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## Reclaiming our Great Lakes Commons: A New Approach for Protecting our Water

Alexa Bradley and Julie Ristau

There are 70 of us assembled here at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana for the opening of the first-ever Great Lakes Commons Gathering. In the opening circle we introduce ourselves and pour water brought from our homes around the Lakes into a large clear bowl. This confluence of the waters reflects the real and symbolic center of our meeting.

We have come from many places, disciplines and backgrounds to explore a new vision for the future of the Great Lakes. We are embarking on an historic joint mission, one that weaves together the knowledge and needs of our different communities, one that ensures a life giving future for all people and species around the lakes.

*As we begin, Grandmother Josephine Mandamin, an Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) elder and founder of the Mother Earth Water Walk, makes an offering to the water itself. The Great Lakes are the heart of Anishinaabe territory, and women are the water's caretakers, responsible for protecting it. Josephine describes how she began walking and praying for the lakes—a journey that has taken her and fellow Mother Earth Water Walkers around all five Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. She recalls listening to the Grand Chief of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge, who said that 30 years from now an ounce of water would cost the same as an ounce of gold if we continue our negligence. Grandmother Josephine carries a vial of gold with her and asks each of us "What will you tell your grandchildren when they ask what you did for the water?"*

### Reweaving The We of the Great Lakes

This gathering is not the usual crowd of water experts and activists. Or rather, it is a much broader circle of water experts and activists. Some have spent years practicing at the cutting edge of water law; some have taught water conservation and engineering; some have organized campaigns to save the lakes from further damage; some have created theater and art out of love for these waters; some have mobilized neighbors to keep water from being privatized; some care for these waters through ceremony, song and water walks.

As the gathering begins everyone is a bit disoriented, which is understandable. The event—hosted by On the Commons and the Mendoza School of Business at Notre Dame and sponsored by Blue Mountain Center, Michigan Technological University and Vermont Law School—was conceived as a microcosm of the broader community that will be needed to establish a living Great Lakes Commons. We are here seeking the common ground we

now need. We are all here for the water, a theme that recurs throughout our three days together.

We begin this gathering with a combined sense of hope and responsibility. We are here to explore nothing less than the transformation of our relationship with and governance of our waters. We are on a journey without a map; guided by the far ranging wisdom of those assembled and by a commitment not to settle for superficial solutions.

The Great Lakes Commons initiative and now this Gathering have arisen out of an understanding that fundamental change is needed if we are to create a sustaining future for the Great Lakes. Despite decades of courageous and committed work to protect these waters, evidence mounts that they are more endangered than ever—from long time threats like pollution and invasive species to newer ones like hydro-fracking and large-scale bottling of water. We are faced with an urgent choice—we can continue on the current path toward destruction or we can make a dramatic change in our relationship to the living systems we inhabit.

*"This indispensable resource—water—has come to be taken for granted and, even worse, viewed as an expendable commodity. I shudder to imagine that our children will think water is something you buy in a store."*

– Camille Gage, artist

### Troubled Waters

The Great Lakes comprise most of North America's fresh water. Millions of people and thousands of species depend on this water. And yet, like so many ecological systems on the planet, the relentless pursuit of economic growth has led to depletion and degradation.

Sadly, the governance—which include jurisdictions at every level as well as regulations, treaties and agreements to protect the lakes—is failing on multiple levels.

- The underlying logic driving Great Lakes policy is biased toward private interests at the expense of ecological and human wellbeing;
- The political boundaries in the region do not correspond to ecological realities;
- The people of the Great Lakes bioregion lack standing and structural power in the water decisions that affect them.

Because of this, we are gradually losing the Great Lakes to those that believe that they are up for grabs. Nestle bottles Lake Michigan and sells it back to us. Rio Tinto mines copper and dumps its waste into shoreline wild rice beds around Lake Superior. The





The Great Lakes contain approximately 20 per cent of the surface fresh water on earth and more than 90 per cent of that available in North America.

Bruce Nuclear Power Plant on Lake Huron makes plans to ship its radioactive waste across the Lakes. The city of Detroit turns off the water of those unable to pay their bill. At the Aamjiwnaang First Nation's reserve near Sarnia, Ontario—described by National Geographic Magazine as the most polluted place in North America—toxic levels of chemicals are believed to be the cause of the area's skewed birth ratios. In Aamjiwnaang, two girls are born for every boy. Underlying these stories is the acceptance of a form of governance that can at best negotiate with private interests and at worst, is wholly captive to them. Most citizens of the Lakes are left to protest and petition with no given power or standing.

Even as we can see that the current approach to our Lakes is failing, it is not easy to imagine a new one. We are influenced by the same ideas and systems that allow the depletion and damage of our Lakes. If we accept even in subtle ways that the water is a commodity, able to be owned or used for the benefit of private individuals and companies, then we allow ourselves to be dislocated from a relationship and lose sight of our role in maintaining an ecologically whole system.

