SPRING 2014
VOL 5, ISSUE 1

GEORGIAN BAY FOREVER

Protecting your water.

WATER LEVELS, WATER QUALITY, ECOSYSTEMS AND INVASIVE SPECIES

THE REED INVASION

Phragmites are out of control — but our community can help

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Georgian Bay Forever is a proud member of the Waterkeeper Alliance.

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SPRING 2014

Photo credit: Penny Pepperell

GEORGIAN BAY FOREVER

Georgian Bay Forever is a community response to the growing need for major research and education projects to sustain the Georgian Bay aquatic ecosystem and the quality of life its communities and visitors enjoy.

We help monitor the Bay's well being, throughout the seasons, year after year.

We fund the research needed to protect the environmental health of Georgian Bay and the surrounding bodies of water. Using our research findings, we inform and educate the general public and governments about any threats to environmental health and propose possible solutions.

Through conferences, workshops and seminars we are educating the Georgian Bay community. By teaming up with reputable institutions we enhance the credibility of our research and we strengthen our ability to protect what's at stake.

Georgian Bay Forever, formerly the GBA Foundation, is a registered Canadian charity (#89531 1066 RR0001). We work with the Great Lakes Basin Conservancy in the United States, as well as other stakeholder groups all around the Great Lakes.

Deeply rooted and broadly drawn, Georgian Bay Forever is steered by lifelong devotees of the Bay. We are committed advocates, educators, environmentalists, realists, idealists, and of course, residents.

OUR CONTACT DETAILS
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You can reach David Sweetnam, our Executive Director, at executivedirector@georgianbayforever.org or at (905) 880 4945 ext 1.

U.S. citizens wishing to make a donation to support our work can do so by giving to:
Great Lakes Basin Conservancy
PO Box 504, Gates Mills OH
44040-0504, USA
(Please add a note saying: "For Georgian Bay Forever")

This newsletter is just a snapshot of our work. For the most up-to-date information on our projects, longer versions of newsletter articles and on breaking news about Georgian Bay, please become a regular visitor to our website and Facebook page.
GeorgianBayForever.org

Design by Key Gordon (keygordon.com)
Editor: David Sweetnam

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GEORGIAN BAY FOREVER LAUNCHES GROUNDBREAKING NEW RESEARCH

By Brenda Drinkwalter

As we begin 2014, following one of the wettest years and record low temperatures with increased ice coverage this winter, middle lakes water levels are struggling. Michigan–Huron remains 14 inches below its long-term average and starts the year as the only Great Lake with levels below chart datum.

As we look back on 2013, Georgian Bay Forever's activities were almost exclusively focused on addressing the water levels crisis. At this time last year water levels in the middle lakes dipped below the all time record low set in 1918, affecting the quality of life for locals, cottagers, small business and industries alike and causing great harm to our economic prosperity. Georgian Bay Forever decided that we needed to do something different if we were to convince governments to act and that meant commissioning the first ever study of the economic impact of declining water levels.

With impressive support from cottagers, the shipping industry, power generators, marinas, the Weston Foundation and government, the study, sponsored by the Council of the Great Lakes Region and conducted by the Mowat Centre at the University of Toronto, will be released in early March 2014.

By year-end most groups were aligned on the next step to addressing water levels — a detailed engineering study that would consider the best locations for flexible structures, a range of technologies, integrated systems thinking (i.e. be mindful of upstream and downstream interests) and recognize the need to plan for future climate change impacts.

Georgian Bay Forever and other groups reinforced the need to move forward with such a study with government and the IJC ahead of their December 2013 joint meeting. We heard from Minister Baird in January, that "Both governments are preparing their formal responses to the IJC on these recommendations… Canadian officials have closely followed the process and progress of the International Upper Great Lakes Study. The Government of Canada is considering what other actions might be appropriate to respond".

> "It is likely that we will face a long period of 'adaptation' to low water before a solution is in place."

The IJC and governments have reminded us that support on both sides of the border is necessary. Georgian Bay Forever addressed a number of important US government and non-government organizations throughout the Fall. And in March our Executive Director will address the Council of the Great Lakes Industries and participate in a US gathering of water levels thought leaders that will include academics, Mowat Researchers, shipping, the IJC, government, a number of Board members of the Council of the Great Lakes Region and other key opinion leaders.

