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**NEW LAKESHORE WETLANDS:
NUISANCE OR ASSET?**



Terry Miller, of the Lone Tree Council, is one of the few Bay City residents trying to protect wetlands sprouting up along the beaches of Saginaw Bay. Many of his neighbors prefer beaches with less vegetation. Photo by Steve Meador.

With water levels below -average in the Great Lakes, emergent wetlands are flourishing in many large, protected bays. This thick vegetation, a few hundred yards wide at most, fringes the shoreline of exposed lakebeds. Scientists and government officials say emergent wetlands are valuable resources worth protecting. Others say the vegetation is a nuisance and want it destroyed. The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's Steve Meador has more:

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NEW LAKESHORE WETLANDS: NUISANCE OR ASSET?

Steve Meador

November 18, 2002

With water levels below-average in the Great Lakes, emergent wetlands are flourishing in many large, protected bays. This thick vegetation, a few hundred yards wide at most, fringes the shoreline of exposed lakebeds. Scientists and government officials say emergent wetlands are valuable resources worth protecting. Others say the vegetation is a nuisance and want it destroyed. The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's Steve Meador has more:

There's a dull gray sky over Saginaw Bay, a large, shallow arm of Lake Huron. A brisk wind blows off the bay toward Bay City State Park.

"This is the area that bathers come to in the summer, and as you can see, there is only a small portion of the beach left, that much of the rest has reverted to fairly high levels of vegetation...cattails...bulrushes... lots of vegetation."

Terry Miller heads an environmental organization in Bay City called the Lone Tree Council. These days, Lone Tree is an appropriate description of Miller. He's one of the few locals trying to protect emergent wetlands. These wetlands remain mostly out of mind during cycles of high water. However, with Lake Huron near its lowest level in decades, thin bands of emergent wetlands now flourish along the shores of Saginaw Bay.

Scientists call these wetlands some of the most productive in the country because they provide critical habitat for fish and birds. Yellow perch and northern pike use them as breeding areas, and waterfowl feed and nest there. The wetlands also reduce coastal erosion by anchoring shoreline sediment during storms.

Terry Miller sees the value of emergent wetlands and is fighting to protect them. He also accepts that some people are less concerned with how wetlands benefit an ecosystem than they are with clean, sandy beaches or an unobstructed view of Saginaw Bay.

"As you can see, some of this vegetation is taller than we are, and if you're a homeowner sitting back in your coffee hutch looking out and not seeing water but greenery, some may find that pleasant, but more than likely they would prefer to see the water."

One local resident who doesn't like the wetlands is Ernie Krygier. He says the vegetation reduces property values and prevents access to the water. Worst of all, he says it ruins sandy beaches, like the one at Bay City State Park.

"This park used to be just jammed, you see all the parking lot space that's out here, you couldn't find a spot back when we had beaches. Now you could shoot a gun through here and not hit anybody."

Krygier wants the vegetation along the park's shoreline removed. He says the place for wildlife is in the nearby Tobico Marsh, away from park users.

"This is where people belong, that's where nature belongs."

Krygier's issue with the park is part of a larger conflict with government regulators that also involves private property. The dispute has been dubbed the "weed war" by a property rights group called Save Our Shoreline, or SOS, that Krygier heads up.

SOS members say they have the right to remove vegetation below the ordinary high water mark. That's land the state and federal government says is publicly-owned bottomland. Government regulators protect this land by requiring permits for mechanized activities like plowing or grading. This helps preserve the dense root mat that anchors the shoreline.

Some less destructive techniques for controlling vegetation are allowed without a permit, including mowing, weed-whacking, and hand-pulling vegetation. Nevertheless, many property owners have used tractors and other heavy machinery to destroy vegetation on public land without a permit. Government regulators say this is a violation of the Clean Water Act. They've sent "cease and desist" letters to many property owners, including one state legislator.

Krygier's main contention is that property owners have ownership rights to the water's edge.

"The government, the state of Michigan wants to take ownership of our property, and that is wrong. We feel we have the law on our side."

Some law experts say Krygier's interpretation is wrong. Chris Shafer is a professor at Thomas M. Cooley School of Law in Lansing. He's had some experience in this area. He ran the Great Lakes Shorelands program for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for more than 15 years.

"I think the law is real clear on this, that all of the land we're talking about below the ordinary high water mark on the Great Lakes is owned by the state of Michigan. It's held in trust for all nine million citizens of Michigan."

Shafer says that while property owners have some legitimate concerns, they don't own the land out to the water's edge as they believe. They have a right to access the water, but no right to destroy vegetation on public land.

Shafer says that, unlike the sand dune shores of Lake Michigan, it may be unrealistic to expect sandy beaches throughout Saginaw Bay. Dr. Thomas Burton agrees. He's a professor of fisheries and zoology at Michigan State University who studies wetland ecosystems.

Burton says emergent wetlands have always been an important part of Saginaw Bay, and that they naturally grow and recede as water levels fall and rise. He says wetlands are a vanishing resource along the Great Lakes, and that the small portion of coastline that's not sandy beach should be protected. Burton says property owners are missing the bigger picture.

"To call it a 'weed war' to me is very short sighted, and really says that the person doesn't either, A. understand the importance of these wetlands, or B. they just don't care about nature at all, and are willing to destroy it just so they have a sandy beach in front of their house, and my own opinion is that that's a pretty lousy way to look at nature."

Back in Saginaw Bay, Terry Miller says his crusade to protect emergent wetlands is a lonely one, especially when neighbors tell him he's one of the most hated people on the beach. He says these wetlands are held in the public trust to benefit everyone who uses the bay, and hopes that some day the effort expended by property owners will be redirected.

"And the sad thing, the thing that I find very frustrating is that, from an environmental perspective, our Saginaw Bay is hurting. There are a host of environmental problems that this energy could be directed at, but it's not."

For now, property owners are putting their energy into changing state law. A bill before the Michigan legislature backed by SOS would allow unpermitted destruction of wetland

vegetation on publicly-owned lands.

For the Great Lakes Radio Consortium, I'm Steve Meador.

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