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Critics scoff at dry forecast

Indiana University prediction of Great Lakes' drought draws criticism from skeptics

By Joel Kurth / *The Detroit News*

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- An Indiana University study is raising interest -- and hackles -- by predicting that the Great Lakes are on the verge of a history-making drought.

Bucking conventional wisdom that the five-lake system follows a 30-year cycle of ebbs and flows, sedimentologist Todd A. Thompson argues that detailed erosion studies show those cycles are just blips in larger, 160-year patterns of lake levels.

Skeptics balk at Thompson's prediction that water levels in the Great Lakes will rebound for about four years, then plunge for 80 more until they reach a nadir around 2080, when conditions will replicate the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

If Thompson's model proves true, Lake Michigan would drop another 12 inches to close out the century.

"He's going out on a very thin limb predicting when this will occur," said Roger Gauthier, acting chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Great Lakes Hydraulics and Hydrology Office in Detroit.

Great Lakes predictions are tough, since data about their water levels go back only 150 years -- a mere bat of the eye, since the current configuration of the lakes began forming 3,800 years ago.

Furthermore, most who study the lakes have seen only high water during their careers.

At the Indiana Geological Survey, Thompson created a model of Lake Michigan's rise and fall over 4,700 years by studying erosion and shore deposits. He's working on a similar model for Lake Superior.

"I certainly am going out on a limb, but what do you do? Collect all your data, then ignore it?" Thompson said. "Slowly but surely, the lakes are going to fall."

Adding to the complicated equation is the specter of global warming, which could throw off Thompson's model and prognosticators who follow the 30-year rule for fluctuations. And there's fresh ammunition for true believers in the global warming theory: Eight of 10 of the warmest years on record have occurred in the last decade -- including 2001, the second-hottest ever.

"If our more excitable friends and colleagues are right and the globe is warming, then all bets are off" for predicting lakes, said Chuck Pistis, a Lake Michigan specialist from Grand Haven.

Study at a glance

Research at Indiana University could change the way people think about water levels of the Great Lakes. Here's a look at the study:

* Going beyond theories that lakes rise and fall in 30-year cycles, specialists have tracked the lakes' movements for 4,700 years and see 160-year patterns that more accurately reflect ebbs and flows.

* Historical data suggest that the lakes now are at the end of an 80-year rise and will begin to fall for another 80 years, until their lowest level occurs toward the end of the century.

Source: Indiana Geological Survey, sedimentologist Todd A. Thompson.

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You can reach Joel Kurth at (313) 561-8623 or jkurth@detnews.com.

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