

# Guest Feature

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## No greatness without great governance, great public

By Dave Dempsey  
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We lob the word “great” back and forth almost casually these days, like a tennis ball. In routine conversation, a good meal is a great meal, and a good day is a great day. In Great Lakes policy circles, we do the same. In the last few years we’ve heard of government initiatives like “Great Waters” and new plans to “Restore the Greatness.”

So why aren’t the Great Lakes getting greater?

Maybe it’s because we don’t understand the meaning of “great.” In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it has multiple definitions, but the ones I favor include “remarkable in effectiveness,” “full of emotion,” and “eminent, distinguished.”

If we apply these definitions not just to the programs designed to restore the health of the Lakes, but also to the government systems that are supposed to protect them, we have a daunting measuring stick. Regrettably, the governments fall well short of meeting that dimension.

The executive order on Great Lakes protection signed by President Bush May 18 is encouraging, but at best a half-step. It puts U.S. EPA in charge of coordinating a task force regarding the scores of Great Lakes programs in the federal government and rightfully acknowledges the national significance of the Great Lakes. But it doesn’t invite the public into the process of beefing up federal Great Lakes policies – the critical element lacking in the last decade.

In *On the Brink: The Great Lakes in the 21st Century*, I have tried to sketch not only what is wrong with the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem, but also what is needed to assure their future greatness. And I have tried to illustrate the huge gap that exists between the public appreciation of the lakes and the government policies that are chipping away at their greatness.

The fact is that overwhelming majorities of the people who live around the lakes revere them. A poll commissioned by the Madison, Wisconsin-based Biodiversity Project in 2002 found that 64 percent of the more than 1,500 adults surveyed rated as “extremely important” our personal responsibility to leave the Great Lakes in good shape for future generations. But they don’t believe the Lakes are as great as they should be. Only 4 percent believed the Great Lakes are in excellent condition, and 44 percent regarded them as “OK,” “poor” or “very poor.”

They’re not alone in thinking we face serious ecosystem problems despite 30 years of sustained recovery. A majority of the environmental indicators assembled for the State of the Lakes Environment Conference (SOLEC) 2002 were mixed or deteriorating. Why? There are many reasons, but one that escapes attention all too often is the failure of our region’s governmental institutions to reflect the public will for healthier and more majestic Great Lakes.

If our institutions did reflect that will, we wouldn’t suffer the introduction of another invasive aquatic species to the Great Lakes every seven months on average or wait to act until other nations far from the Great Lakes ban many brominated fire retardants for poisoning the ecosystem and our bodies.



The most alarming implication of the failure of governments to act in a protective way toward the Great Lakes lies not in our present, but in our future. If our governmental institutions are unable to cope with readily identifiable threats to the ecosystem like exotic species for fear of offending special interests today, how can we expect them to cope with the threats of climate change, water expropriation, and runaway habitat loss tomorrow?

The short answer is that we can’t – not until we develop a system of governance as great as these spectacular lakes themselves. That means reviving the robust public participation that helped drive such landmark initiatives as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and the innovative, community-based remedial action planning process for Great Lakes Areas of Concern. Citizens led the first recovery of the Great Lakes, and they’ll need to lead the second.

A report released by the Michigan Environmental Council in April offers specific suggestions on how to help citizens lead the second recovery. It calls for reform in institutions like the International Joint Commission and built-in public participation mechanisms in any Great Lakes restoration legislation to assure billions of U.S. dollars are properly spent.

Most importantly, it calls for bringing government to people, not the other way around. Through the creative use of the Internet, training of citizen ecosystem leaders of the future, and a periodic Great Lakes summit pulling together all of the region’s key institutions to respond to citizen concerns, the report envisions true greatness – an eminent and distinguished system governance system worthy of the lakes.

To read MEC’s report on Great Lakes governance, go to: <http://www.mecprotects.org>. To get more information on Dave’s book, *On the Brink*, go to: [www.davedempsey.org](http://www.davedempsey.org). ♦

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