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- Homepage
- Search
- CyberSurveys
- News Talk
- Autos Talk
- Sports Talk
- Lions Talk
- Pistons Talk
- Wings Talk
- Tiger Talk
- Tech Talk
- Horoscope
- Hot Sites
- Lottery
- Recommendations
- Weather
- Staff



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Valerie Barnard, above, and her husband bought Sandy Beach Resort on Lake Huron in 1997 when water was high. Today, there's 12 feet more beach than 5 years ago, and her jet ski and boat rental businesses are ailing.

NEWS

- Autos
- Insider
- Auto Show
- Consumer
- Joyrides
- Business
- Careers
- Census
- Columnists
- Commuting
- Detroit History
- Editorials
- Health
- Metro / State
- Livingston
- Macomb
- Oakland
- Wayne
- On Detroit
- Nation / World
- Obituaries
- Death Notices
- Politics / Govt.
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Technology

Shrinking Great Lakes threaten Michigan way of life

Tourism, shipping and fishing industries feel the impact.

By Joel Kurth / *The Detroit News*

Great Lakes water levels probably won't rebound this year, as had been expected, and that's dire news for the state's \$10-billion tourism industry, fishermen, shippers and weekend boaters.

Scientists had hoped for a significant jump in the water levels this spring, but a protective ice cap hasn't formed over parts of the lakes, and snowfalls in some areas are half the winter average.

"It's going to be quite similar to last summer," said Roger Gauthier, acting chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Great Lakes Hydraulics and Hydrology Office in Detroit. "If they didn't like it then, they won't like this summer."

The five-lake system is at its lowest point in 35 years, and just a foot above the record low set in 1964.

Last year's rainfall was just above average, and average precipitation is expected in the coming months. The lakes depend on a large



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Dredging at marinas has become one of the most visible symbols of the ebbing waters. Port Loke owner John Mullett paid \$26,000 to dredge the canal to his 40-boat marina.

What's ahead

* Ice cover on the lakes has been limited to shorelines and bays and is below normal.

* Lake-effect snows, which remove water from the Great Lakes and dump it

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- Pistons/NBA
- Shock/WNBA
- Tigers/Baseball
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- U-M
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- Golf Guide
- High Schools
- Motor Sports
- Outdoors
- More Sports
- Scoreboards

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▶ Movie Finder
▶ TV Listings
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▶ Food
▶ Gardening
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infusion of water over the winter -- but that hasn't happened this year. Snowfall in Metro Detroit is half the average; at Marquette on Lake Superior, headwaters for the system, almost half the winter snowfall came early and already has melted.

Satellite photos show lakes normally frozen at this time, such as Erie and Michigan, have just a smattering of cover near the shores. Without an ice layer, water evaporates -- sapping millions of gallons of water that experts hoped would replenish them.

The lakes are critical to the economy and lifestyle of Michigan, which has more than 3,000 miles of coastland and 825,000 registered boats, more than any other state in the nation. More than 30,000 jobs depend on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence water transportation system.

The recreational boating industry alone loses \$50 million a year, Michigan State University Professor Ed Mahoney said.

"We're losing business, and they're not coming back," said John Mullett of Fair View, owner of a Lake St. Clair marina whose annual revenues have fallen 70 percent to \$15,000 since 1997. "This whole town depends on water. Businesses have closed. Restaurants have closed. It's tough."

Since 1997, water levels in Lakes Michigan and Huron have dropped more than 40 inches and are now 14 inches below average. Lake Superior is four inches below the norm; Lake Erie, five inches.

Lake St. Clair is five inches below its norm. While not officially one of the Great Lakes -- it's actually a river delta -- Lake St. Clair plays a huge role in the economy and lifestyle of southeast Michigan. The water level of Lake Ontario, which is mechanically regulated at Massena, N.Y., is at its average level.

Far-reaching effects

The effects of low water levels go far deeper than a few grounded marinas. They include impacts on the environment, fishing, commercial boating and tourism.

Already reeling from a bad economy and low demand for steel, Great Lakes vessels must reduce loads by 90 to 115 metric tons for every inch lost of Lake Michigan, said Helen A. Brohl, executive director of the U.S. Great Lakes Shipping Association in Portage, Ind.

