Excursions Journal

Volume 3, Issue 1 (June 2011)
States of Emergence / States of Emergency

Terrianne Shulte, 'Emerging Routes to Environmental Activism: Lake Erie Sportsmen and the League of Women Voters', *Excursions*, 3, 1 (2012)
URL: http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/54

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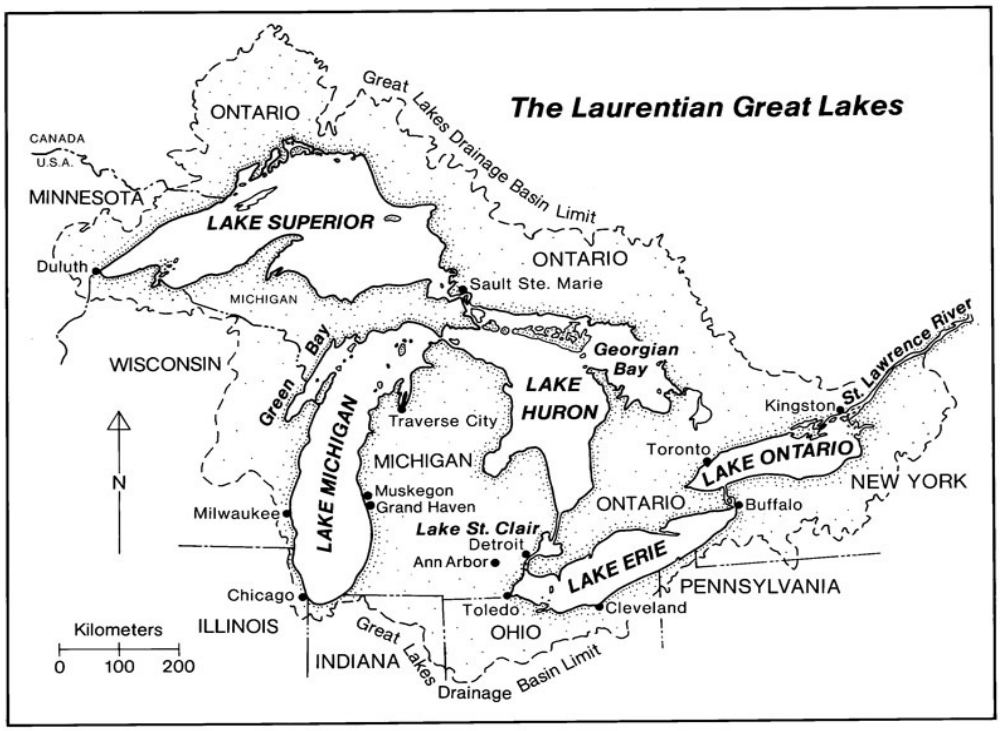
Emerging Routes to Environmental Activism: Lake Erie Sportsmen and the League of Women Voters

The so-called 'death of Lake Erie' in the 1960s was one of the most important environmental emergencies of the twentieth century. The extreme pollution and degradation of the smallest of the Great Lakes awakened people throughout the nation to the emerging threats facing America's water supply. As this environmental crisis began to unfold in the wake of the Second World War, two groups—Lake Erie sportsmen and the League of Women Voters—emerged to sound the alarm regarding the need to remediate the lake. How and why the League of Women Voters came to the issue of water pollution, as compared with Lake Erie sportsmen, is the focus of this paper. The League of Women Voters began its struggle to save Lake Erie in the 1950s after close to half a century of conservation activism. For Lake Erie hunters and fishermen the battle was more specific, focusing on the deteriorating quality of the lake and its tributaries throughout the first half of the twentieth century. But while hunters and fishermen launched their fight to clean up Lake Erie as a result of direct contact with rising pollution and its deleterious effects on fish and wildlife, the League's interest in water pollution was, in part, an extension of its longstanding academic commitment to the conservation of natural resources, as well as a response to a series of severe droughts that plagued the nation during

the late 1940s and mid-1950s that helped to generate a national dialogue about a 'water crisis'.[1]

The environmental problems affecting Lake Erie were increasingly evident by the 1940s around Detroit, Michigan, where industrial production for World War II led to rising pollution levels that, when combined with a population explosion and inadequate municipal sewage treatment, ultimately overwhelmed the Detroit River, one of Lake Erie's main tributaries.[2] Since Detroit is home to the shallowest section of the lake, the consequences of pollution surfaced in the form of substantial wildlife and fish deaths, hepatitis outbreaks, and debris-covered shorelines.



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory. http://www.glerl.noaa.gov

[1] See Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 296-319.

[2] See, for example, Dave Dempsey, *Ruin and Recovery: Michigan's Rise as a Conservation Leader* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 143-152.