2014 will see Georgian Bay Forever return to doing research into issues that impact the Bay's ecosystems starting with a project to work on eradicating the invasive weed phragmites, which threatens to destroy our beaches and wetlands. It is likely that we will face a long period of 'adaptation' to low water before a solution is in place. We must remain vigilant to identify and remediate adverse changes to our fragile ecosystems where we can.

We are delighted to announce that Adam Chamberlain, Cognashene cottager and a partner at Borden Ladner Gervais has joined our Board. Adam's family will celebrate 100 years on the Bay in 2014. Adam will chair our Government and Public Affairs Committee. He is a certified Specialist in Environmental Law, is BLG's National Leader of the Team North and Climate Change Groups and Toronto Regional Leader of the Aboriginal Law Group.

Hugh Wilkins, who has served on Georgian Bay Forever's Board for the past six years has accepted a new position in government and must leave the board. We congratulate Hugh on his new role and extend our heartfelt thanks for his significant contribution to Georgian Bay Forever's success. Peter Singer, Sans Souci, will take over as Chair of the Governance and Nominating Committee succeeding Hugh Wilkins.

We would like to thank all of your for your wonderful support for the work that Georgian Bay Forever is doing to 'protect your water'. As always, and like you, we want it to be there for our kid's kid's kids!

HOW LOWER WATER LEVELS ARE HURTING THE ECONOMY—AND OUR PROPERTY VALUES

By Reuven Shlozberg

Since last spring, the Council of the Great Lakes Region and the Mowat Centre have been working to quantify the economic impact of low water levels on the economy of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region. Our findings, expected to be released at a public event in Toronto in early March, suggest that this impact would be significant.

Our work draws on available data to estimate the impact of persistently low water levels on six of the region's critical economic sectors: commercial shipping and harbours, tourism and recreational water activities, waterfront properties, hydroelectric generation, domestic/municipal and industrial water users, and commercial fishing.

The sectors we have focused on are the drivers at the heart of the region's economy. The region's shipping industry accounts for 227,000 jobs and a $14.1B wage bill while offering a significantly cleaner shipping alternative than land-based transport. The region's tourism industry supports over 650,000 jobs with an estimated $55-60B in direct spending. The upper Great Lakes and connecting channels alone are home to 93,400 riparian properties supporting about 233,000 full-time or seasonal residents. Hydroelectric generation produces more than 25 per cent of Ontario's power.

For each sector, we identify the major impacts of low water levels that can be themselves reliably assessed. We then ascertain what economic losses would be caused by each impact under three different climate change scenarios. The three climate change scenarios we are using estimate what each Lake's annual average water level will be, over time, given certain assumptions about climate change rates and factors.

We derive these scenarios and assumptions from the most commonly used and widely accepted Canadian climate change models. Our work has found that these sectors would all be adversely affected in a low water levels reality.

Some of the impacts confirmed by our research include:

Low water levels reduce carrying loads for the Great Lakes commercial fleet, which increases costs for shippers. Some of these costs will likely be passed on to clients, many of whom have no viable alternative for shipping goods. Ports will require more dredging and structural repairs. Overall, the region's shipping industry will be put under considerable strain if low water levels persist.

There is clear evidence that low water levels go hand in hand with declining property values on the Ontario side of the Great Lakes, the only area in the region for which reliable data is available. This would extend to many other parts of the region, though not the region as a whole since there are areas where high water levels pose a greater risk and are therefore a more significant factor in driving down waterfront property values. There are clear implications for municipal tax revenues which depend on waterfront property values in many communities in the region.

Many of the impacts that drive down waterfront property values, especially reduced access to the water, to beaches, or to the property itself, are likely to deter use of such properties. This will hurt local economies, which rely heavily on revenues from seasonal occupants.

Many businesses in the region perform maintenance services, rent equipment and docking space, and provide other goods and services to visiting boaters and tourists. Low water levels markedly decrease boating and fishing days, further impacting fragile local economies.

Based on the evidence we have been able to collect and analyze, we are confident that additional work would only strengthen our conclusion: that the likely persistence of low water levels in the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence region poses a significant risk to the region's economy.

Reuven Shlozberg, Ph.D. Policy Associate, Mowat Centre. Revuen specializes in collaboration in the Great Lakes region, special projects, tongue-in-cheek office humour, and vegetable-heavy lunches.

