



Restoring Wetlands and Habitat

The loss and degradation of habitat in the Great Lakes is a pressing concern. The landscape and aquatic ecosystems in the Great Lakes basin have been altered due to human settlement, farming, development and other activities, resulting in the loss or degradation of many wildlife habitats, including fish spawning substrate and nursery areas. The Great Lakes region has lost more than half of its original wetlands and 60 percent of forest lands, and the region only has small remnants of other habitat types such as savannah or prairies. These changes in habitat type and extent have contributed to the loss or severe reduction of numerous plant and animal species across the region. The 10,000 miles of Great Lakes coastline include more than 530,000 acres of coastal wetlands, sand and cobble beaches, and the largest system of freshwater dunes in the world. More than 30,000 islands scattered throughout the lakes are refuges for rare and sensitive species. These resources have substantial economic value. Boating, fishing, hunting and wildlife watching in the Great Lakes region yield over \$50 billion of economic activity annually and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs. Healthy and diverse Great Lakes ecosystems are also of great value to the Tribal Nations who rely on these resources to meet their subsistence, economic, cultural, spiritual and medicinal needs.



Lake Ontario. Photo: The Nature Conservancy.

Great Lakes Commission Requests to Congress

The Great Lakes Commission requests congressional support for the following priorities to continue efforts to achieve regional habitat protection and restoration goals:

- **Provide full funding for the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act (\$16 million)** to enable the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to partner with the Great Lakes States and others to restore and conserve fish and wildlife resources.
- **Provide \$5 million** for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program.

Funding History

Wetlands and Habitat Priority	Fiscal Year Funding (millions of dollars)					
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009*	GLC Request
Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act	\$1.77	\$1.77	\$1.77	\$1.77	TBD	\$16.00
Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program	\$0.668	\$0.375	\$0.470	\$0.936	TBD	\$5.00

*Appropriations for FY2009 are under a continuing resolution until March 6, 2009; final appropriations bills have not been passed.

Committee Jurisdiction

- House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans
- House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Environment and Related Agencies
- Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Water Quality
- Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

Progress to Date

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) Strategy of 2005 established habitat and wetland restoration and protection goals for the Great Lakes region. The Strategy calls for 1.1 million acres of habitat to be protected or restored: 550,000 acres of wetlands and 550,000 acres of other habitat. In 2006 several initiatives were formed to coordinate efforts to achieve those goals. Decision support tools have been developed to identify plausible habitat restoration projects that could be implemented to reach these targets. Since December 2005 an estimated 95,000 acres of wetlands have been protected, improved and restored across the Great Lakes basin. Significant additional acreage has been protected, improved and restored by state, local and Tribal governments and other partners although not fully quantified. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers led the Great Lakes Habitat Initiative (GLHI) to identify site-specific actions that can be implemented under existing programs to protect and restore wetlands and aquatic habitat in the Great Lakes region. The GLHI web-based decision support tools include a project database with over 240 projects that are viable for implementation and a funding source and technical assistance database which summarizes over 130 federal, state and private foundation programs that could expedite restoration and protection activities. These tools are helping to bridge the gap between regional needs identified in the GLRC Strategy and the programs that provide funding for “on-the-ground” actions.

There are several important federal programs that contribute to restoring and protecting fish, wildlife and habitat in the Great Lakes. The **Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act**, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, provides competitive grants to states, Tribes and other entities for the conservation, restoration and management of fish and wildlife resources and their habitat in the Great Lakes basin. From 1998-2008, 87 restoration projects totaling \$8.2 million – including \$5 million in federal funds and \$3.2 million in matching funds – were implemented under the act. These projects have contributed to a range of priorities from lake sturgeon rehabilitation to wetlands restoration. The program has been severely under-funded, however, receiving only \$1.77 million annually (of which \$1.2 million is used for Fish and Wildlife Service operations). In 2006, up to \$16 million annually was authorized under the Act. The **Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program (GLFER)**, administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, provides non-federal partners with planning, engineering and construction support in the development of Great Lakes fishery and ecosystem restoration projects. The Corps of Engineers works closely with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to implement this program. Since 2002, an implementation plan for this program was approved and approximately \$2.28 million has been allocated to fund restoration projects. Unfortunately, the program is significantly underfunded given the authorized amount of \$100 million for projects and the demand for support. Currently, planning and design are proceeding on eight restoration projects throughout the region. There are four projects expected to be ready for implementation in 2009-10. The optimal funding level to continue design and implementation of GLFER habitat restoration projects in FY 2010 is \$5 million.

Economic and Environmental Benefits

Restoring and protecting wetlands and habitat is a vital goal for the Great Lakes region. Natural habitats and native fish and wildlife communities play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem health and function, and contribute to the social and economic vitality of both the region and the nation. Nearshore and open waters provide drinking water for municipalities and habitat for fish, aquatic life and waterfowl. Thousands of tributaries transport sediments, nutrients and organic material throughout the watershed. Inland lakes and wetlands support diverse fish and wildlife resources and are important reservoirs for water. The full array of habitat types is vital for sustaining valuable Great Lakes species, particularly those targeted for restoration, such as trumpeter swans and lake trout. The Great Lakes also provide significant economic benefits for the region. People spend \$25 billion annually on recreation involving fish and wildlife. Boating on the lakes generates nearly \$20 billion annually and over 120,000 jobs. All told, more than 37 million people participate in fishing, hunting and wildlife watching in the Great Lakes states. Thus, human health and prosperity – as well as the sustainability and diversity of Great Lakes wildlife, fish and plant species and their habitats – are dependent on the health of the entire ecosystem.

More Information

Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Program: www.fws.gov/midwest/Fisheries/glfwra-grants.html

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-Great Lakes and Ohio River Division: www.lrd.usace.army.mil

Great Lakes Habitat Initiative: www.glhi.org

Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Habitat/Species Web Tools: gis.glin.net/habitat