay ‘Water Babies,’ ‘a sense of well-being so extreme that it becomes at times a sort of ecstasy. There is a total engagement in the act of swimming, in each stroke, and, at the same time, the mind can float free, become spellbound.’

Here we get to the heart of what powers OLAUG. In searching for garbage in the waters of Cape Cod ponds, we are so focused on finding the line or colour that doesn’t belong here that we forget ourselves and the rest of the world. For the timeless minutes it takes to clean a pond, we are free from all obligations, all politics, all anxieties. We are simply capable bodies in the water with a strenuous but worthwhile job to do.

But we are not romantics. OLAUG members understand that aging involves loss. Our physical and mental strengths decline, and every year one of us loses a body part, has a joint replaced, gets Long Covid or loses a spouse. But at the same time, the unplanned combination of experiences that OLAUG involves us in expands our lives. New enthusiasms flourish, and we feel far more deeply connected to the planet and people we love.

In today’s hard and confusing times, there is a deep hunger for reconnecting with the real – the real hand that grips your cold, wet hand and helps pull you out of the water; the real tractor tyre covered in velvety green algae that needs to be lifted, somehow, out of the pond; and the real shiver that runs through your body as the sun comes out from behind a cloud and streamers of light slant through the water you love. Outdoor swimmers live in the real world, and when a group of them set their minds on a goal, it will be accomplished to the benefit of all.

Find out more about OLAUG via olaug-ma.com. Susan Baur started swimming seriously in her 50s. Soon becoming obsessed with swimming in ponds and the turtles she found there, she wrote *Swimming With Turtles: How Wonder Reconnects Us To The Natural World*, which will be published in 2026. Susan founded OLAUG in the hope of conserving the turtles’ natural habitat.