During the war years, heavy industries such as iron, steel, automobile, rubber, chemical, and oil in Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo had increased production to support the war effort. As a result, one of the earliest casualties of the war turned out to be Lake Erie. Receiving massive volumes of industrial discharge directly—and indirectly through its tributaries—the fetid consequences were discernible as early as 1942. Four years later, a reporter for the Detroit Free Press acknowledged how the need to support the war effort overshadowed everything, and thus for those who were 'already weary in their fight against pollution of the Detroit River,' he wrote, 'the war years were the hardest'.[3] The union of government and industry in war production was too powerful and preoccupied with enemies overseas to consider problems like water pollution, which were viewed as local issues. But as the war continued, water quality deteriorated until it was not uncommon to refer to the River Rouge in Michigan as a 'fermenting, oil-covered, open cesspool',[4] and the nearby Raisin River as a 'reeking, filth-laden open sewer'.[5]

For years Michigan sportsmen had been complaining about the declining water quality and habitat loss, but their protests were usually ignored.[6] Then, during the summer of 1947, the *Detroit Free Press* echoed the sportsmen's call in rallying its readers to 'Save Our Streams' with a series of articles highlighting the deplorable state of Michigan waters, advising residents that they had the power to demand that the pollution be cleaned up. Before long, a number of 'Save Our Streams' citizen committees emerged throughout the state. The newspaper counselled its readers to push for the enforcement of existing laws, and if that did not work, then new laws could be passed that would, for example, 'outlaw all new pollution' and eventually 'put an end to all pollution, say by 1950'.[7]

By the late 1940s an increasing number of Michigan residents were becoming concerned about the rising contamination of streams and rivers throughout the state. So many people

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3 Warren Stromberg, 'Pollution Load Falls to Downriver Cities' in *Save Michigan Streams*, ed. by Jack Van Coevering, (Detroit: The Detroit Free Press, 1948) (article originally published in the *Detroit Free Press*, 29 August 1946). Jack Van Coevering Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Box 5, Fol *Save Our Streams*.

4 U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Public Health Service. Transcript of Conference in the Matter of Pollution of the Navigable Waters of the Detroit River and Lake Erie and their Tributaries Within the State of Michigan, First Session, Detroit, Michigan, 27-28 March 1962, vol. II, part 1, p. 387.

5 Jack Van Coevering, 'Polluted Waters Peril Resorts' in *Save Michigan Streams*, (article originally published in the *Detroit Free Press*, 25 May 1947). Jack Van Coevering Papers.

6 For an excellent study of the role of sportsmen in the creation and evolution of the conservation movement, see John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, 3rd ed. rev. and exp. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001).

7 Jack Van Coevering, 'Why It's Up to You to Help Save Streams,' in *Save Michigan Streams*, (article originally published in the *Detroit Free Press*, 29 June 1947). Jack Van Coevering Papers.

had requested reprints of the *Free Press'* articles on water pollution in 1947 and 1948 that the newspaper published an entire booklet dedicated to the series. These articles, many written by the *Detroit Free Press'* conservation reporter Jack Van Coevering, provoked widespread, often complimentary, discussion and the series increasingly gained nationwide attention. For example, the president of a local chapter of the national fishing organization, the Izaak Walton League, flatly stated that the issue of water pollution 'goes beyond the interests of just the fishermen', reminding the public that every 'person who likes a drink of cool clear water without its being loaded with all sorts of chemicals in order to neutralize its filth and man-made poisons, has a stake in this fight to clean up our streams'.[8]

It was not long, however, before Michigan's example began to be repeated around the country. At the *Detroit Free Press,* Coevering remarked that some Americans were beginning 'to see the financial and [a]esthetic losses from dirty streams, and to appreciate the need for action to head off epidemics which are born in pollution-loaded waters'. Highlighting the role of good investigative journalism in helping to remediate social problems, Coevering detailed how the pattern established in Michigan was being reproduced in other states throughout the country: 'First: the facts are uncovered and published, as they were by the *Free Press* in 1947. Then public opinion begins to demand clean-up and improvement. Finally, industries and cities begin to swing into line and lawmakers pass legislation to bring recalcitrants into line.'[9] Within a few years, the public was increasingly becoming aware of problems affecting the water supply in the country, in large part due to the media coverage of water-related issues, like the ongoing pollution stories reported in the *Detroit Free Press*.

The first to pick up on the newspaper's exposés, according to Coevering, was *Sports Afield,* which began reporting on environmental despoliation in Michigan and around the country in the autumn of 1948, and it would go on to become one of the leading voices against pollution. In part three of its series on the Great Lakes, entitled 'Running Sores on Our Land', author Bill Wolf observed that out of the five lakes, the two main tributaries of Lake Erie could claim the notorious distinction of being the most polluted in the entire Great Lakes region: 'With the possible exception of the Cuyahoga [River] in Ohio, the Detroit River probably is the worst

8 'What Readers Have to Say' in *Save Michigan Streams*, (article originally published in the Detroit Free Press, 29 June 1947). Jack Van Coevering Papers.