By Penny Pepperall

GORDON AUSTIN:

A WAR HERO IN THE BAY

Photo courtesy of Betsy Austin

"Vigilance, even in the face of consistently good report cards, is key to ensuring that our water remains swimmable, drinkable, fishable and healthy for our ecosystems. Forever."

They met at a cocktail party in Paris in '49, just after the war. Gordon Austin was a pilot with the U.S. Air Force, Joyce Tedman a reporter for the Toronto Star. Two minutes later, they were talking about Georgian Bay. "You're just like all those other Americans," she snapped, "you think you know everything, but you don't know a thing about Georgian Bay." The conversation was ostensibly about pike fishing but it was really about falling in love, getting married and building their own place in Georgian Bay. They were together for 44 years.

For families that move around the globe—Gordon and his brood certainly did that from Hawaii, North Africa, Italy during the war, and many points in the U.S. including Anchorage Alaska, and France after it—their own place on a rock overlooking the water is where psyches revive, disparate individuals converge, and the rules get simpler. You can drink your coffee and stare at the water without thinking you ought to be doing something else.

The specialness of Georgian Bay can be measured in the distinguished people who find their way here, and there is no greater example of that than Gordon H. Austin, Air Force Major General, original group commander of the 325th Fighter Group, responsible for the air defense of Alaska and the United States Eastern Region.

Gordon had a legendary mix of modesty, cheerfulness and almost inhuman lack of fear. This is why he was awarded the Silver Cross in '43 for a mission in Sardinia.

"Colonel Austin's flight of four P-40s was attacked by ten enemy fighters. Although his flight was temporarily separated from the remainder of the group and greatly outnumbered…Austin courageously and fearlessly turned into the enemy and succeed in driving them off. He then spotted four ME-323's flying at a low level and led a devastating attack on those huge transports. All four enemy planes were destroyed… On the return flight, he observed an enemy radio station on the beach and again he attacked with his flight, leaving the installation in flames."

In 1946, as a senior member of the U.S.-Canadian Air Defense planning group, Gordon took some time off and went fishing in Georgian Bay. The love affair had begun.

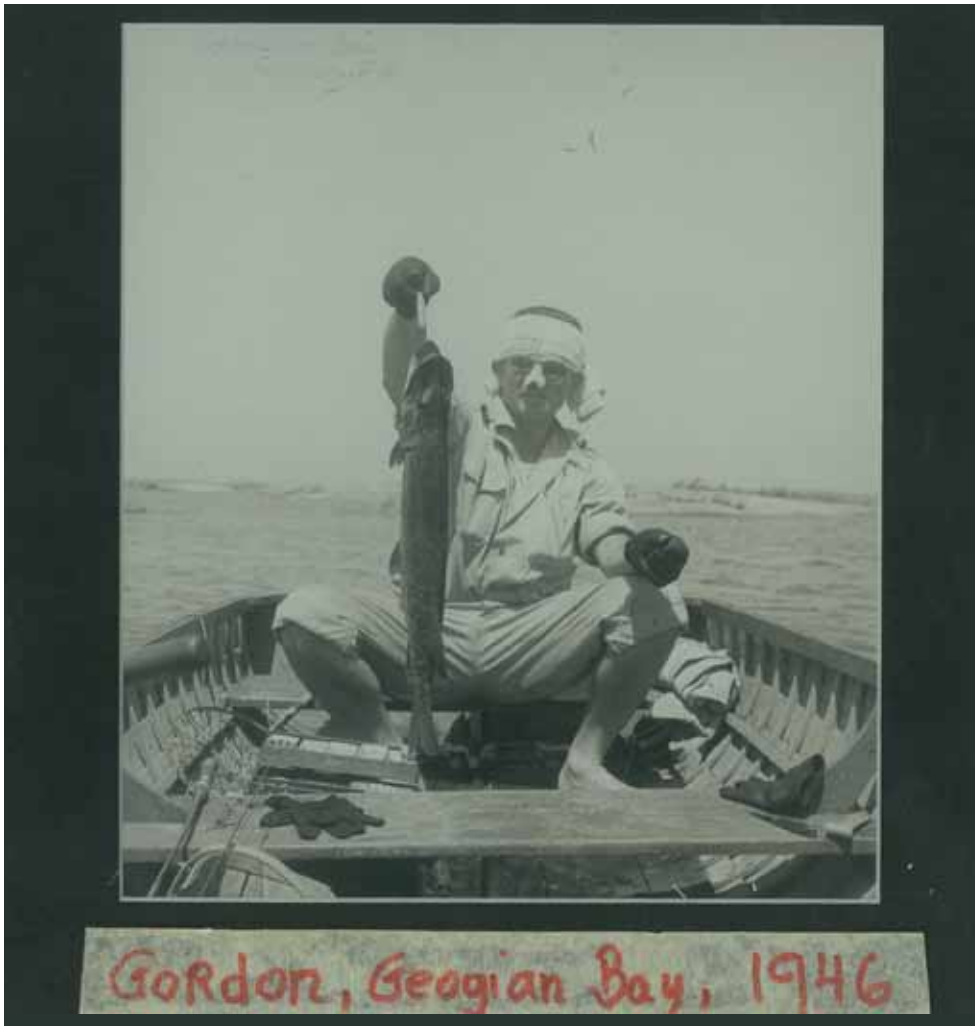
In 1960, the Austins plopped down $300 for an island they named High Rock in the Sans Souci area; a place that ran on propane, (and to this day still lacks electricity.) "At the end of the season, we would burn our clothes," said daughter Betsy.

