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## **Great Lakes Pioneers**

Program script for Wednesday, May 23, 2001  
By Krishna Ramanujan

### **A shortcut around Niagara Falls opened the door to a deadly parasite in the Great Lakes.**

For thousands of years, the fish in four of the five Great Lakes lived in splendid isolation. Niagara Falls formed a natural barrier that kept anything from swimming upstream out of Lake Ontario and into Lake Erie. But engineers changed all that in the 1800s by building the Welland Canal. It bypassed the falls and connected Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River and the sea. That eventually led to the invasion of the exotic sea lamprey, an animal that still causes problems today.

Historian Margaret Bogue documents the invasion of sea lampreys in a new book called "Fishing the Great Lakes." The book looks at many factors that have affected the Great Lakes fishing industry. Bogue says the sea lamprey played a special role in the collapse of Great Lakes fishing in the 1930s.

Lampreys are parasitic eel-like fish that attach to other fish and suck their blood. Once they made it to the Great Lakes, they feasted on whitefish and lake trout. These fish already were in trouble from overfishing and pollution, and the sea lamprey put even more pressure on them.

Bogue says the Welland canal was rebuilt in 1919, and those renovations created the upstream effect that attracted the lampreys and led them from Lake Ontario and into Lake Erie.

*"And by nature they spawn upstream. So they came into Erie; a fisherman caught one in 1921 and he took into the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto for identification. He said he had never seen anything like it, and it was identified as such."*

Bogue says water conditions in Lake Erie were not ideal for the lamprey. They kept moving until they reached Lakes Huron, Michigan and Superior. For the past 40 years, people have tried to control the lampreys with chemical pesticides, and there is no end in sight to this fight.

#### **Sources:**

Fishing the Great Lakes, by Margaret Bogue, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.

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