

White Paper 2014 - Martin Auer, Alexa Bradley & Nancy Auer

We believe that the people living around the Great Lakes must come together and begin to regard these waters and all their ecological connections as a *Commons*: an entire ecosystem in which we all share responsibility, if we want all life therein to survive and thrive. Humankind finds itself at a critical juncture; we must begin to make radically different personal, management and governing choices than we have, if we want to sustain the planet and our lives and those of generations to come. This paper is a call to develop a way of thinking about and caring for these great water bodies into the future. We look both at the cost of our continued unrelenting extraction and misuse of precious natural resources and what can be learned from commons and indigenous understandings and approaches to water. Our goal is to provide food for reflection on a bold and significant change in how we might restructure our lives.

Ecosystem disturbances visited upon the Great Lakes in the 21st Century include some that are surprisingly similar to those that were held at bay in the decades since the signing of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement in 1972. These current disturbances are seen in the spread and a growing diversity of invasive species, the increasing discharge of phosphorus from point and nonpoint sources, and the atmospheric deposition of more ubiquitous toxic chemicals (e.g. mercury). Other threats continue to surface including those related to energy extraction, pharmaceuticals and climate change. It is *the thesis* of this paper that the larger Great Lakes community of citizens, scientists, policy makers, and regulators is poorly positioned to successfully address these disturbances to the degree achieved in the 20th Century. Three considerations are cited here as supporting that point of view.

First, if we think of scale (local → regional → global), the scope of these problems has grown to the point where some consider them to be intractable. Ecosystem disruptions addressed from the 1970s through the 1990s offered targets amenable to mitigation, e.g. a spatially localized and vulnerable life stage for the sea lamprey, an effective and economically feasible technology for point source control of phosphorus and a specific chemical, toxaphene, which could be eliminated through regulation in commerce. Today, we face trillions of mussels distributed over millions of hectares of lake bottom, unprecedented loads of bioavailable phosphorus delivered from highly agricultural watersheds that have essentially defied management and a toxic substance, mercury, the management of which is opposed by many for economic and energy policy reasons, and more. One could be forgiven for viewing these disruptions as intractable.

Second is a societal failure to disengage from what might be termed a Manifest Destiny environmental worldview. It is not difficult to imagine that North American settlers moving west in the 1800s viewed natural resources as being inexhaustible, in fact, infinite. Today, many cling to the notion of the Lakes as infinite and ever resilient, despite clear evidence of humankind's impact on them and, more broadly, the global environment. It has been well demonstrated that without deep-seated citizen concern and robust involvement, little success can be expected in addressing environmental assaults through in policy and regulation¹. Thus, we find ourselves facing seemingly intractable problems, while lacking sufficient community outcry and action to catalyze a change in course.

Third, we believe that the Great Lakes are presently facing an *end game* scenario¹. The challenge that we face is clearly evident in the degree of development experienced near large cities (e.g. Toronto, Ontario) or in the intensity of agriculture within certain watersheds (e.g. Ohio's Maumee River). More broadly, an

emerging challenge is seen in the increasing presence of ecologically-disruptive pharmaceuticals throughout the Great Lakes Basin. We find ourselves revisiting and responding to problems strikingly similar to those of the 20th Century, but having ‘no obvious way to win’. We cannot ‘find a win when there is no obvious way to win’ without both a paradigm shift and a more complete engagement of the Lakes community, the driving force in the policy and regulatory processes. Citizen *re-engagement* and expansion of the grassroots base will require a *metanoia*, a change in the way humans perceive the nature and value of the Great Lakes and the immediacy and significance of a commitment to effective management.

Change is needed at two levels to create ‘a way where there is no way’. At one level humankind must be encouraged to develop or re-establish a reverence for the Great Lakes and this occurs at a much deeper level than do concepts such as ‘beneficial use’ or ‘ecosystem services.’ There must be a view of the Great Lakes as a **Commons**, i.e., as a system critical to sustaining our lives and the lives of the organisms and natural systems which sustain us. On a second level humankind must come together as a community, as representatives of that Commons, bringing their reverence, knowledge, experience and insight to bear on matters of Great Lakes management and governance. It is of value to the Commoners to realize that their voice matters and that their actions are vital to how we care for the Lakes, the ecosystems that they host and their connectedness to the whole Earth.

It is critical that there be continued exploration of diverse approaches to water stewardship and ecological governance⁴ that may be applied in achieving a sustainable future. Under an endgame scenario it is no longer sufficient to ‘seek a win’ using a reactive, micro-restoration approach; we need to change at the level of human thought and engagement. We see much to draw on and the possibility of a path forward in commons and indigenous water governance, both long-standing traditions that reflect a commitment to shared responsibility, the integrity of the ecosystem, a multi-generational perspective, and community-wide stewardship. We have offered some preliminary thoughts on how this change in thinking about our waters could begin and, in particular, the value of Commons and indigenous people's approaches, but are seeking a wider discussion. If you are interested in helping develop and influence the thinking and implementation of new ways to create reverence for the Great Lakes and enable their sustainability for generations to come, please share your contact information with us for further opportunities.

¹ End game - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chess_endgame

⁴ from Alexa Bradley

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