With Joyce and Betsy ensconced at the cottage, Gordon would fly there from wherever he was stationed, and as he flew over the cottage on his way to North Bay he would tip his wings so Joyce would know when to put the water on for dinner.

Gordon and Joyce have passed on now, but the cottages they built on High Rock Island endure as places where the clan recharges family ties and enjoys a cup of coffee while studying the water.

Betsy Austin has kindly donated to Georgian Bay Forever in memory of her father.

PHOTO CREDIT: GORD AUSTIN ESTATE



WANT THE BIGGER PICTURE OF LOWER WATER LEVELS?

THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATED DATA

By David Sweetnam

An Integrated Approach to Monitoring Programs can Improve Outcomes and Decrease Costs

In 2012 GBF was out in the field with our research teams testing water quality, measuring biodiversity using state of the art DNA techniques and watching as the algae blooms formed throughout the summer turning the water from gold to green. That year water levels dropped to record lows as less than average precipitation and increased evaporation occurred. Water temperatures in some of our bays reached higher than 27 degrees Celsius, and oxygen levels in lower waters of several bays dropped to zero driving out fish and promoting conditions for toxic algae growth. In coastal embayments with limited circulation, it is clear that water quality and water quantity go hand in hand.

That year we also supported a study to synthesize data that had been collected on the ecosystems of the area over the previous five decades in order to contribute to our understanding of the area and provide an integrated picture. And since that wasn't enough to tell us what things looked like on a more "natural" (i.e. a pre-development) condition, we also sponsored a paleolimnological study to look back through previous centuries by carefully examining the sediments deposited deep in the bays.

All of this effort was designed to provide the best possible understanding of the region to better understand how protect our water. Beyond the ecosystems obvious right to have its existence protected, in order to protect our health we need to preserve our ecosystems, and to preserve our ecosystems we need to preserve the quantity and quality of aquatic habitat.

Like all of the other organizations focussing on the Great Lakes, GBF works to harmonize and rationalize the water quality testing programs that we have participated in throughout Georgian Bay while providing better outcomes at decreased costs. Our program has now been modified to allow findings to be compared with other coastal monitoring programs and so that the data collected can be accepted into the Ontario Ministry of the Environment Lake Partner Program. This required a transition to a different sampling protocol in the field and to a more highly sensitivity lab for analysis.

What is an integrated approach and why is GBF steadfast in its support?

There are many benefits of integrating data sets throughout the watershed. An integrated system approach is an overarching philosophy of looking at the Great Lakes as a system and not just as individual lakes and connecting waterways. In its report to the International Joint Commission (IJC), the Upper Great Lakes Study Board recommended that a new system wide Water Advisory Board be established. This board will collect watershed data from across the entire Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River basin and share it with the existing authorities to allow better management of this highly regulated system.

And in its September 25th, 2013 report, the IJC's Health Professionals Advisory Board recommended integrating health and ecosystem data to promote a better understand of health outcomes derived from exposure to various environmental contaminants.

