

## An Overview of the Great Lakes Project:

A GLOBAL PRIORITY IN THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S CAMPAIGN FOR A SUSTAINABLE PLANET

Scientists, scouring the heavens for another biological presence like our own, long to find one marker above all others—water. Without water, life as we know it is not possible. Because this chemical substance is so indispensable, when The Nature Conservancy began choosing the seven priorities that would drive our Campaign for a Sustainable Planet, we appropriately devoted one to freshwater, naming it “Lakes and Rivers: The Lifeline for People and Wildlife.”

Life gathers wherever fresh waters are found, providing sustenance, energy and habitats for all Earth's creatures, including humankind. But in these times of population growth and exploding resource demands, and in a world of ever-increasing political and economic complexity, we must look ahead and anticipate the conservation needs of our Earth's freshwater capital to assure its health for future generations.

Through our newly launched Campaign for a Sustainable Planet, The Nature Conservancy will address this challenge by directing more resources than ever before to restorative and protective conservation applications for some of the most important rivers and lakes of the world.

In addition to the Great Lakes, the freshwater priorities targeted by the Campaign for a Sustainable Planet include: the Mississippi River, the Colorado River, Southern U. S. Rivers, Australia's Murray Darling Basin, Pacific Salmon Ecosystems, the Yangtze River, the Zambezi River, the Paraguay-Parana River system, the Rivers of the Andes, and “Rivers for Life,” an effort to integrate the ecological concepts and fundamentals that apply to freshwater ecosystems around the globe.

### GREAT LAKES CONSERVATION

Lying at the heart of the North American continent, the Great Lakes cover more than 94,000 square miles and drain more than twice as much land. More accurately described as inland seas, the lakes hold an estimated 6 quadrillion gallons of water one-fifth of the world's usable fresh surface water supply.

People in the Great Lakes region and beyond depend on this vast ecological system for food, natural resources and services that support industry, jobs, international shipping and tourism, as well as a quality of life that is second to none. The Great Lakes provide drinking water to more than 40 million people in Canada and the United States. The Lakes play a key role in influencing climate in the basin. They also provide habitat

for 20% of all fish species in North America and are an essential resource for hundreds of millions of birds each year, who use flyway corridors and over 30,000 islands found in the open waters of the Lakes to rest and refuel during spring and fall migrations.

The Great Lakes region is a major population center for both the United States and Canada, and unsustainable use of land and water pose enormous threats to the health and balance of biodiversity and the entire Great Lakes ecosystem.

### GREAT LAKES IMPERATIVE

The Great Lakes Project is an ambitious new collaborative effort among The Nature Conservancy's eight state programs and Canadian partners bordering a global freshwater priority – The Great Lakes.

The Nature Conservancy's 2015 goal and vision, articulated by the Campaign for a Sustainable Planet, compels us to build on and enhance the Conservancy's long history and tradition of site-based conservation through state-based programs, and reach for a new model to meet the needs and demands of one of the world's most important freshwater ecosystems.

The Nature Conservancy's unique niche is innovation, science, and market-based strategies, and significant contributions to conservation are taking place through the Conservancy's efforts and partnerships across the region. Prior to launch of the Campaign for a Sustainable Planet, our efforts included a science-based study incorporating Conservancy and partner data from throughout the region that resulted in a conservation “blueprint” and map illustrating 501 individual areas targeted for conservation action.

Our efforts have also included significant landscape-scale projects such as the “working forest” initiatives launched in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, protecting hundreds of thousands of acres of forestland and water through public/private partnerships that incorporate traditional land protection methods along with sustainable timber harvests. Our efforts have also encompassed planning at the large lake basin scale, for example the work that has been done to create a Conservation Action Plan for Lake Ontario by the Conservancy's Central and Western New York field office and its partners.

Yet without a more coordinated, integrated, and systematic approach to Great Lakes conservation, we will fail to make the best use of our capabilities, fail to address basin-wide challenges that cannot be addressed through state actions alone, fail to achieve the tangible lasting results at the scale required and, ultimately, fall short of our mission.

With the important role partners play in our success and our mission, greater commitment to collaboration and integration among the state programs will expand our capability for more meaningful and effective collaboration and co-creation with our partners.

Defined and bound by one of the largest freshwater ecosystems in the world, our programs face an opportunity to contribute to needed solutions for freshwater conservation around the world. With five Great Lakes, two countries, and one chance to find a more effective path forward to protect one of the world's freshwater priorities, it is imperative that we try.

## COLLECTIVE VISION AND GOALS

Our 10-year vision for success is to assure a sustaining, healthy, and resilient Great Lakes ecosystem, where the connection between natural systems and the quality of human life is valued, and where the places that sustain all life endure for future generations.

To achieve this vision, The Nature Conservancy has launched an unprecedented initiative in which we will work with partners to ensure the Great Lakes is among the best managed ecosystems in the world.