9 Jack Van Coevering, 'Fight for Clean Streams Spreading over Nation: States Follow Michigan Action,' *Detroit Free Press*, 6 February 1949. Jack Van Coevering Papers.

festering sore that eats into the flanks of the Great Lakes.'[10] Wolf singled out Detroit as number one in the Great Lakes region for the amount of pollution it dumped into Lake Erie, although he acknowledged that the Motor City was not alone since Cleveland was 'certainly not far behind' (p. 92).

Considering that the Lake Erie shoreline held the unenviable position of playing host to the most polluted cities in the entire Great Lakes region, it is not surprising it became a lake on life support, declared 'dead' by some. Wolf particularly blamed two Detroit plants run by the Ford Motor Company and the Great Lakes Steel Corporation for the type and amount of effluent they discharged into the major tributaries of Lake Erie, noting that he had 'seen some foul rivers, but will stake the River Rouge from the Ford plant down to where the Rouge enters and contaminates Detroit against any stream for absolute, concentrated filth' (p. 91). Of course, some industries balked at this constant focus on industrial pollution. One member of the Michigan Manufacturers Association provoked residents by asking: 'Do you want fish or jobs?'[11] However powerful the 'jobs vs. environment' argument would grow to at the end of the twentieth century, at midcentury an industry representative to the Michigan Water Resources Commission made the dichotomy a moot point when he reminded everyone that 'the greatest menace of pollution to the people of Michigan is to health'.[12]

By 1950, the International Joint Commission (IJC) confirmed the public's fears regarding the dangers posed by declining water quality in Lake Erie. Concluding a four year study of the Great Lakes Basin begun in 1946, the IJC found that the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers, which connect Lake Huron to the western end of Lake Erie, 'are so badly polluted that they are a potential threat to the health of millions of people'.[13] In addition, the IJC listed two further rivers that posed a potential health threat to those living in the region, including the Niagara River — linking eastern Lake Erie to Lake Ontario via Niagara Falls –– as well as the St. Mary's River, uniting Lakes Superior and Huron. Of the three regions representing the most danger, two were directly related to Lake Erie. The IJC found that the:

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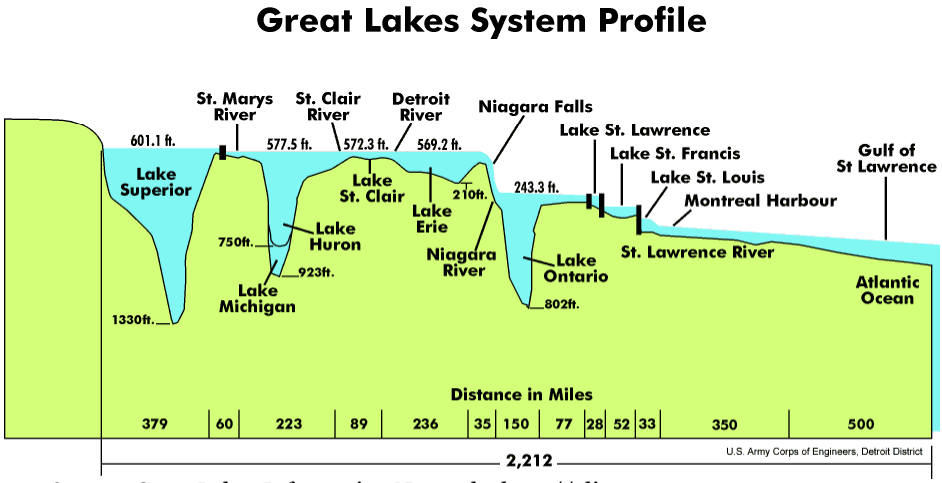
[10] Bill Wolf, 'Running Sores on Our Land: part three—the Great Lakes Basin,' *Sports Afield*, November 1948, p. 85-96; 88. Jack Van Coevering Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Box 16, Folder: Water Pollution: Great Lakes, 1939-1968. Future references to Wolf will be made parenthetically in the text

[11] Jack Van Coevering, 'New Pollution Law Strikes at Greed,' *Detroit Free Press*, 29 May 1949. Jack Van Coevering Papers.

[12] Jack Van Coevering, 'Pollution's No. 1 Menace: Health, *Detroit Free Press*, 24 July 1949. Jack Van Coevering Papers.

[13] Jack Van Coevering, 'Deadly Rivers: Detroit, St. Clair Rivers Endanger Lives, Report Says,' *Detroit Free Press*, 17 September 1950. Jack Van Coevering Papers. See also, William McGucken, *Lake Erie Rehabilitated: Controlling Cultural Eutrophication, 1960s-1990s* (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2000), p. 40-44.

