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Troubles are on the rise as level of lake declines

Lower water line leaves its mark on beaches, marinas

By **John Flink**

Special to the Tribune

July 1, 2001

The water level in Lake Michigan has dropped so far this summer that Dan Hirsch and his assistants at the Waukegan Yacht Club have to hold onto the masts of small sailboats as their students climb down long ladders to get to the boat decks.

The low-slung sailboats are a good 6 feet below the edge of the pier, making clambering in and out of them something of a project, even for nimble kids.

"If you tried to jump into the boats from this height, you'd either go straight through them or bounce out and into the water," Hirsch said while supervising a class on a recent evening. "It's really inconvenient. And the funny thing is, it wasn't too many years ago that the water level was so high that we were worried about the club being flooded."

Low water in Lake Michigan has affected commercial and recreational activities up and down the Lake County coastline, and especially at Waukegan Harbor, North Point Marina in Winthrop Harbor and Illinois Beach State Park near Zion.

There was a time when the peaks and valleys of water levels in the Great Lakes basins were thought to operate on an 11-year cycle. The theory was based on averaging the ups and downs over time, and it seemed to hold fairly true, even though there was no scientific basis for the assumption, said Bob Grosso, Illinois Beach State Park lakefront superintendent.

The cycle has faltered in recent years, probably because of the combined effects of weather patterns like El Nino and La Nina, relatively mild winters and, perhaps, global warming, Grosso explained. In any case, Lake Michigan's water level is about 22 inches below the average for this time of year--the most recent figures available are from May--and only 10 inches above the all-time low set in 1964, according to the U.S. Army Corps of



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Engineers.

Water levels are measured not by the depth of the lake in question, but by its height above sea level. The surfaces of Lakes Michigan and Huron are at the same height, currently about 577 feet above sea level. Lake Superior is at about 601 feet, and down only about 4 inches from its May average. Lakes Erie and Ontario are below their May averages by 10 inches and 3 inches, respectively.

The low water can be either a blessing or a curse. The lake has receded about 50 feet at Illinois Beach State Park, making the 6.5-mile-long beach roughly 1.7 million square feet bigger. This suits Grosso just fine, he said. Fishing is a bit off, though, because shallow water lets more sunlight penetrate to the lakebed, stimulating freshwater seaweed growth.

In Waukegan Harbor, the low water has proven costly and annoying. The Waukegan Port District last year replaced its six-foot rescue ladders with eight-foot ladders to be sure that they could be reached by anybody unlucky enough to fall into the water. Boaters who lease any of the 1,000 recreational slips in the harbor can buy or rent ladders for their slip from the district, said Walter Jones, Port District executive director.

Last year the district spent about \$175,000 dredging channels in the recreational marinas to give clearance for deep-draft sailboats, some of which need at least 9 feet of water in which to operate. This year the district has already spent about \$150,000 on dredging, Jones said, and water in the North and South Harbors is about 7 feet to 9 feet deep.

Most frustrating, however, is the system of fixed piers in Waukegan Harbor that stay at the same height no matter what the water level. Solid and easy to maintain, the piers were installed in 1985 and 1986, with the later installations in the North Harbor being a foot higher than those in the South Harbor because it was feared that the water level might rise above the lower piers.

"We've had to move some boaters to new slips in deeper water, and we've lost a few long-term customers with deep-draft sailboats, which is a shame," Jones explained. "Three more feet and that would be devastating."

Things are better up the shoreline at North Point Marina, an Illinois Department of Natural Resources-owned recreational marina in Winthrop Harbor.

The key to North Point's relative happiness is its system of floating docks.

Installed in 1989 and 1990, North Point's 1,477 slips rise and fall with the water. Waukegan Harbor officials chose not to install a

similar system because its moving parts require relatively high maintenance.

But that's a small price to pay under the current conditions, said Dave Suthard, North Point's assistant general manager.

"We've done some dredging around the harbor entrance and other high-traffic areas, and we've lost a few deep-draft sailboats, so it's not like we haven't been affected," Suthard said.

"But are we glad to have our floating docks? We're very glad. This is exactly the kind of circumstance they were designed for."

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