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Falling lake levels giving some a lift

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BY GARY WISBY ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Not everyone feels low about falling Lake Michigan levels.

True, some boating docks are high and dry, and cargo ships must be light-loaded so they won't scrape bottom.

But owners of lakefront property have bigger beaches now. Dredging companies haven't been this busy in years. And low water is just the ticket for certain varieties of fish and plants.

"Perceptions of lake levels fluctuate as much as the levels themselves," said Cameron Davis of the Lake Michigan Federation. "They're not good or bad; it's simply how we view them."

The beach at Bill Boyd's home in Wilmette, once 25 feet deep, has grown to more than 200 feet since Lake Michigan started receding in late 1997.

"We enjoy walking along it, viewing it, and there's more room to play volleyball," said Boyd, a boater and sailboat racer who has lived there more than 20 years.

"There are some people along the lakefront with seawalls who did not have a beach before but do now."

Dave Kadinger Sr., owner of Kadinger Marine in Milwaukee, has seen an explosion in demand for the dredging part of his business.

"We've added at least 75 percent over the last three years," he said.

This year, the company deepened harbors in Milwaukee, along the Wisconsin-Illinois border and in Waukegan, and it recently completed work at Chicago's Jackson Harbor.

"It used to take two months in the spring," said Kadinger, who has been in



business for 35 years. "Last year, it was August before we got everybody done."

Some nonhuman lakefront dwellers also are getting a rise out of falling levels. For example, the lakeshore rush plant, which hasn't been seen here in more than 50 years, is beginning to come back to North Side beaches.

Seeds lying dormant in the lake bed get a chance to sprout when the water withdraws, said John Gannon, science coordinator for the U.S. Geological Survey's Great Lakes office. The new plants provide a home for microscopic animals that make good fish food.

Fluctuating water levels produce varying conditions that express themselves in a richer diversity of life.

Lakes with controlled levels--such as two other Great Lakes, Ontario and Superior--"end up with almost a monoculture of cattails," Gannon said.

Nature goes with the flow, and beach owner Boyd said he tries to, as well.

"There are highs and lows," he said. "Most of the time, we've got the mean, which still provides adequate beach for us."

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