

We Must Take Action to Protect the Great Lakes Forever



The Great Lakes of North America are in serious trouble. Industrial pollution, climate change, over-extraction, invasive species, and wetland loss are all taking their toll on the watershed that provides life and livelihood to more than 40 million people that live around it. Once thought to be immune from the water crisis that threatens other parts of the world, the Great Lakes are a source of increasing concern as residents watch their shorelines recede, their beaches close and their fisheries decline. Added to this mounting ecological crisis are growing conflicts as some eye these waters for commercial bulk and bottled water export, mining, oil and gas exploration, private control of once public water services, and as an incentive to lure water-intensive industries to locate on them.

The Great Lakes of North America form the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world. They hold more than 20 per cent of the world's surface freshwater and 95 per cent of North America's. Add to this the groundwater underlying and feeding the Great Lakes or its tributary streams and lakes, and the percentage is closer to 25 and 97 per cent respectively. The Lakes and the St. Lawrence River – which is their primary flow outlet to the Atlantic Ocean – are bordered by two Canadian provinces: Ontario and Quebec, and eight U.S. states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. The Great Lakes have a unique biodiversity and are home to more than 3,500 species of plants and animals. They were formed more than 20,000 years ago when the last glacier continental ice sheet retreated. The Great Lakes are the economic centre at the heart of the continent, and a life-source for millions.

Over-extraction and pollution

According to a 2004 study by the Great Lakes Commission, communities around the Great Lakes Basin pump 850 billion gallons (3.2 trillion litres) of water out of the Lakes and St. Lawrence River every day. Close to 2 billion gallons (over 7.6 billion litres) are “consumed” every day, meaning they are not returned to the watershed. The water sources that supply the Lakes are under assault. As with most other bodies of water in the world, the groundwater around the Lakes is being pumped with little oversight. Some communities on Lake Michigan's west coast are pumping so much groundwater they are now drawing water from the lake itself. The U.S. Geological Survey reports that by using deep wells that reach farther into the ground than Chicago's tallest skyscrapers soar into the sky, cities are pumping the aquifers beneath them so hard they are pulling water in through the bottom of Lake Michigan, reversing a flow as old as the lake itself.



*The Great Lakes, a drinking source for millions, is at serious risk from pollution, unsustainable water withdrawals and neglect.
Photo by Marius M. / stock.XCHNG*

While over-extraction of water supplies are draining the Lakes, polluters are also contaminating them. There are now 43 “Areas of Concern,” sites on the Great Lakes so contaminated that they have been targeted for special remediation. They include Saginaw Bay in Michigan where the tourist industry has been destroyed with the spread of a foul toxic algae called cladophora, and Sarnia, Ontario, nicknamed “Chemical Alley” where twice as many girl babies as boy babies are being born to the local First Nations peoples, the Aamjiwnaang, and where unusual sexual attributes to frogs and other species have been observed by Canadian wildlife experts.

What can we do?

What might happen if the people living around the Great Lakes decided to collectively protect them based on some of the very principles and practices that informed the Indigenous peoples of the region, namely that the Great Lakes must be shared equitably by all who live around them and protected for seven generations into the future?

The Great Lakes and a commons approach

The notion of the commons is very old. It asserts that water belongs to the Earth, other species and future generations as well as our own. Because it is a flow resource necessary for life and ecosystem health, and because there is no substitute for it, water must be regarded as a public commons and a public good and preserved as such for all time in law and practice.

“A commons narrative asserts that no one owns water. Rather, it is a common heritage that belongs to the Earth, other species and future generations, as well as our own.”

- Maude Barlow, National Chairperson, The Council of Canadians

A Great Lakes Basin Commons would reject the view that the primary function of the Great Lakes is to promote the interests of industry and the powerful and give them preferential access to the Lakes' bounties. It would embrace the belief that the Great Lakes form an integrated ecosystem with resources that are to be equitably shared and carefully managed for the good of the whole community.

A commons approach should be supported by a public trust doctrine, which underpins in law the universal notion of the commons that certain natural resources, particularly air, water and the oceans, are central to our very existence and considered to be the property of the public, which cannot be denied access. The trust resources must, therefore, be protected for the common good and not appropriated for private gain. Under the public trust, governments, as trustee, are obliged to protect these trust resources and exercise their fiduciary responsibility to sustain them for the long-term use of the entire population, not just the privileged few who could buy inequitable access.

Finally, declaring the Great Lakes a protected bioregion would require legislation that recognizes the inherent rights of the ecosystem and aquatic life of the Great Lakes Basin outside of their usefulness to the humans who live around it. Law and practice would protect all the waters of the Great Lakes Basin, and the restoration of its ground and surface waters would be a priority. While the Great Lakes are governed by many political jurisdictions, they are, in reality, one integrated watershed and should be protected as such.

Great Lakes funding must increase

For decades, funding for the various joint agreements and reclamation projects for the Great Lakes has been so meagre their recommendations have been impossible to implement. Many groups appearing before the current review of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement expressed widespread concern that inadequate and inconsistent funding has hampered the overall success of the Agreement. A 2008 report by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative showed that local governments in Canada and the United States invest the lion's share of Great Lakes rehabilitation costs, an estimated \$15 billion annually. The U.S. government had cut federal funding for the Great Lakes to the bone to just over half a billion dollars annually in 2004, while the Canadian government has allocated a paltry amount of funding for Great Lakes clean-up and protection.

There are many jurisdictions responsible for the Great Lakes that govern with an uneven patchwork of rules, regulations and laws. Most have not mapped the groundwater feeding the Lakes and do not have extensive knowledge of the crises threatening them. All suffer from chronic underfunding, regulatory infractions, and inadequate enforcement of existing rules.

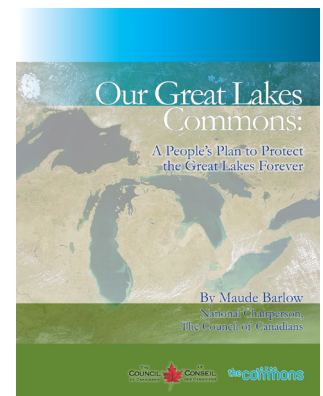
Take action!

Contact Prime Minister Trudeau today and tell him that the Great Lakes must be recognized as part of the commons, as a public trust and a protected bioregion so we can ensure the Lakes' health and protection today, and for the benefit of generations to come.

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Source: Our Great Lakes Commons: A people's plan to protect the Great Lakes forever, written by Maude Barlow is available at canadians.org.



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