



THE GREAT LAKES REGION

An interconnected web of life

importance to people

- The benefits people receive from the Great Lakes are immeasurable. One can only say with certainty that the millions of people living in the Great Lakes basin are inextricably connected to the natural abundance around them. They depend on healthy ecological systems for drinking water, food, flood and drought mitigation, and natural resources that support industry, jobs, shipping and tourism.

Quick Facts

- About 37 million people live in the basin. That's one in every four Canadians and one in every 10 U.S. citizens. More than 26 million of these people rely on the lakes for drinking water.
- About 125 million tons of cargo—almost half a ton for every person living in the United States—ship each year between the basin and the markets of the world.
- More than 60 million people annually visit the many parks that dot the lakes' shores.
- One-third of the basin's land is used for agriculture, which feeds millions of people within the basin and throughout the world.
- If the Great Lakes region formed its own country, it would be the world's third largest economy, surpassed only by the United States and Japan. Gross domestic product in 2000 reached nearly \$2 trillion.
- About one-third—or 4.2 million—of the United States' recreational boats reside here, with another 2 million in Canada. Together, they generate hundreds of millions of dollars every year in the sale of licenses, equipment and boat rentals.



Lake Superior © Photos.com

The Great Lakes are a natural marvel and a globally important resource. Containing 20 percent of the world's fresh water and 95 percent of North America's, the lakes are the envy of people throughout the world, especially those in water stressed countries.

Sailors nicknamed the lakes the "Sweetwater Seas" because of the valuable, drinkable nature of the water, on which 26 million people depend. The lakes, however, give so much more than water.

"We each depend far more than we may realize on the web of life of which we are a part. The food and fresh water that keep us alive, the wood that gives us shelter and furniture, even the climate and the air we breathe: all are products of the living systems of the planet," a team of international scientists recently wrote in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, an effort launched by the United Nations.

Their thoughts couldn't be truer for the Great Lakes region, where this interconnected web of life includes large



Split Rock Lighthouse State Park © Mark Godfrey/TNC.

boreal forests in the north that give way to the mixed and deciduous forests and tallgrass prairies in the south. Wetlands, marshes, swamps, bogs and fens dot the landscape. Wild rivers ripple through the region, connecting inland lakes and tributary watersheds to the great basins.

These amazing natural resources support industry, supply drinking water and food to millions, and provide a moderated climate and vast recreational opportunities.

Growing Concerns

If you live near a Great Lake, you may have heard of algal blooms, fish consumption advisories and beach closings, evidence of growing ecological problems. Increasing pressures from incompatible land use practices, changes in water flow patterns, invasive species, incompatible resource extraction and climate change are taking their toll. Scientists are in clear agreement: The ecological health of the Great Lakes region is in danger.

Strategic Action

If stress on the lakes and their surrounding lands continues, it would spell the end of the Great Lakes as we know them. That's why The Nature Conservancy works throughout the region to restore health to the lakes and their inland aquatic systems. A variety of

tactics is helping ensure the continued vitality of this globally significant region.

Conservancy state programs, working in each of the states adjacent to the Great Lakes, are protecting important areas. Scientists with the Great Lakes Program are supporting these efforts with new research and the development of important tools, practices and strategies, which will help protect the region's ecological vitality. Although a great deal remains to be done, this important work has yielded impressive results.



Dwarf lake iris © Robert A Kleppin

A Roadmap for Conservation

The Nature Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy of Canada embarked on a momentous study with partners to identify the lands and waters important to conserving the diversity of life found in the Great Lakes region. The result was the Binational Conservation Blueprint for the Great Lakes which identifies ecologically vital conservation areas in both countries.

New Practices

In working landscapes, poorly-built roads—used to access northern forests that are vital to timber production—can fragment streams, lowering water quality and hurting fish. The Conservancy is leading educational workshops on the design of road-stream crossings and is replacing several to restore healthy water flows. Similarly, in agricultural landscapes, scientists are testing a new drainage ditch designed like a natural stream. By creating best practices through collaboration with these important industries, the Conservancy is reducing the strain sometimes caused by agriculture, timber production and development

New Tools

Invasive species wreak havoc on aquatic systems. The Great Lakes Program is working with research, policy and management partners on developing ways to forecast where new invaders are coming from, how to stop them and how to prevent the spread of those already here.

Strategy Development

Alvars are glacially formed environments that support a unique array of life. In the late 1990s, the Conservancy brought together a group of scientists to identify where alvars existed, what threatened them and strategies to protect them. The impact from this work is evident today, as many alvars remain protected. This model is being used to rank and conserve the lakes' islands, of which there are more than 30,000, as well as their coastlines, rivers and other important natural communities.

contact information

The Nature Conservancy
Great Lakes Program
8 South Michigan Avenue
Suite 2301
Chicago, Illinois 60603
tel (312) 759-8017
fax (312) 759-8409

nature.org/greatlakes