That translates to \$22,000 to \$28,000 lost per barge -- costs that are passed on to consumers.

Brohl said one carrier has lost \$1 million already this year because of delays, but she wouldn't estimate overall losses for the Great Lakes shipping industry.

Nor would Glen G. Nekvasil, vice president of the Cleveland-based Lake Carriers Association, who said the industry wants the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study the possibility of dredging shipping channels to 30-foot deep, from their current 25.5 feet.

The project would cost several millions of dollars, but Nekvasil said help desperately is needed.

The federal government maintains 745 miles of dredged channels on the Great Lakes. Congress has approved \$2 million to upgrade 49 water-level gauges in the lakes that freighters use to navigate. Work should wrap up in March.

as snow on the land, were heavy in late December and early January.

* The January-March outlook is for normal precipitation and average or below-average temperatures.

* Normal precipitation for the rest of the winter would, at best, create an average snowpack for spring runoff. That won't restore normal water levels.

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Ann Arbor.

More reports

Read "[Our Lakes in Peril](#)," a Detroit News special report on the impact of falling lake levels in Michigan.

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Dredging is costly

Dredging at marinas has become one of the most visible -- and costly -- symbols of the ebbing waters.

Two years ago, a study led by Michigan State's Mahoney pegged losses to Michigan marinas at \$28 million to \$30 million a year. Some of the cost is dredging. In 2000, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers granted 808 dredging permits, up from 487 in 1998.

Overall, half of Michigan municipal boat launches have closed because they sit entirely in shallow water, according to the Army Corps.

A retired engineer who bought a marina as a nest egg, Muliatt is among the losers of the lakes' ebb and flow. Last year, he reluctantly paid \$26,000 to dredge the canal to his 40-boat marina.

His business depended on it: Once 4 feet deep, the water fell to 26 inches. Muliatt is still trying to recover. The dredging shut down Port Loke Marina for part of the season, and his business went elsewhere.

So far, 13 have returned -- a far cry from the high-water days when Muliatt made \$40,000 a year.

"I'm losing money," said Muliatt, 75. "I'll be lucky this year if I break even."

Statewide, about 15 marinas closed last year -- and consumers are paying the price.

Mahoney's research found that marinas last year raised rates an average of 8 percent to pay for dredging and lost fees. The average slip fee is about \$1,800.

The research found that most of Michigan's marinas were built during high-water years and are ill-prepared for natural fluctuations. In contrast, marina owners in Wisconsin largely have avoided expensive dredging because they were built in coves and away from riverbanks.

Mahoney is researching a larger, \$3-million study for the Army Corps of Engineers on the impact of falling waters on communities bordering Lake Michigan.

Levels discussed

Lake levels also dominate discussion at the few bait shops that still are open during an ice-fishing season limited by warm weather and little ice.

A \$1-billion industry in Michigan, fishing is essential to the livelihoods of the state's 454 boat dealers and 604 marinas. Many fear the receding lakes -- and difficult-to-access waters -- already have crushed business.

"People are real hot because they're scared," said Dan Thomas, president of the Great Lakes Sport Fishing Council in Elmhurst, Ill. "If some industry had done this, they would be in prison. But this is Mother Nature. There's nothing we can do."

Last year's whitefish harvest fell 15 percent from the average of 15.5 million pounds, state records show. Still, the decline isn't atypical in an industry where yields can vary widely from year to year, said Steve Sadewasser, a commercial fisheries specialist for Department of Natural Resources.

He blamed last year's whitefish decline on zebra mussels, which eat plankton and algae that fish need to survive, and the dwindling number of commercial fishermen on the lakes. Last year, 12 were bought out by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, leaving about 120 licensed commercial fishermen in Michigan.

Charter boats and commercial fishing have felt little impact, Mahoney said. Officials from the Inter-Tribal Fisheries, which oversees Native American commercial fishing, didn't respond to calls from The Detroit News seeking comment on fishing and lake levels.

"We're seeing smaller fish, but I'm not sure there's a correlation between the lake levels and their size," said Jill Bentgen, owner of Mackinac Straits Fish Co. in St. Ignace, a wholesaler for commercial fishermen.

