

# Preserving Great Lakes will be up to the people

The issue

Great Lakes water fights

Our View

Protect, don't sell out the Great Lakes

The history of natural resources is simple. They vanish rapidly when they become commodities — even when they seem in unending supply.

In Michigan, it took less than a century in the 1800s to devastate fish populations of the Great Lakes, cut down primeval forests, shoot millions of passenger pigeons to extinction and annihilate sturgeon.

As millionaire Chicago fish dealer Alfred Booth said in 1885:

“It did not take long for capital to see the rewards which might be gained by reaping the fields which Nature had so abundantly supplied with a crop that cost nothing for the sowing or raising, and but little for the reaping.”

Booth was talking about fish but his words apply to any abundant natural resource of the 1800s that was cut down or slaughtered and shipped off to far-away markets.

Fresh water from the Great Lakes apparently has become the region's last “free” crop to extract, sell and export.

This is what the Great Lakes water fights of the last three decades really are about.

It's an important battle and will have great impact on the region's future.

It is why governments, municipalities, elected leaders and individuals must become better stewards and more educated about the important role the Great Lakes, with 94,676 square miles of surface water, play in this region's life, economy and natural world.

It is why fresh water must always be seen, protected and managed as a “public commons” by those who live around it — not international corporations and Wall Street.

Water is a vastly different natural resource than timber, wildlife, minerals and other natural resources. Humans, animals, plants and ecosystems cannot survive without it.

This is why fresh water, lakes, rivers, streams and navigable waters long have been protected by law and regulations for the common good.

To legally identify water from the Great Lakes as a “commodity” sets up a legal framework that would allow it to be siphoned off and sold for use outside the Great Lakes basin.

Current attempts to dismantle state and federal protection laws enacted in the 1960s and 1970s are an outrage given the history of these freshwater seas.

Traverse City has become a center for water advocacy, thanks to conservation lawyer Jim Olson and many Michigan residents. Olson was the attorney in the nine-year case of Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation vs. Nestle Waters of North America in Mecosta County.

He and other water activists who formed Flow for Water are vigilant sentinels for the Great Lakes and have done much to educate the public in annual conferences like “Saving the Great Lakes Forever,” held at the State Theatre and Northwestern Michigan College earlier this month.

“Too many people see the Great Lakes as a big dollar sign,” keynote speaker Maude Barlow said. “This way of looking at nature as a resource for us is failing the Earth.”

She's right. The history of the Great Lakes' natural resources proves that.

Sessions like this month's conference — organized by Flow for Water, the Great Lakes Water Institute at NMC and Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation — keep water issues in public focus.

Without them, people might lose sight of what these great bodies of fresh water mean to Michigan, the United States and the world.

The lakes clearly need strong advocates, stewards and leaders at the grass-roots level all along their shores.

Recent water politics and court decisions show us that the federal and state governments, big business, and the Michigan Supreme Court have little interest in saving Great Lakes water.

