



ECOLOGICAL DESIGN

Reclaiming our Lake Erie shore

On September 18, 1997, EcoCity Cleveland director David Beach spoke at the Ohio Lake Erie Conference at the Great Lakes Science Center and advocated a much enlarged vision of a public lakefront in Ohio. His "modest proposal" called for at least half of Ohio's 262-mile Lake Erie shoreline to be made public in the next generation. Below is an adapted version of his speech, which explains the vision.

Estranged from the lake

How many of you get your drinking water from Lake Erie?
Have you thought about what that means?

Look at your body. It's mostly water. We are water beings.

That means that the water you drink every day from Lake Erie replenishes your body, becomes your body. Chances are that part of every molecule in your body has cycled through Lake Erie.

You are Lake Erie. And Lake Erie is you.

In fact, you have a more intimate relationship with the lake than with anything else. This intimate, physical relationship is good reason to care about issues like water pollution, especially the persistent toxics which accumulate in our bodily tissues.

But today I'd like to talk more about our psychological and emotional relationship with the lake. I'd like to talk about what I see as a great tragedy in Ohio—the fact that so many of us are so close to this great body of water, yet we are so estranged from it.

Let me explain. I grew up not far from here in Bay Village, a misnamed city that isn't a village and has no bay. But it does have about five miles of Lake Erie shoreline. When I was a kid I had little connection to that shore. It was right there. It should have been my playground. But back then we turned away from the lake. It was "dead." It smelled.

When we went swimming, we went to the city pool, where high concentrations of toxic chlorine made the water safe. I only saw glimpses of the lake. As we drove down Lake Road to get to the pool I could see snatches of it between the private homes.

I think my experience is typical.

At EcoCity Cleveland we publish a monthly journal about environmental and urban issues. To subscribe, you fill out a coupon with the usual information—your name, address, zip



code, etc. And then there's a blank for you to write in the name of your bioregion. We invite subscribers to be creative and think up a name for what they feel is their "life place." What's special about where they live? What's their identity?

Over the years, we have collected a lot of [intriguing names](#). At the start I would have guessed that most people would have associated their bioregion with Lake Erie or the Great Lakes. After all, the lake is the dominant natural feature of this region. Nothing else comes close.

But while we do get quite a number of lake related names, they are not the majority. More people identify with local rivers. They live in the Cuyahoga Bioregion or the Chagrin Watershed.

This may be anecdotal evidence, but I take it as a sign that many of us have trouble feeling connected to the lake.

Now that most of the gross sewage problems have been corrected, there is little reason to avoid the lake. But, if you don't have a boat, you still have a hard time reaching out to experience it-for the simple reason that there is so little opportunity.

We can't get to the lake. It's walled off, developed, privatized. Ohio has one of the most intensively developed coasts in the nation. Only about 15 percent of the Ohio shoreline is publicly owned-about 40 out of 262 miles. And out of that 40 miles, less than seven miles are publicly accessible beaches. The city of Chicago probably has more public access to Lake Michigan than our entire state has to Lake Erie. It's outrageous.

A public asset

I'd like to make a modest proposal.

The state of Ohio should begin a systematic program to buy shoreline property so that by the next generation half of Ohio's lakefront is publicly owned and freely accessible. The process to accomplish this could be like the creation of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. In areas designated for acquisition, current property owners are allowed to remain for as long as they desire or until they die. Then the government buys the land at a fair price.

Of course, the lakefront property owners would raise bloody hell about this outrageous land grab by the state. But I'm not talking about taking land. I'm talking about buying it the way society buys land for roads and other important public purposes that benefit most people. After all, there are only a few thousand lakefront property owners and more than 10 million of the rest of us in Ohio.

The creation of a vast and sweeping public lakefront would be one of the best investments Ohio could ever make-an investment in future quality of life, an investment in economic competitiveness and environmental restoration, an enduring gift to our children.

And there would be other benefits. For example, right now we're struggling with the problem of shoreline erosion. Most of this problem has been caused by unwise development too close to the shore. We've developed and armored the shore and built jetties, all of which prevents the natural transport of sand and sediment to build beaches, which causes more erosion, which causes lakefront property owners to install even more barriers in a vicious cycle.

The only solution is to step back from the shore, remove the manmade barriers where possible and allow natural coastal



processes to prevail. We could do that with a public shoreline.

And, in many places, stepping back from the shore also would be the best thing we could do ecologically. Several years ago, The Nature Conservancy issued a report on biological diversity which called the Great Lakes ecosystem a globally significant reservoir of rare plants, animals and habitats. The lakes are unique in the world because of their size and location in a temperate climate. They support at least 131 species and ecological communities that are rare or of limited distribution worldwide. Of these, nearly half are either unique or largely confined to the Great Lakes basin, and their global survival depends upon their conservation here. These include the Kirtland's warbler, the Michigan monkey-flower, White catspaw mussel, and Lakeside daisy. Many of these features are concentrated along the coasts and on the lake plain of the Great Lakes. Many occur around Lake Erie or within its watershed.

So by easing development pressures along the lakefront, we can make a significant contribution to global biodiversity. The effort could be focused on the protection and restoration of the coastal marshes along the western basin of Lake Erie and on the restoration of biologically productive river estuaries in the central and eastern basins.

Keeping the public trust

In closing, I'd like to read you something—something like a poem. Try to guess where it came from.

You can't own a beach.
It's like trying to own the morning, or the air, or
the way seaweed smells.
A beach should be for anybody, anytime, any
part of any beach.
From the road to the water.
A beach belongs to the universe, the cosmos.
That's how nature wants it.

No, it didn't come from some romantic poet. It came from an advertisement put out by the Oregon Tourism Commission. There were a couple more lines that went like this:

Besides, according to No. 390.610 of the Oregon
Revised Statutes, it's the law.

In Oregon, it seems that they take the public trust doctrine seriously. Public trust is the ancient legal doctrine that says that the state is responsible for holding oceans—and the Great Lakes—in trust, in perpetuity, for all citizens. The lake belongs to all of us. And access to it should be free and open.

It's the law. Or at least it could be in Ohio with a little vision and leadership.

EcoCity Cleveland
3500 Lorain Avenue, Suite 301, Cleveland OH 44113
Cuyahoga Bioregion
(216) 961-5020
www.ecocitycleveland.org
Copyright 2002-2003

