



GREAT LAKES UNITED

A New Look at an Old Problem - Lake Erie

By Mary Ginnebaugh

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the people that cared about Lake Erie were alarmed. The water was fouled by oil slicks and factory and municipal wastes. The shorelines had uncontrolled smelly growths of algae. Dead fish, choked from a lack of oxygen in the water, washed ashore. Many beaches were closed because of dangerous levels of bacterial contamination. Lake Erie was in serious trouble and the conditions that were leading to its "death" were becoming widely recognized as environmental problems affecting the Great Lakes Basin as a whole.

In the years since that Lake Erie alarm was sounded the environmental movement has founded many organizations. These groups have successfully raised awareness of environmental problems throughout the Great Lakes Basin. As a result of their hard work, a great deal has been accomplished toward improving the Great Lakes ecosystem. Yet, despite Lake Erie's role in focusing attention on the Great Lakes environment, it has always remained in the shadow of its big sisters - Michigan, Superior, Huron and Ontario.

To leave the impression that Lake Erie is in the same state now as 20 years ago would be a mistake. There have been significant improvements in the environmental conditions, particularly due to a decrease in the amount of phosphorus and other nutrients dumped into the lake. Environmental research indicates there has been movement toward reversing the rate of eutrophication or aging of the lake.

But while one problem has been "fixed," others remain. Pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers from farm and home use wash into Lake Erie. Untreated sewage is still dumped into the lake because many municipalities cannot handle the volume of

water during and after heavy rains. Development degrades wetlands and destroys wildlife habitat which directly affects the quality and quantity of fish and wildlife populations. Continuing discharges of persistent toxic contaminants into the lake threaten its ecological well-being, as well as that of humans who consume fish and wildlife feeding within the basin. Invading exotic species, like zebra mussels, create unknown disturbances.

In response to the many problems that continue to face Lake Erie, a new group has been created: The Lake Erie Alliance. This binational organization was formed to assist individuals and existing groups within the Lake Erie watershed to communicate with one another and address common issues and concerns.

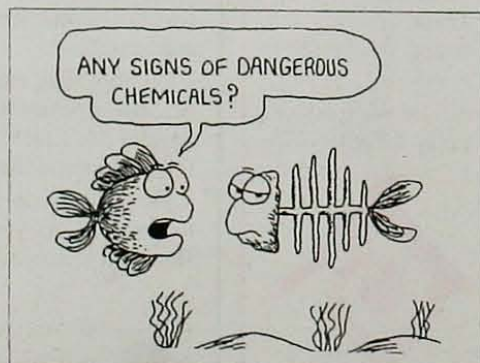
Organizational meetings held in both Canada and the United States over a period of seven months culminated in the formation of a mission statement and organizational goals that will help develop solutions to the environmental problems existing in Lake Erie. The Alliance's goals are to increase public awareness, share information and provide leadership among the community-based grass-roots groups within the Lake Erie watershed. In reach-

ing these goals, the Alliance hopes to mobilize people in Canada and the United States to develop strategies for joint action to improve Lake Erie.

Great Lakes United (GLU), a non-profit, binational environmental organization, has played a major role in providing support for this new Lake Erie organization. Acting as a financial umbrella for the Alliance, GLU helped find available grant money to support offices in Canada and the U.S., and to publish a quarterly newsletter, *The Erie Connection*. As a coalition of 195 organizations throughout the Great Lakes Basin, GLU has maintained that solution to environmental problems will be reached through co-operative ventures.

The binational movement in the Great Lakes continues to hold real potential for improving the environment. Citizens and environmental organizations in Canada and the U.S. are identifying problems that exist and are working towards solutions. Organizations like the Lake Erie Alliance will provide the mechanism to achieve sustaining environmental change.

Citizens can actively get involved by participating in public involvement opportunities within the various Remedial Action Plans currently underway for nine areas of concern on Lake Erie. Public input into Lakewide Management Plans for Lake Erie is also needed. To learn more about the environmental issues or to become involved in the Lake Erie Alliance or Great Lakes United, please contact the Great Lakes United Windsor Office at (519)255-7141, or write to Great Lakes United, P.O. Box 548, Station A, Windsor, Ontario, N9A 6M6.



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