> total discharge of municipal wastes into the three areas covered by the report is 750,000,000 gallons a day. A fifth of this is untreated, and practically all of the remainder is only partially treated [...] The discharge of industrial wastes averages 2,000,000,000 gallons a day. It includes 15,000 pounds of phenols, 8,000 pounds of cyanides, 70,000 pounds of ammonium compounds, and large quantities of oils and suspended solids.[14]



Source: Great Lakes Information Network. http://glin.net

Sporadic fish fatalities were one obvious consequence of the industrial discharges, but the substantial wildlife casualties that began occurring around the winter of 1948, when an estimated ten thousand dead waterfowl were discovered in Southeastern Michigan, signalled a more serious and persistent problem. Approximately one thousand ducks added to the death toll the following autumn. Noting how even small amounts of oil could be lethal for birds and other wildlife, H.J. Miller, a biologist from the Michigan Department of Conservation, explained that 'oil mats feathers or fur permitting exposure of cold water to reach the skin; starvation may result due to reduced mobility, either swimming or flying; actual drowning may occur; and sickness may result due to ingestion of oil'.[15] But oil was clearly not the only culprit, as Miller acknowledged that other industrial chemicals have 'a disastrous effect' on plankton and small aquatic animals that larger fish and wildlife feed on. Thus, despite all the

[14] Jack Van Coevering, 'U.S. and Canada Urged to Force River Cleanup,' *Detroit Free Press*, 17 October 1950. Jack Van Coevering Papers.

[15] Detroit River and Lake Erie Conference, 27-28 March 1962, vol. II, part 1, p.377, 379. During the winter and spring months of 1950 to 1955, a University of Michigan study of oil pollution and waterfowl deaths observed that oil slicks occurred on the Detroit River approximately one-third of the time. Moreover, in one twenty month period from August 1960 to March 1962, the Michigan Water Resource Commission recorded 112 notifications of pollutants being discharged into the Detroit River from industries and municipalities out of 197 examinations. See p. 380-382.

attention the considerable wildlife casualties received in the press, he warned that the 'indirect effects of pollution on wildlife' from different types of industrial effluents pouring into the lake 'may thus be very serious even when no direct losses occur'.[16]

Waterfowl deaths continued throughout the next decade and into the 1960s. Over twelve thousand ducks were killed in Southeastern Michigan in March 1960 alone. Desperate to call attention to the extensive duck fatalities in the immediate post-war period, members of the Izaak Walton League, one of the oldest fishing organizations in the country, resorted to dumping thousands of reeking, oily duck carcasses in front of the Capitol Building in Lansing to get the legislators' attention. The sportsmen noted how their demonstration was a contributing factor in the creation of a new state Water Resources Commission.[17] Yet, despite the emergence of the new agency, enforcement remained a problem, a point made clear by a representative with the Michigan Department of Conservation who complained that 'local, state, and federal agencies have been lax in the enforcement of existing pollution abatements acts'.[18] Bill Wolf at *Sports Afield* echoed this sentiment, pointing out that each of the states 'has a strong antipollution law, or has one in the making. If enforced, there would be no need of further laws' (p. 96). But this lack of enforcement would remain a nagging and persistent problem, not only in the Lake Erie region, but throughout the entire country in the post-war era, too. The prevailing thought among most experts by the mid-twentieth century was that the Great Lakes were far too large to become polluted, and instead they adhered to the outmoded belief that the solution to pollution was dilution, arguing that the vast quantities of lake water would dilute whatever was dumped into it, rendering it innocuous. Consequently, the concern over pollution in the Lake Erie Basin was primarily focused on the connecting channels and tributaries of the lake where the effects of pollution were more visible, rather than on the lake itself.

The most visible sign of contamination in the mid-twentieth century was the persistence of spectacular wildlife fatalities. Residents around the lake began witnessing tremendous numbers of wildlife perish in bursts of increasing frequency. At the eastern end of the lake in Buffalo, New York, sportsmen were aghast at the escalating number of waterfowl and fish casualties in the easternmost part of the lake where it flows into the Niagara River. On March 14 1953, for example, thousands of dead fish were discovered floating in the Niagara River, while several dead seagulls and ducks were found floating near the base of Niagara Falls at the

[16] Detroit River and Lake Erie Conference, 27-28 March 1962, vol. II, part 1, p. 384.

[17] Ibid., vol. II, part 2, p. 945.

[18] Ibid., vol. II, part 1, p. 374.

'Maid of the Mist' tourist boat landing. Dr. Alfred F. Bartsch, a biologist in the Division of Water Pollution Control at the U.S. Public Health Service was 'convinced that cyanide poisoning was responsible for the death of the fish'.[19] Meanwhile, a local conservationist and chairman of the Erie County [New York] Sportsmen's Alliance, Stanley Spisiak, worried about the links between 'the fish slaughter' from cyanide poisoning and the subsequent death of the seagulls and ducks, claiming that 'it was obvious they died from eating poisoned fish'. Spisiak carried the connection beyond animals to humans, perceiving more generally how the existence of cyanide pollution in the river could threaten public health. Challenging the prevalent theory at midcentury that the solution to pollution is dilution, Spisiak stressed the danger of someone believing that 'cyanide is not poisonous if diluted with water' by sardonically suggesting that the 'Niagara River and Lake Erie provide as much dilution as you can possibly get', and yet the wildlife continued to die in spectacular numbers.[20]