A continued spiral, however, eventually could have a bigger impact. Chuck Pistis, a Michigan Sea Grant agent from Grand Haven, said receding waters could dry up

breeding grounds and reduce populations of fish such as walleye and pike, which leave the lakes to spawn in streams.

Still, he cautioned there's little cause for alarm because fish can adapt to the changes. The biggest short-term impact is on anglers who can't get their fishing boats on the water, said Jerry Rakoczy, who oversees the state's annual census of fish.

Power supplies affected

Receding waters have caused trouble for power supplies.

At the height of 2000 tourist season, Mackinac Island endured repeated power outages over a week. An investigation claimed water levels contributed: Electricity cables buried in Lake Huron were damaged when receding waters left them exposed to the sun and rocks and drastically reduced their life span, said Don Sawruk, president of Sault Electric Co.

The hydroelectric company is preparing to raise rates for the first time in six years because it can't generate enough power from the lakes. Last year, it had to buy 60 percent of its electricity from other producers, Sawruk said.

He couldn't estimate how much low levels have cost his company, which is awaiting approval from the state for its rate hike. Average customers would see annual bills increase to \$398 from \$390, he said.

Farther east, the New York Power Authority is having similar problems. In September alone, production fell 18 percent in plants fed the Great Lakes near Niagara Falls and the St. Lawrence River.

Lakefront towns hurting

Valerie Barnard and her husband bought Sandy Beach Resort, six cottages on Lake Huron north of Port Huron, in 1997, when water was high. Today, there's 12 feet more beach than five years ago. But her jet ski and boat rental businesses are suffering. "Did they pull the plug or something? How did the water go so low?" she asked.

Clay Township, a town of 9,800 year-round residents on Lake St. Clair also is ailing, and Lois K. Lane has the books to prove it.

Records at her 14-room Colony Motel mirror the lakes' decline: Usually at full occupancy in the tourist-rich summer, business has fallen by a third, Lane said.

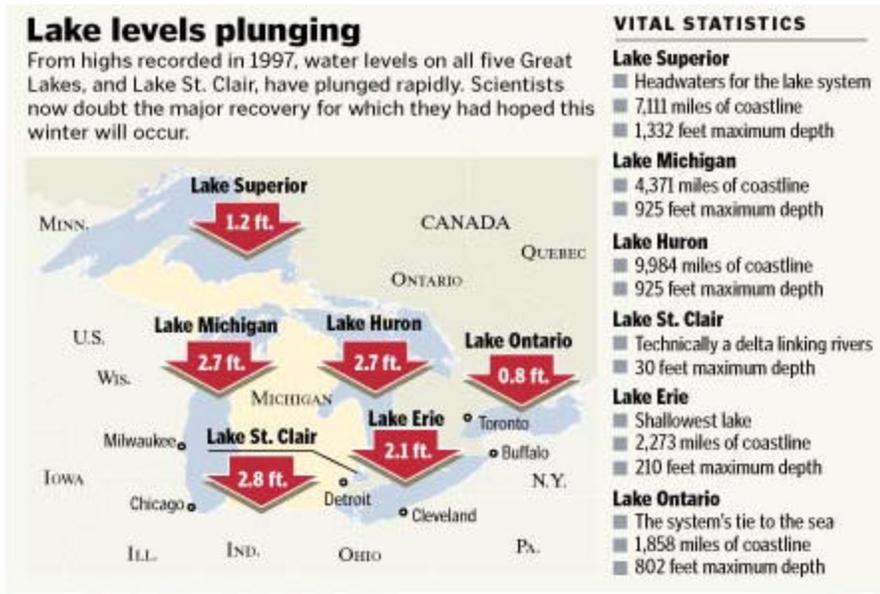
"It's dead all over," she said. "Everyone's feeling it. We're just praying it gets busy again."

Nearby, Bill Golm religiously monitors the water levels of the canal leading to his repair business, Bill's Marine. Another few inches and boats won't be able to reach his small shop, where he repairs vintage wooden boats from across the nation.

For years, real-estate agents inquired about buying his land to convert it to condominiums. Those offers dried up when the Great Lakes did.

"If it goes down anymore in the next few years, we're out of business," Golm said. "As it is now, we have to make a little money go a long way. These days, it's potatoes and tube steaks."

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