The goals we seek to achieve through our collective 10-year vision are to:

- Achieve a net gain of 1 million acres in protected areas, working lands, and improved ecosystem conditions in the Great Lakes basin;
- Advance the protection of 20 priority watersheds across the Great Lakes basin;
- Maintain the health and function of 15 coastal reaches across the basin;
- Recover open-water food webs and habitats of the Great Lakes.
- Support protection of priority large lake ecosystems of the world.

## KEY STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

These strategies, as well as the goals just mentioned, were drafted by the Great Lakes Board of State Directors in 2007, and are outlined below. These strategies and their associated objectives, plans, outcomes and timelines will serve to guide us as we work to implement our 10 year vision and goals.

### Strategy 1 – Achieve tangible results at scale by:

- Creating a network of protected areas in forest, prairie, coastline and inland waters.
- Assuring protected lands and waters that continue to work for people in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and urban settings;
- Achieving natural flow and hydrologic function and health through protection of priority watersheds in the Great lakes basin;
- Expanding conservation impact to the coastal and open water systems including benthic (bottom) and pelagic (open water column) zones.

### Strategy 2: Leverage our impact by:

- Developing basin-wide capital investment strategies that seek to leverage public dollars to protect the Great Lakes including: the Farm Bill; a new \$250 million Great Lakes Coastal Heritage Act; bond initiatives for Great Lakes protection in key states; state tax incentive legislation; and the Great Lakes Restoration Act.
- Encouraging intergovernmental treaties, agreements and agencies to adopt a true ecosystem management approach and common platform for cooperation among large lake basins including: the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement; the Great Lakes Compact; aquatic invasive species policies to achieve basin-wide prevention, early-detection and rapid-response protocols; climate change policies; and prescribed fire policies.
- Revolutionizing private philanthropic giving and investment strategies in the Great Lakes by creating a Great Lakes Challenge Fund and developing market-based tools for investing in conservation.
- Realizing global impact by transferring resources and learning from large lake basin management experiences in the Great Lakes region to other priority large lake systems of the world.

### Strategy 3 – Build strong, science-based knowledge and public awareness by:

- Developing a broad-based conservation research agenda in partnership with top scientists and academic institutions that leverages improvements to the Great Lakes ecosystems.
- Establishing demonstration projects to facilitate learning and leverage our existing successes and knowledge through systematic replication in new areas.
- Understanding and responding to the impact of climate change and aquatic invasive species.
- Creating new tools and pilot projects for freshwater management solutions including assessment of water withdrawal impacts and water management certification programs.

- Developing ecosystem services models to estimate the economic value of the contributions of natural resources for use in policy and decision-making.
- Establishing a learning network of conservation practitioners addressing the large lake basins.
- Building a widespread, informed community-based action plan.
- Developing a Great lakes “scorecard” to track progress and measure the effectiveness of our efforts.

## PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

There is a very crowded organizational field working on Great Lakes issues, and The Nature Conservancy has significant leverage opportunities by introducing its science-based biodiversity mission into policy and decision making processes. Here are some of the highlights:

### Canada

Nature Conservancy of Canada – NCC shares a mission to promote biodiversity and is represented on the Great Lakes Board of State Directors. NCC has conducted ecoregional planning on the north shores of the lakes, with supplemental staffing and funding from TNC. NCC and TNC’s Central and Western NY field office are collaborating on a Lake Ontario plan that is being used as a model for a large lake planning approach on the other Great Lakes. A formal partnership agreement and Memorandum of Understanding between TNC and NCC was formed in the late 1990s.

### Quasi-Governmental/Bi-national Organizations

These are unique to the Great Lakes and represent significant leverage opportunities through policy and funding:

- International Joint Commission—established by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, a binational agreement between the U.S. and Canada. The IJC historically focused primarily on water quality, and has been moving toward an ecosystem approach to protecting the two countries’ shared waters, through administering the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.
- Council of Great Lakes Governors, which led development of the Great Lakes Compact, an inter-state compact that must be authorized by Congress, and that will allow states in the Great Lakes to make joint decisions related to utilization of water resources.
- Great Lakes Protection Fund –provides funding for restoration and protection; all states in the Great Lakes, except Indiana, contribute financially to the fund.
- Great Lakes Commission – a binational commission that focuses on the use of shared resources, both water and related natural resources of the basin and St. Lawrence River.

- Other institutions that may provide partnership opportunities in the future: Great Lakes Fisheries Commission, Council of Great Lakes Industries, and the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust.

## U.S. Federal Agencies

These public agencies provide federal funding resources, enforce laws, conduct research and monitoring efforts, establish rules and implement policy within the federal jurisdictions of the Great Lakes:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Great Lakes National Program Office

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Department of Agriculture (USFS and Farm Bill funding are administered by USDA)

Department of Interior (U.S. Park Service and Bureau of Land Management)

## Land Trusts and Foundations

There is a well-developed network of local land trusts throughout the Great Lakes basin. Also included are regional land trusts such as Heart of the Lakes, Gathering Waters, and Land Trust Alliance. TNC has good relationships with them and works in a collaborative and non-duplicative, non-competitive way. In addition, there are significant Great Lakes programs within Ducks Unlimited, National Wildlife Federation, The Conservation Fund, and Trust for Public Land. TNC has collaborated with these organizations on several site projects in the past, and there is an opportunity to develop a more systematic comprehensive partnership with these organizations in the future around Great Lakes issues.