The emerging public awareness of the pollution issue in the early 1950s was distinct from previous years. As one local sportsman recognized: 'public reaction to the recent fish kill has lasted much longer than in the past and shows that sooner or later industries here are going to be put in a very unfavorable spotlight'. Castigating those who put politics and profits before pollution and public health, this fisherman pointed an accusing finger at political leaders who preferred to bury the pollution issue in red tape, explaining how the

> average citizen is mad at the attitude they are taking. They are saying 'I get pulled in for taking an under-sized fish and have to pay $37.50, but the big factories kill them by the thousands and nothing is done' [...] instead of action, all we get is hedging and dodging. Our children are being deprived of their natural heritage. Those waters belong to the people not to big business.[21]

Yet 'big business' — like the steel, auto, and chemical industries — formed the underpinnings of the manufacturing economy in the Lake Erie region, including Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and politicians routinely responded to the needs of industry leaders. As a result, polluting industries did not have to worry much about enforcement when they played such a key role in the local economy. Reacting to citizen outrage, public officials typically responded that more studies were needed to assess the situation, but this was essentially a stalling technique and little was done. One fed-up conservationist recognized this and complained,

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[19] Stanley Spisiak, 'Persons Who Guard Against Pollution Playing it Down, Conservationist Says,' March 1953, *Niagara Falls Gazette*, Stanley Spisiak Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

'every time there is a fish kill or some other pollution issue, they set up a new commission. We have several now — from the federal down to the local. Is that the only thing you can accomplish?'. He stressed that what was needed was a public official 'who does not want to cover up and pass the buck . . . Otherwise, this will be forgotten and people will go back to their normal life until the next fish kill.'[22]

But more people began noticing that pollution levels were rising, and the dramatic wildlife casualties raised their suspicions regarding the potentially dangerous effluents in the lake; if the chemicals could kill thousands of animals at one time, what effect would they have on public health? Lake Erie was the source of drinking water and recreation for millions of Americans, and thus, in the wake of the fish and wildlife fatalities, a number of people did not go quietly back to their normal lives as some had predicted. Instead, fishermen throughout Western New York and Southern Ontario began making their voices heard around the Lake Erie Basin and Niagara River, not only over the spate of recent fish kills, but also because of an attempt by the State Water Pollution Control Commission to reclassify the Niagara River from a Class A river –– which would allow swimming, drinking, and fishing –– to a Class B Special; or even worse, a Class C Special, indicating an industrial river not fit for human consumption or bathing/swimming; or as Spisiak called it 'a category just slightly above what we consider an open sewer'.[23] This reclassification was even more of an abomination when one considers the symbolic importance of the Niagara River cascading over one of the most spectacular wonders of the world, Niagara Falls, while also acting as an international boundary dividing the United States and Canada, connecting Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The thought that the 'honeymoon capital of the world' was home to the world's largest continually flushing toilet was a little too much to bear.

As the pollution in the lake and its tributaries grew worse, antipollution advocates in the region grew stronger and more vocal. Here, Spisiak again took the lead and began organizing the members of the Erie County Sportsmen's Alliance and other concerned sportsmen in the region through a sustained letter-writing campaign to garner support and pressure political officials. Industry leaders began to take notice. As one professor of Industrial Arts Education remarked, 'Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, National Aniline etc. are pretty big stuff, and I must admit that I think you are making some of them squirm.' Despite the vested interests of the local

[22] Ibid.

[23] 'Masses of Dead Fish are Spotted in Lower River,' 21 October 1953, n.p., Stanley Spisiak Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

industries, the professor encouraged Spisiak to take comfort in the knowledge that 'the mass of people are behind you'.[24]

But it would take a louder cacophony of public voices to awaken state and federal officials, particularly the New York State legislators in Albany, a point not lost on one officer of the New York State Conservation Council who commended Spisiak on his efforts: 'By the sound of the papers, T.V. and radio you are creating a little noise on the Niagara Frontier. Keep it up and maybe Albany will find out where Lake Erie is.' Grumbling about the close-knit cooperation between politicians and commercial interests, he called on Spisiak to 'Give 'em Hell', which would be more prophetic than either of the men was aware at the time. [25]

