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Lake levels bring up boat business

But water still below norm because of weather

By SUSANNE QUICK
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Last Updated: July 22, 2002

Bill Krueger says business is up this year.

And he thinks Lake Michigan's water levels have something to do with it.

"Things were looking scary around June. But we had the best Fourth of July in a long time," said Krueger, the owner of Kap's Marina on Washington Island.

Indeed, many of the boats that were unable to dock at the marina last year - larger sailboats with more than 6 feet of drag - are back this summer.

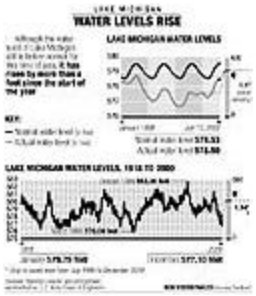
But he's keeping his fingers crossed, just in case water levels start to drop again.

"Those boats just can't make it through when the water's too low - they hit bottom," he said.

And although Lake Michigan's water levels are up from last year, they still are below normal, said Cynthia Sellinger, a hydrologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"Since 1997, Lake Michigan's levels have been dropping off," Sellinger said. "But we're up 10 inches from last year - putting us back to the 2000 levels."

Lake Michigan



Graphic/Bob Veierstahler
Water levels rise

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The reasons for this drop - and recent increase - are pretty well understood.

But what is less apparent is whether this year's increase is a sign of things to come - or an aberration in a larger decline of water levels.

Since 1997, Lake Michigan's surface has dropped 3.4 feet.

"It's been a pretty steady decline," said Sellinger, who, like other researchers studying the fluctuations of water levels in Lake Michigan, thinks the trend of decreasing levels is related to the weather.

"It's a combination of low precipitation and higher-than-average temperatures," she said.

"And because we've had warmer winter temperatures than usual for the past five years," and therefore, no ice, she said, the amount of water lost to the air has been enormous.

Last winter, however, the situation was ameliorated by "a combination of near-record snowfall and a bigger supply of water into the lake" through streams and rivers, said Keith Kompoltowicz, physical scientist and meteorologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit.

But whether this latest resurgence of water into the lake is the beginning of a new trend "is anybody's guess," Kompoltowicz said.

Todd Thompson, associate scientist at the Indiana Geological Survey, would beg to differ.

"Engineers think I'm crazy," he said, referring to the general feedback he gets from the Corps of Engineers when he presents his work.

But Sellinger believes that Thompson, who's looking at geological data to determine lake levels, may be onto something big.

By looking into the past - at ancient climatological records - patterns may be teased out that will help scientists accurately predict and create models for future events, Sellinger said.

Thompson has collected 4,000 years worth of data on Lake Michigan's fluctuating levels.

"I look at old beach rings - they're kind of like bathtub rings - around the lake," he explained.

He takes samples from the soil around these rings. And from these sediments, he is able to determine the elevation of the lake when the ring was formed.

And what he has discovered is that the lake bobs up and down in a

pretty predictable fashion.

"I wouldn't call them cycles," he said. "I like 'quasi-periodic fluctuations.' "

But every 160 years or so, he said, the lake rises to a high - and falls to a low.

"We are currently at the high peak of a 160-year cycle," he said.

But within these long cycles, he discovered shorter ones: fluctuations that span roughly 30 years.

"Around 2010, we'll be back up at the high for the 30. So I expect water levels to increase over the next few years," Thompson said.

"But 80 years from now, we'll be back into another Dust Bowl," as we plummet from the peak of the longer cycle, he said.

Brent Lufgren, a physical scientist at NOAA in Ann Arbor, says, however, that there really is no way to know what is going to happen.

He has designed several models, based on known climate patterns, to predict the fluctuations of lake levels. And depending upon which model he uses, the prediction changes.

Part of the problem, he said, is choosing the right factors to use in his model.

"I throw in carbon dioxide and sulfur aerosol levels," he said, to mimic greenhouse effects.

But because no one really knows what effects - or how much of an effect - these chemicals have on the environment, he said, it's difficult to make accurate predictions.

Glen Nekvasil, vice president of the Lake Carriers' Association, a trade association representing the Great Lakes shipping industry, doesn't have the time to sit around and wait to see which models prove accurate and which ones don't.

"At our peak, we were shipping 125 million tons of iron ore through the Soo Locks," he said, describing one of the main shipping routes through the upper Great Lakes.

But, "in 2000, we only shipped 102 million," he said.

"We currently have the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers looking into deepening the Great Lakes system," he said of a five-year project that the corps has just begun.

Appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on July 23, 2002.

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