There are several large foundations that have strong programmatic interests in Great Lakes issues. We are already working with many of them including: Gund Foundation (Cleveland, OH), Joyce Foundation (Chicago, IL), National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (MN), W. K. Kellogg Foundation (MI), Kresge Foundation (MI), and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (MI).

## Research Universities

TNC works with major research institutions in each state in the region, and there are several Conservancy staff with joint faculty appointments. An inventory of these partnerships must be taken to fully appreciate the scope of engagement across the region and to create greater efficiencies and opportunities for Great Lakes partnership. For now, there are known partnerships with researchers at University

of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, Michigan State University, University of Michigan, and a unique collaborative partnership on aquatic invasive species with Notre Dame.

#### Other Non-Profit Organizations

TNC interacts with a large number of Great Lakes policy and advocacy groups, often on project-specific issues, on committees in which our science and data can provide value, and on policy questions related to Great Lakes issues. Examples include the Alliance for the Great Lakes, Healing our Waters, and Great Lakes United, to mention a few. These examples highlight just a few of the wide array of partners we can work with to make the Great Lakes among the best managed ecosystems in the world.

#### LEADERSHIP

Many strategic steps are being taken to pursue an integrated approach in the Great Lakes that will strengthen a shared vision, leadership, and management of our Great Lakes work to protect this globally-important freshwater priority.

The Great Lakes Board of State Directors is playing an important role in leading this collaborative effort. This board, formed in 2005, is expanding its role and effort to achieve the goals and vision outlined by the Campaign for a Sustainable Planet.

One of the steps taken by the Board to achieve that vision is this first-ever meeting of The Nature Conservancy's executive team, trustees, staff leadership, and friends from all the Great Lakes states, and our Canadian partner NCC, here on Mackinac Island.

Another critical action of the Great Lakes Board of State Directors is the development of a joint vision and set of goals. As noted previously, this document is the "hands on" tool we will use to guide us as we work to implement our 10-year vision and goals for the Campaign, and builds on and expands a Great Lakes strategic alignment plan developed in 2006. A copy of this document is provided at the end of this overview.

Similarly, more detailed plans stemming from the Great Lakes goals and objectives are being developed through collaboration among conservation staff leadership and management. The lake basin approach is a primary organizing principle around which the Great Lakes states can base a more integrated approach to the Conservancy's conservation efforts in the region, an approach that has already been successfully modeled by TNC's Central & Western New York Chapter and partners.

To this end, Lake Basin teams have been established for each Great Lake, with team leaders and associated work charters. Learning networks and convenings are already underway to bring together the needed skills to embrace the Great Lakes vision. For example, science and lake basin leadership across the region is convening in May

2008 to begin the development of a more integrated, comprehensive regional science agenda for the Great Lakes. In addition, Great Lakes basin conservation was addressed at the annual TNC Central U.S. Region's science and stewardship meeting in February of 2008.

Lastly, a more systematic, integrated, and collaborative approach to conservation of the Great Lakes provides a tremendous opportunity for collaboration with the Conservancy's worldwide Conservation Strategies division teams. Conservation success will depend on bringing the best and brightest minds and strategies to this region, and the work they do can provide a platform and laboratory for development of these strategies for freshwater applications. The challenges and threats we face in the Great Lakes are issues being faced across the world, and we have an opportunity to leverage what we learn here to assist the Conservancy's freshwater efforts elsewhere.

#### CONCLUSION

On June 1-2, 2008, the Great Lakes Board of State Directors, Trustees, and The Nature Conservancy's Executive Leadership will meet to discuss the Great Lakes Project and its 10-year vision for conservation. We will challenge ourselves to embrace this new vision and make a pledge of action, collaboration and support on behalf of the globally significant freshwater resource that touches all of us. This is a watershed moment in conservation for one of the eleven global freshwater priority projects included in The Nature Conservancy's newly launched Campaign for a Sustainable Planet, and an opportunity – an imperative – to make a significant contribution to our 2015 goal.

Building upon The Nature Conservancy's long history, traditions, and site-based conservation success through state-based programs, the members of the Great Lakes Board of State Directors, their Trustees, and special friends, will make a public pledge to lead an effort characterized by a shared and understood vision, a commitment to co-invest and achieve new levels of coordination and integration across boundaries. This pledge will embrace a commitment to sharing and deploying the formidable bank of TNC skills and staff that exist in the Great Lakes basin while working closely with others also vital to our collective success.

Together with all of you, who so willingly give of your limited time and resources in support of The Nature Conservancy's mission, we will work to assure a healthy and resilient Great Lakes ecosystem where the connection between natural systems and the quality of human life is understood and valued.

Five Great Lakes, Two Countries, One Chance – Thank you for being part of this important action to make our beloved Great Lakes one of the best managed ecosystems in the world.