By the autumn of 1953, when another in a long line of fish fatalities took place in the Niagara River, Spisiak and his growing band of supporters were ready to target politicians and industry officials to 'Give 'em Hell'. On the same day that multitudes of perch, pike, herring, and bass were discovered belly-up in the lower Niagara River, Spisiak was testifying before officials of the New York State Water Pollution Control Board at the Buffalo Museum of Science arguing that the dead fish were 'a barometer of what could happen to humans'. Spisiak could not believe the timing of the fish kill, exclaiming to reporters that he was trying to highlight how 'officials who are supposed to protect the citizens have been too negligent in this matter'. Now here emerged proof in the form of thousands of floating fish carcasses. Spisiak promised to grab the state officials and rush down to the site, which was easy to find because of the 'several thousand' seagulls fluttering above the mid-section of the lower Niagara River, preparing to dine on the mass of dead fish.[26] Irate over the condition of Lake Erie and the Niagara River, Buffalo Councilman-Elect John J. Brinkworth warned the State Water Pollution Control Commission that he was taking his stand 'from health reasons relative to the City of Buffalo drinking water and the recent fish kills'. He promised that as soon as he took office on 1 January 1954, he was going to push for enforcement of existing laws 'to prosecute violators who contaminate these waters by disposing of chemicals and raw sewage' into the region's waterways.[27] The sportsmen's efforts, spurred by their direct experiences with the effects of pollution, were finally having an effect, and lawmakers were beginning to listen.

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[24] John Fontana to Stanley Spisiak, 13 November 1953. Stanley Spisiak Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

[25] H.J. Whitmore to Stanley Spisiak, 19 March 1953, Stanley Spisiak Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

[26] 'Masses of Dead Fish are Spotted in Lower River,' 21 October 1953.

[27] John J. Brinkworth to State Water Pollution Control Commission, 30 November 1953, Stanley Spisiak Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

Thus, sportsmen should be recognized not only for the critical role they played in awakening public concern regarding pollution in the Lake Erie watershed, but also for combating one of the most important environmental problems of the twentieth century, and consequently helping to save a crucial natural resource.

While sportsmen launched their fight to clean up Lake Erie as a result of their direct contact with the lake, witnessing the deterioration of the water quality and its dramatic effect on fish and wildlife, the League of Women Voters, owing to its longstanding academic interest in the conservation of natural resources, emerged as a leading organization dedicated to protecting water resources. In a comparative sense, the early response of fishermen in the Lake Erie Basin was clearly linked to their interests being directly and adversely affected, whereas the League of Women Voters strategically narrowed its scope from a broad view of conservation issues to a specific focus on water resources –– particularly in the Lake Erie Basin –– in response to a series of severe droughts that plagued the nation during the late 1940s and mid-1950s, especially in the heavily populated northeast. A national dialogue about water usage was launched amidst recurring shortages that some labelled a 'water crisis'.[28] By this time, the League had already spent half a century involved in conservation issues and had built up a degree of expertise in dealing with such concerns.

According to Carole Stanford Bucy, the League's interest in conservation dated back to its predecessors in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).[29] At the opening of the twentieth century, NAWSA was committed to consumer reforms to guarantee an adequate food supply with proper government regulations. By the mid-twentieth century, the League's interest in water-related issues coalesced around soil conservation dedicated to the economic production of food sources, which could be disrupted by long-term droughts or uncontrolled flooding, and hydroelectric power. Following a period of reduced precipitation alongside population increases that led to water shortages in the late 1940s and mid-1950s, League members in the Midwest, with memories of the Dust Bowl, called on the national organization to examine the role of soil conservation in combating erosion.[30] The idea received widespread support from other local Leagues around the country, who feared the consequences for urban areas if food production was disrupted because of droughts. As the

[28] See Melosi, *The Sanitary City*.

[29] Carole Stanford Bucy, 'Exercising the Franchise, Building the Body Politic: The League of Women Voters and Public Policy, 1945-1964' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2002).

[30] The Dust Bowl was a major ecological disaster that occurred during the 1930s and was caused by extreme drought and poor agricultural practices on the Southern Plains. One of the best studies exploring the impact of the Dust Bowl is Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

League began wading into the field of water resources, the issues increasingly centred on the quality and quantity of water supplies in the country, including simply whether or not there would be enough clean water to go around.

However, League members were not only focused on the conservation of water resources. They were also concentrating their attention on reshaping water policy in the United States. Blending their concern for the efficient use of government resources with their longstanding interest in conservation, the League began examining how to negotiate government bureaucracy with an eye toward uncovering waste and inefficiency in the utilization of natural resources. It was this focus that illustrates how League members embodied conservation era values well into the mid-twentieth century. By investigating the environmental policymaking structure regarding the development and implementation of natural resources policies, the League proposed to study how efficiently the government managed its resources. For it was the League's belief that the 'time has come when the United States, for its future security and well being can no longer afford to spend its resources lavishly. They are being depleted at a dangerous rate.'[31]

The League's concern for the wise use of natural resources was much more pragmatic than aesthetic, however. As the successor to the woman's suffrage movement, the League continued to promote certain Progressive era values focused on efficiency, order, and professionalism throughout the twentieth century. Encouraging these values, the League pursued conservation as a way to save money and prevent waste, thus putting the United States on a stronger footing with a solid resource base.[32] Pursuing the management of natural resources to its source at the governmental level, the League believed that one reason for environmental deterioration was the 'Overlapping functions established by law' that were inefficient and wasteful. In light of these 'conflicting authority and inter-agency rivalries', the League sought to help streamline the policymaking process from agenda setting to decision-making. Pointing out that 'conservation has long been a subject of keen League interest', the members concluded that an opportunity existed for them to assume a leading role in the redefinition of water resources policy.[33]