All of this shows why a profound shift is needed in how we think and act about the Great Lakes. If we are to protect the Great Lakes so they can be used and enjoyed by future generations, we need to move beyond a worldview that values economic profits over everything else. This is why the principles and practices of the commons—a way of looking at the lakes as belonging to everyone—is the theme of this gathering.

### Recovering The Knowledge of a Living Commons

Hanging on the wall of conference room in which we are meeting, 30 miles from Lake Michigan, are many maps of the Great Lakes:

of watersheds, of Indigenous territories pre-settler, from outer-space, and a cross-section of the Lake depths. One even hangs upside down, a trickster image demanding we revisit our preconceptions of the Great Lakes. The idea is to gently disorient everyone gathered—to free us from the confining patterns of habitual thought and open ourselves to discovering a new path towards regeneration of this natural wonder.

The work of this Gathering mirrors the expansive work of re-establishing the Lakes as a commons. The process is designed to identify the ecological and social breakdowns we now face and to engage us in recovering vital knowledge about ways of governance rooted in commons and Indigenous thought and practice. This is the seedbed we will draw upon as we envision a commons-based framework for protecting the Great Lakes and map out strategies to move toward this transformation.

As Notre Dame Business Professor Leo Burke points out in his introduction to the gathering, the commons is an ancient way that people have shared essential resources. Today, the commons is emerging as a contemporary and evolving approach to social and economic challenges in light of the failures of existing market-dominated systems. Our future depends on recovering our commons and on each of us seeing ourselves as commoners.

While there is no word for the commons in Indigenous languages, Indigenous participants expressed a closely related worldview. Prominent parallels between Indigenous and commons governance include longstanding values and practices that recognize our interdependence and kinship with the natural world, that foster multigenerational thinking and that understand generosity and reciprocity are more key to our collective survival than private ownership.





left. Opening Water Ceremony at the Great Lakes Commons Gathering; right. one of the small groups in action.

## Sidebar

*Professor Robert Lovelace, retired Chief of the Ardoch Algonquin First Nation, has decoded elements of aboriginal governance that are key to re-indigenizing the commons. Lovelace presented part of his work at the Great Lakes Commons Gathering:*

Indigenous cultures are complex knowledge systems that utilize energy, food security, transportation and communications in balance with natural systems. Understanding how indigenous economies, social and cultural systems work can help bend the curve against the prospects of social, environmental and economic failure.

Present governance structures conform little to environmental or ecosystem realities. For the most part, political boundaries were created to serve colonial settlement, resource extraction and industrial manufacturing while denaturing ecosystems and limiting environmentally appropriate governance. Faced with over exploitation of resources, ecosystem degradation, contamination of soils and water and climate change, the people of North America need to re-imagine how we connect to the earth. Ecosystem appropriate governance is a step in the right direction. We also need to ensure economic, social and cultural practices work with natural replenishment cycles rather than against them.

Language is the 'signature' of culture. How we speak to one another, how we describe and discuss the world in which we live, determines our success in relating to the world. Indigenous knowledge systems are reflections of empirical interaction with the earth, rational discovery, symbolic imagery and social reinforcement, directed toward a deep understanding of the local. Indigenous languages are verb based rather than using nouns as the foundation for communication as we do in English. If we simply want to acquire 'things,' then our present language works fine. If we want to relate with the world, make appropriate ecological choices, and rebuild collapsing environments then we need to learn, think and create in action words. We need to live within dynamic eco-natural processes to live well together.

Frank Ettawageshik, Executive Director of United Tribes of Michigan and former Tribal Chair of the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, highlights the importance of recognizing Indigenous wisdom as a legitimate school of thought but also

underscores the importance of recognizing Indigenous sovereignty and the legal, political, economic and cultural rights of Indigenous people today as defined in treaties as well as many international declarations and accords.

## Putting the Commons Into Action: A Social Charter For The Great Lakes

The Great Lakes are already a commons, of course, something shared by many and belonging to none. But can a commons truly be a commons if not recognized as one in law, policy and the minds of the public at large? This was a central inquiry at the Great Lakes Commons Gathering, fueling exploration of ways to activate people in various arenas to work for the recognition of the lakes as living commons.

As we explore what a forward looking form of governance for the Great Lakes could be, one that would give standing to all people the care and preservation of our cherished waters, we focus on the creation of a social charter.

Social charters have been one tool commoners used to protect themselves from destruction or enclosure of the commons. When people in 13<sup>th</sup> Century England found their commons lands under threat by the monarch, they drafted the Charter of the Forest alongside the Magna Carta to protect what belonged to all. In South Africa, the South African Freedom Charter ratified by the Congress of the People in 1955 articulated a vision for society and unified resistance to the oppression and exploitation of apartheid.

