

Address

By

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Great Lakes Commission 2015 Annual Meeting

&

60th Anniversary Celebration

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Good afternoon, my fellow North Americans, most especially the Board of Directors, Commissioners, Observers and Staff of the Great Lakes Commission.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver this address to a truly landmark, binational gathering. I want to congratulate you all for your leadership, over six decades, on policy and integrated management in the Great Lakes Basin. Long before the phrase “triple bottom line” became popular, you have attended to the economic, environmental and social needs of the region

Whenever I come to Chicago and the Great Lakes region, I am overwhelmed with fond memories. Not only did I have the pleasure of working on Great Lakes issues for many years, but I also had the good fortune in marrying a proud native of Wisconsin who grew up on the shores of Lake Michigan. My wife and I also spent our honeymoon here at the Drake Hotel!

Chicago, a city which gets better and better with each visit, is a great place to gauge the progress we have made in protecting the waters of the United States and the Great Lakes.

Upton Sinclair's famous muckracking novel, *The Jungle* (1906) excoriated conditions in the Chicago stockyards and packing houses of that era. There you will find this description of a body of water surpassing even the Cuyahoga River in terms of past degradation:

“Bubbly Creek” is an arm of the Chicago River, and forms the southern boundary of the yards; all the drainage of the square mile of packing houses empties into it, so that it is really a great open sewer a hundred or two feet wide. One long arm of it is blind, and the filth stays there forever and a day. The grease and chemicals that are poured into it undergo all sorts of strange transformations, which are the cause of its name; it is constantly in motion, as if huge fish were feeding in it, or great leviathans disporting themselves in its depths. Bubbles of carbonic acid gas will rise to the surface and burst, and make rings two or three feet wide. Here and there the grease and filth have caked solid, and the creek looks like a bed of lava; chickens walk about on it, feeding, and many times an unwary stranger has started to stroll across, and vanished temporarily. The packers used to leave the creek that way, till every now and then the surface would catch fire and burn furiously, and the fire department would have to come and put it out. Once, however, an ingenious stranger came and started to gather this filth in scows, to make lard out of; then the packers took the cue, and got out an injunction to stop him, and afterward gathered it themselves. The banks of “Bubbly Creek are plastered thick with hairs, and this also packers gather and clean.”

Conditions such as these are unimaginable today, even on Bubbly Creek where you can now spy an occasional four-pound coho salmon or buy a million-dollar residence.

As former EPA Administrator Bill Ruckelshaus is reported to have said that even if all our waters are not fishable or swimmable, at least they're not flammable.

But you have done better than that. In August 2006 lake whitefish, the number one commercial fish in the Great Lakes and a key indicator of water quality, returned to the Detroit River. They were found spawning there for the first time since 1916.

The Detroit River lost this valuable fishery due to a witch's brew of oil, phosphorus, mercury, and organochlorine pollution over many years. Relative to 1972 levels, oil and phosphorus pollution levels are down 98 percent and 95 percent respectively. Mercury contamination in fish tissue is down 70 percent, and PCB contamination is down 83 percent as measured in herring gulls from a nearby island.

The Detroit River now has naturally reproducing populations of peregrine falcons, lake sturgeons, and bald eagles, not too mention a world-class walleye fishery for which it shares honors with Lake Erie, itself once declared dead or dying. And just two weeks ago my cab driver, Kevin, in Erie, PA, was marveling at the luck local fishermen are having catching naturally reproducing lake trout again.

It is important to recall these successes for our childrens' and grandchildren's sake especially and avoid the corrosive cynicism and hopelessness that so often tinges debate over policy in this country. We have it within our power to improve human health and the natural world.

So I am very pleased to be here today. I am extremely happy to join in this celebration of one of the most effective public, intergovernmental and binational partnerships with which I have ever had the privilege to be associated--the Great Lakes Commission.

I count it one of my great personal and professional blessings to have been a Commissioner of this great undertaking for many reasons, not the least of which are the many friendships which the Commission brought my way during my years with the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes.

I congratulate all of you who have worked so hard these past 60 years to achieve so much, sustained by a mutual commitment to the Great Lakes and the people who both depend on and revere them.

1955 was quite a year. Besides witnessing the creation of the Great Lakes Commission, and long before the *Red October*, the USS *Nautilus* put to sea. President Eisenhower sent the first US advisors to South Viet Nam. Chicago Mayor Martin Kennelly lost to the head of the Cook County Democratic Party, Richard J. Daley, in the mayoral primary. Jim Henson created Kermit the Frog 1.0. The FDA approved the Salk polio vaccine, and the *Mickey Mouse Club* made its debut on TV along with *Gunsmoke*. And Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to obey an order to give up her seat to a white passenger. General Motors became the first American corporation to make a profit of over one billion dollars, and Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Ray took out an add touting 15-cent hamburgers, 19-cent cheeseburgers, and 10-cent french fries and sodas which was a good thing because Social Security pegged the national wage index at \$3,301.44.