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[31] League of Women Voters of the United States, 'Statement on Item III,' National Convention, Atlantic City, NJ, April 24-28, 1950, p. 1-2. *Papers of the League of Women Voters, 1918-1974*, Part II, Series B, Transcripts and Records of National Conventions, 1946-1974, and of General Councils, 1945-1973, microfilm, reel 2 of 30. (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America), Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

[32] See Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

[33] League of Women Voters of the United States, 'Statement on Item III,', p. 1-2

During its long history, the League recognized how many people would not respond to an issue unless they were directly involved or affected.[34] A combination of rising population and decreased precipitation in various parts of the country led to water shortages and subsequent public alarm in the late 1940s, the mid-to-late 1950s, and again during the early to mid-1960s. The Northeast seemed particularly affected by the periodic droughts, and being home to many of the country's major media outlets, as well as some of the largest cities in the nation, it was not surprising that numerous newspaper and magazine articles were published that warned of the impending doom of water restrictions and shortages. It was enough to direct the public's attention to the increasingly deplorable quality of the water resources in the nation as well, impressing the need for the public and lawmakers to do something about it. The conservationist Arthur Carhart observed in 1949 that three consecutive years of drought in the northeast was creating a sense of anxiety in many communities. He hoped the drought would be a wake-up call for the public to pay attention to deteriorating water supplies, warning that the

> combination of continued drouth [sic] and high demands [...] must be regarded as a bright-flashing danger signal that unless we check the abuse and misuse of our water wealth, adopt sound principles of conservation with regard to water and related resources, more and more we'll slam headlong into 'water shortages' — and those warning signals are flashing all across the continent.[35]

This certainly was not lost on the League. Although they complained that Congress had not done enough to advance new federal water resources policies, they saw that water problems were 'very much in the news these days'. [36] Indeed, as the media increasingly warned of the impending threat of water shortages facing the nation, political officials were unable to ignore the nation's water problems for much longer, especially when the public was clamoring for federal action on water resources. Here, League members saw an opportunity to carve out a niche in the political system, negotiating between the various institutions of government

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34 League of Women Voters Education Fund, *The Big Water Fight: Trials and Triumphs in Citizen Action on Problems of Supply, Pollution, Floods, and Planning across the U.S.A.* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1966).

35 Arthur H. Carhart, *Water — Or Your Life* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959), p. 14-15.

36 League of Women Voters of the United States, 'National Board Briefing,' November 1958, p. 13. *Papers of the League of Women Voters of the United States, 1918-1974*, Part I, Meetings of the Board of Directors and the Executive Committees: Minutes and Related Documents, 1918-1974, microfilm, reel 2. (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America), Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

involved in water resources to help shape the policymaking process on behalf of concerned citizens.

After careful study, the League officially adopted water resources as a leading issue for concerted action in 1956. Discussions among the local Leagues around the country had emerged over questions of water supply, specifically whether or not there would be enough clean water to go around because of persistent droughts and widespread pollution. Citing water shortages as fulfilling one of the most important criteria for launching League programs, one League leader asked if it was necessary for the League to get involved. The question was largely rhetorical, however, as she proceeded to note 'that last year over 40 million people (one-fourth of us all) had their use of water curtailed to some degree'.[37]

Such finite limits of water resources were increasingly becoming apparent, as people began to debate what it meant to have clean water. With a rising population and stresses on water resources from pollution and drought conditions, many wondered how long it would be before one person's laundry water, or worse, would return as their drinking water. In many ways, the question was moot, since the public had been drinking 'reclaimed sewage water' for decades.[38] What was at issue, however, was not the reality, rather the perception among the public that their drinking water had once been pure, yet was now sullied because of drought conditions and declining supplies, pollution, population increases, and improper sewage treatment. In his outstanding study of the development of sanitation infrastructure in the United States, environmental historian Martin Melosi points out that despite the fact that water supplies and waste treatment were becoming more problematic in the post-war era, the public was more focused on the 'dramatic claims of water shortages and drought' (p. 307). To some degree, the League contributed to those 'dramatic claims' by using existing and predicted shortages to further its cause and generate greater public awareness. League leaders highlighted problems such as soil erosion and siltation by reminding members of the effects of the dreaded Dust Bowl in the 1930s, and the fact that twenty years later 'every delay in meeting our major problems means that more of our irreplaceable topsoil blows away or washes downstream — lost forever' (Foreman p. 4). But in the end the focus usually came back

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[37] Mrs. Orville Foreman, 'Presentation of Proposed Program—Conservation: Study of Water Resources,' League of Women Voters of the U.S., 22nd National Convention, 30 April 1956, Chicago, Illinois, p. 3. *Papers of the League of Women Voters of Ohio*, mss. 354, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio. Future references will be abbreviated to Foreman and included within the text.