A social charter process will do two vital things toward the establishment of our Great Lakes Commons: It will help activate a sense of power, that we the commoners of the Great Lakes have a rightful, in fact critical role in establishing the vision and principles that can reshape governance of the Great Lakes; and secondly in engaging people about what those principles ought to be, it will invite a sense of responsibility and stewardship in what happens to the water.

Today, the average person thinks little about their relationship to the waters or their responsibility for them. And yet there is a deep love of the Lakes that is evident in the people of the region, but rarely is tapped politically or socially. That's why we are embarking on a social charter creation process to renew, rediscover and reinvent a stewardship relationship and culture around the Lakes. Besides the importance of the charter itself, the audacity and clarity of calls for a social charter will break through the status quo and galvanize people around a new possibility.



left. Indigenous leaders address the group; right Leo Burke gives Grandmother Josephine a gift of appreciation.

## Going Forward

On the final day we are led by Robert Lovelace, a Queens University Professor and retired Chief of the Ardoch Algonquin First Nation in an ‘exchange’ of invitations, offers and ideas. It is an ancient ritual of people coming together, and in this modern incarnation, it functions as a forum for the development of a web of strategic initiatives, partnerships and offers of assistance and resources. The Great Lakes Commons will not be established by any one action or campaign but through a multitude of efforts aligned in principle and vision.

All of us realize that we need to deepen and expand our knowledge of each other if we are to forge a life sustaining future for our Great Lakes. But it is not easy to connect given the history between the region’s people—Native and settler, urban and rural, descendants of African, European and First Nations peoples. When a commons has been lost, taken or forgotten, our first task is reweaving the web of relationships and understandings. In our days together at Notre Dame we worked to build, recover and recreate the knowledge and connections that will enable us to act together—the beginning of a truer spirit of ‘we’ for the Great Lakes commons that extends hope for a path forward.

*“We are moving forward to build a deep awareness of water, our environment, culture and place. The participants in the gathering became the lived experience of a commons and I know that experience will begin to vibrate within the organizations, work, and hearts of those who attended. These ripples will spread out among the various communities and will gather together in a Great Lakes Commons. I felt the tension of difference, but also felt the beauty of our shared humanity. The gathering gave me renewed insight into what it takes to really be present, be authentic and make connections. I trust the connections we made at the Great Lakes Water Gathering will grow deep roots, and be nourished by the nutrients of love, joy, respect, care, concern, gratitude, responsibility, and the waters of the Great Lakes.”*

– Charity Hicks, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network

These days have been a rehearsal for the commons we need to create. For a few days we have practiced a different paradigm of co-creation, reciprocity, equitable access and benefit, shared

leadership and sustainable solution seeking. As we head off to our respective homes, we are carrying these new patterns with us—a constellation of leaders committed to acting toward a kind of change we are only just beginning to imagine.

*“We are each on a journey to find ourselves. We are guided in choosing pathways of action to not do harm, to repair and restore what has been harmed, and to act in ways that will add to the strength of our coming generations and the world within which they will live. We must learn how to walk softly on Mother Earth and in the Cosmos. The gathering and the work for the Great Lakes Commons was an opportunity to further this mission, personally and collectively. As we left the Gathering we were leaving the world a bit better than we found it, and we were leaving with ideas for creating the tools that will help others to do the same.”*

– Frank Ettawageshik, Executive Director, United Tribes of Michigan

Contributing writers and editors to this article include: Frank Ettawageshik, Faye Brown, Camille Gage, Charity Hicks, Robert Lovelace, Ana Micka and Jay Walljasper.

*On the Commons* is a commons movement strategy center. We work with communities to explore and demonstrate how we can exercise power in the decisions that affect our lives. Through initiatives like the Great Lakes Commons, we connect a rapidly growing network of people, organizations and ideas and foster the creation of solution oriented work aimed at reclaiming the public domain, shared resources and our own humanity. The tremendous and widespread growth of the commons movement over the past few years is testimony to the resonance of this ancient concept as a fresh solution to 21st century problems. <http://onthecommons.org>

Alexa Bradley is a Program Director at On The Commons. As part of the organization’s leadership team she works to foster community solutions rooted in commons principles. Her current work includes a focus on the Great Lakes Commons Initiative. Alexa has worked as an organizer, facilitator and popular educator for over 25 years. Julie Ristau is Co-Director at On the Commons, where part of her mission is to infuse commons principles and practice to various local initiatives OTC has launched. Julie has been publisher of Utne Reader Magazine, held an Endowed Chair at the University of Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, and worked as a community-based animator, organizer and civic leader in both rural and urban settings.