I indulge in this walk down Memory Lane to illustrate that, as the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus once said, "Sit Flux"-all is flux, all is change. You never put your foot in the same river-or lake-twice. Society, ecosystems, economies are dynamic and continually present new challenges demanding adaptation, resilience, judgment and wisdom from all of us, individually and collectively.

And there are challenges aplenty: a changing and variable climate generating extreme wet weather events that require new infrastructure investments, both gray and green; nutrient pollution from unregulated agricultural sources that create situations like those we find in Toledo, Saginaw Bay and estuaries around the globe; the continuing scourge of invasive species; and the inevitable pressures of a growing population and, please God, economy. These challenges also present opportunities for the Great Lakes Commission to play to its strengths in terms of technical expertise, collaboration, integrated management and political legitimacy.

Whither the Great Lakes Commission? What are its strengths and projects appropriate to its strengths? What are the new opportunities for applying the lessons learned from this sixty-year collaboration? And, just as important, what activities should the Commission cease doing or abandon entirely, thus creating opportunities to conserve, renew, or redirect precious human, financial, and political capital for the benefit of the citizens of the Great Lakes basin?

The late Peter Drucker, the greatest of America's management theorists (although he was Viennese by birth), is always worth studying during times of institutional change, be it commercial, non-profit, or governmental.

Drucker claimed that successful leaders do not ask, "What do I want to do?" They ask, "What needs to be done?" And of those things that would make a difference, "which are right for me?" He maintained that leaders don't tackle things they aren't good at.

But Drucker also insisted on what has been characterized as "Creative Abandonment." As Drucker put it:

A critical question for leaders is, "When do you stop pouring resources into things that have achieved their purpose?"

However, I do not want to dictate outcomes to your ongoing deliberations as to the future course of the Great Lakes Commission but only to suggest avenues for you to explore.

It is no fun to talk about what you are *not* going to do—as necessary as such a discussion may be. So let's consider those emerging and long-standing challenges such as those I have already mentioned.

I know that the Commission is already engaged on these salient issues. There are no shortages of discrete projects, activities, or initiatives that it might undertake given adequate resources. Given our limited time here together, let me try to offer a broad conceptual framework for optimizing or prioritizing your work going forward.

With respect to our great ecosystems, the Great Lakes most notably, I find myself envisioning one of those Venn diagrams with which teachers used to torment you in grade school. My Venn diagram, like most you see, is made up of three overlapping circles. The first circle represents water or H₂O. The second represents nutrients-N or P for nitrogen and phosphorus. The third circle represents the carbon cycle or CO₂.

All three of these circles represent natural cycles that are highly dynamic if not approaching non-linear, often chaotic, status in terms of the Great Lakes as well as the global ecosystem. We have continually disrupted the hydrologic cycle or natural flow regime with everything from dams to impervious surfaces and now climate variability. Certainly, the nutrient cycle is out of control even after our multi-billion dollar investments in end-of-pipe treatment. We now have to deal with unregulated, nonpoint source agricultural runoff, say, from row crop agriculture and deforestation. Finally, the carbon cycle is disturbed with carbon now at 400 ppm in the atmosphere. We can have a legitimate debate as to our relative investments in either mitigation versus

adaptation and resilience planning. I lean heavily toward the latter because managing water and aquatic resources cannot wait for mitigation efforts to yield any results in a meaningful time period. We have to start adapting now.

These three circles or cycles-water, nutrients, carbon or climate-overlap substantially. We need to look carefully at the shaded areas, so to speak, and discern those opportunities where we can leverage our limited resources by addressing all three circles simultaneously. This way you can achieve multiple benefits or synergies in an integrated or systems approach.

To give one example, reducing nutrient application in farming will improve water quality and also reduce nitrous oxide that is a very intense greenhouse gas, 319 times as much as carbon. One can imagine a water quality trading system that yields financial benefits for farmers while improving water quality; reduces greenhouse gas emissions; and, depending on the management practices utilized, restores a more natural hydrologic regime.

Reforestation is another example, really a no-brainer. You improve water quality, restore the natural flow regime, sequester carbon and create habitat.

These are simple examples. My aim is to suggest a strategic approach to structuring your work and prioritizing your investments of time, money and political capital in those projects of greatest economic, environmental and social benefit.

I wish the entire community of the Great Lakes Commission best wishes as you begin the next 60 years of service to the Great Lakes and its citizens on both sides of the longest undefended border in the world.

Thank you.