[38] Donald E. Carr, *Death of Sweet Waters* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1971), p. 51-52. Carr dedicated his book to the League of Women Voters because he believed that they were doing the 'best country-wide job that is being done in educating the people to the importance of the water problem' (p. 7-8). Carr also acknowledged that much of his material came from the League's research.

to water pollution, especially when leading experts concluded that approximately half of all industrial and municipal wastes were released into the nation's waters untreated. This led League leaders to declare that in the field of federal policy, where the League wanted to exercise its influence, one of the most important issues was pollution control. Therefore, this would emerge as a critical element in the organization's overall plan to help redefine water resources policymaking.

Deteriorating water quality was only one part of their concern for water resources. Another reason why League members became more involved in the issue was because so many members were 'impressed by the suitability of the water resource field as an area for better understanding intergovernmental relationships' (Foreman p. 1). Here, members believed that there was 'no field today where our unique contribution of background and techniques can be employed more fruitfully, for our own satisfaction and the public good'. They noted how there were several groups working on conservation issues, ranging from forests and wildlife to national parks and gardens, and each was playing a valuable part. But as so few of these groups approached conservation with a focus on 'its governmental aspects', the League saw that they could fill an important hole in the public policy arena (Foreman p. 4). Employing their deep understanding of the policymaking process, they were able to adopt a unique position in conservation, specifically in water resources. Thus the League found its niche in combating water pollution through public education and legislative initiatives. To this end, the League ultimately established a successful campaign over the next two decades to educate people about the problems facing Lake Erie, while also encouraging concerned citizens to lobby their lawmakers to clean up the lake. To this day, public education and environmental advocacy remain hallmarks of the organization.

Conclusion

In the immediate post-war era, the League of Women Voters launched its struggle to save Lake Erie following half a century of involvement in the field of conservation. In this paper, I have argued that the League became involved in water resources issues after a combination of rising population and decreased precipitation in various parts of the country led to water shortages and public alarm in the late 1940s and mid-1950s, creating a national debate over the issue of water restrictions and the future of water supplies.

Concentrating on water resources with a perspective that was broad and academic, rather than directly experiential, the League saw problems stemming from severe drought conditions that would not only affect water supplies, but could also contribute to soil erosion and

potential disruptions in food production. Focusing on waste and efficiency, coupled with its sharp understanding of how the various institutions of government interacted with one another, the League emerged as a leader in the field of water resources policy. In seeking out the most effective method for reform, the members negotiated government bureaucracy, working with various government agencies responsible for water resources policy to help streamline the policymaking process from agenda setting to decision-making. Ultimately, League members sought to work with political officials as allies, rather than adversaries.

On the other hand, Lake Erie sportsmen, based on their direct experience with declining water quality, adopted an adversarial tone to challenge lawmakers and demand that they address the degraded condition of the lake and its tributaries. Fishermen and hunters throughout the region sounded a warning about the links between municipal and industrial discharges and the increasing number and frequency of wildlife fatalities. Furthermore, with the devastating effects of cyanide and phenol manifested in thousands of wildlife casualties, the possible consequences for human health became a pressing concern. Sportsmen had witnessed declining water quality for decades, and the degradation seemed to be accelerating in the post-war era. From their perspective, lawmakers' cosy relationship with manufacturing industries was the root of the problem. Therefore, they needed to capitalize on citizen outrage to demand action before a wildlife crisis became a public health emergency. To this end, sportsmen turned to the media and sympathetic officials for help. Their outrage became fuel for national sportswriters, thus carrying the debate on environmental quality far beyond the local boundaries of the Lake Erie Basin.

Comparatively, the League of Women Voters and the sportsmen each came to the struggle to save Lake Erie from vastly different perspectives. Yet before long, they would be working together with other concerned citizens from around the region in calling for federal involvement in pollution control when state and local governments around the lake proved incapable of handling the problems. This paper illustrates the academic and pragmatic quality of the League's approach to environmental remediation and the subsequent alliance between League members and lawmakers, as opposed to the sportsmen's adversarial approach, which stemmed from years of frustration borne of state and local government inaction. Fishermen and hunters wanted a clean lake and a healthy ecosystem, whereas League members not only wanted a clean and healthy environment, but also set out to recreate and redefine national water policy by utilizing their longstanding expertise in the arena of governmental relations. League members' interest in shaping water resources policy as political insiders working within the system inspired their environmental activism, whereas disgust and frustration

drove sportsmen to pressure state and local officials from outside the political system, acting as community watchdogs and guardians of ecosystem health. By studying the League's academic and pragmatic approach to cleaning up Lake Erie in the second half of the twentieth century, as compared to the sportsmen's direct and experiential approach, we can begin to explore the various routes to environmental activism, and begin to understand the community mosaic that made up the modern environmental movement in the post-war era.

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