State of the Bay Update

Little Traverse Bay

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council is questioned frequently about the health of Little Traverse Bay. As with any issue affecting the quality of our Northern Michigan waters, the Watershed Council has been at the forefront, monitoring the developments and taking action when necessary. Here is an update on some of the issues affecting Little Traverse Bay. If you have questions or would like more information, please visit our website at www.watershedcouncil.org or call (231) 347-1181.

Avian Botulism

Type E botulism is a naturally occurring compound released by the "Clostridium botulinum" bacteria. Spores of the bacteria reside in the bottom sediments of the Great Lakes and many other lakes. The botulinum bacteria is harmless unless exposed to low oxygen conditions, which allows it to grow into a vegetative state that contains a toxin capable of paralyzing the muscles and respiratory systems of fish, birds and humans. The colonization of the Great Lakes by zebra and quagga mussels triggered a chain of events that unleashed the toxic strain of the botulism and pushed it up the food chain. As a result, an estimated 8,000 birds and thousands of fish died last year in Lake Michigan from botulism. Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council has been appointed the regional coordinator for the monitoring efforts of avian botulism in Northern Michigan and is currently working to disseminate information regarding botulism outbreaks and coordinating volunteer monitoring to track the problem. An Avian Botulism Cleanup Kit in now available from the Watershed Council that contains all of the elements necessary to safely dispose and report on bird carcasses that have been found.

Great Lakes Compact

The Great Lakes Compact is an agreement among the eight US Great Lakes states to prevent diversions and withdrawals that would harm the Great Lakes ecosystem by implementing a strong and effective water management program. The Compact allows the Great Lakes states to maintain control over Great Lakes water in the face of growing demand from across the nation and the world as well as unwise water use within the basin. The Watershed Council led the decade-long effort to pass the landmark Compact through the Michigan Legislature. The US Congress quickly ratified the Compact and President Bush has signed it into law. It is now effective and binding on the states.

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council occasionally leads educational cycling tours around Little Traverse Bay.

Ballast Water

The invasion of exotic species is one of the gravest dangers facing the Great Lakes today. Over 186 non-native species are already established in the Great Lakes and connecting waterways. Ballast water from ocean-going vessels entering the Great Lakes ecosystem is the primary vector for introduction of aquatic invasive species. Ballast water discharge has been the pathway of entry for over 77% of non-native species and more than 1/3 of invasive species have been introduced since the St. Lawrence Seaway opened up. Federal lawmakers have two bills under

consideration to prevent and control the invasion of our nation's waters, the Coast Guard Reauthorization Act and the Ballast Water Management Act. These potentially landmark bills would set up a much needed national approach to managing ballast water. The Watershed Council is working with Great Lakes partners to urge Congress to pass quickly federal legislation to address the serious and ongoing threat of invasive species.

Two young girls play with globs of algae that had washed up on the shoreline at the Petoskey State Park.

Algae

Piles of algae continue to wash up and rot on our shorelines. Recent growths have increased due to a combination of factors including invasive zebra and quagga mussels, low lake levels, and warmer water temperatures. This green algae growth will likely continue to populate, and at times, plague our shorelines. For the time being, there is no other environmentally safe recourse than raking up algae from the water onto land and disposing of the accumulated algae that collects along your shoreline. The Watershed Council will continue to coordinate a volunteer algae monitoring program on Great Lakes' shorelines due to recurring nuisance algae blooms that are unsightly, at times foul smelling, and potentially dangerous to human health.

Cleanup at Bay Harbor Properties

Over 80 years of cement manufacturing left behind an estimated 2.5 million cubic yards of cement kiln dust (CKD) at what is now known as Bay Harbor Properties and East Park. When water comes into contact with the CKD, it can leach substances from the CKD and potentially contaminate adjacent waters. This leachate can have high pH and can contain heavy metals such as mercury, arsenic, and lead, which pose adverse impacts to water quality, fish and other aquatic life, and, potentially, human health with direct contact. CMS, a prior partner with Bay Harbor who retained environmental responsibility for the site, continues to implement interim measures to prevent leachate from entering Little Traverse Bay and work toward a solution that will address the problem permanently. As for the long-term, the Watershed Council believes the solution will have to be a multifaceted approach incorporating a combination of activities to achieve the best outcome for the water resources and citizens of Northern Michigan. The Watershed Council would ideally like zero CKD leachate entering Little Traverse Bay through various prevention and collection methods along with safe treatment and disposal that meets all water quality standards. We will continue to monitor the situation closely, working with the involved parties to ensure that the cleanup is done properly and thoroughly to protect public health and environmental quality.

Shoreline Management

During low water periods such as we have right now, nearshore areas of the Great Lakes that are typically under water are exposed. These exposed bottomlands naturally become vegetated and form coastal wetlands. This natural increase in vegetation growth during low water periods is vital to the overall health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Coastal wetland systems support diverse assemblages of invertebrates, fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. In an effort to protect coastal wetlands, the Watershed Council worked with the DEQ and other stakeholders to develop a new shoreline management policy. Certain shoreline management activities now require a General Permit (GP) from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). While small scale shoreline activities done by hand do not require a permit, mechanized activities or larger scale activities now require a permit. Information on the Great Lakes Shoreline Management or the new General Permit can be accessed at www.michigan.gov/deqwetlands.

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For additional information about
Little Traverse Bay, visit our website:

www.watershedcouncil.org