GBF applauds the IJC's integrated systems thinking. Piecemeal management was found to be ineffective with detrimental outcomes to the economy and ecosystems of the Region.

> "An integrated system approach is an overarching philosophy of looking at the Great Lakes as a system and not just as individual lakes and connecting waterways."

Nowhere is an integrated system approach so obviously needed than in addressing water levels. Experts agree that it is highly likely that the long-term ongoing impacts from climate change will eclipse historic changes to the system and that means continuing declines in water levels particularly in the unregulated Lakes Michigan-Huron over the coming decades. Looking at this issue from both an ecosystem and economic perspective allows us to justify actions that one or the other perspective alone might not support.

David Sweetnam is the Executive Director of Georgian Bay Forever and the Georgian Baykeeper.

By Peter Luciani,
Scientific Advisor
Msc., PhD. (abd)

HAVE YOU SPOTTED PHRAGMITES IN AND AROUND GEORGIAN BAY?

These are not your average wetland reeds. You are looking at a 5.2-metre stand of European Common Reed (Phragmites australis subsp. Australis – 'Phrag. Aus.') in southern Ontario. Phrag. Aus. is an invasive, non-native, long-living perennial grass originating from Eurasia and first discovered in Nova Scotia just over 100 years ago (1910). Invasive species are non-native organisms which can disrupt ecosystems and cause harm and stress to native species, including species at risk. Invasive species can alter food webs, affect nutrient cycling, and displace native species. These changes are often irreversible, can result in decreased biodiversity, and can affect Ontario's economy, society, and/or human health (MNR, 2013).

Since initial establishment, Phrag. Aus. has expanded in range through Canada and the U.S. in and around wetlands, marshes, meadows, lakes, beachfronts, roadside ditches, storm water ponds and rail line corridors. The plant, which grows in thick dense monoculture, stands from approx. 1.5m to 5m in height, aggressively displaces native plants, such as bull rushes, sedges and cattails, in its pursuit of light, nutrients and water.

Phrag. Aus. is distinguishable from native Common Reed (Phragmites Americanus subsp. Americanus), having a thick, dark and large seed head, bluish-green leaves, and a beige stem, while, the latter species grows in less dense, shorter, multi-culture (i.e. other plant species are present) stands, having lighter-coloured sparse seed heads, yellow-green leaves and a reddish-brown stem. Stands of Phrag. Aus. readily form and spread with the plant releasing root toxins to impede the growth of other plants. In doing so, the plant reduces and displaces native floral/plant diversity; forms impenetrable monocultures; alters natural soil chemistry and conditions; promotes sedimentation of water body muds and substrates; and changes natural nutrient cycling (e.g. nitrogen). In turn, these effects can eliminate habitat and food resources and alter natural movements of native wetland wildlife, including rare and endangered species (e.g. Spotted Turtle), which overall, compromises natural ecological integrity. The height and density of Phrag Aus. stands can also limit shoreline/waterfront/water access and vistas/views compared to native plant species.

This plant is establishing itself within the coastal wetlands of Eastern Georgian Bay. Large stands are present along shorelines and within wetlands of Severn Sound and other areas of Georgian Bay. According to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources Phrag. Aus. is widespread across Southern Ontario and there is evidence, that overall the distribution of Phrag Aus. is spreading (MNR, 2013).

Georgian Bay Forever has solidified three years of external funding through the Environment Canada sponsored Lake Simcoe Eastern Georgian Bay Clean-up Fund to undertake a project to better understand and control this invasive species. The project involves documenting and physically removing existing and emerging stands of Phrag. Aus.

Families and people of all ages can participate and work with Georgian Bay Forever to help preserve Georgian Bay ecosystems for current and future generations.

Eradicating stands of this plant helps protect the biodiversity of the wetlands as well as habitat used by birds, waterfowl, mammals, reptiles and others including numerous threatened species. Through the project, Georgian Bay Forever is educating the community to identify the plant and how to undertake appropriate actions to minimize impacts on native plants.

The sooner eradication efforts of this invasive plant commence the easier it is expected to be to control. This objective will likely require the ongoing vigilance of engaged landowners, cottage associations and the surrounding Townships of Georgian Bay.

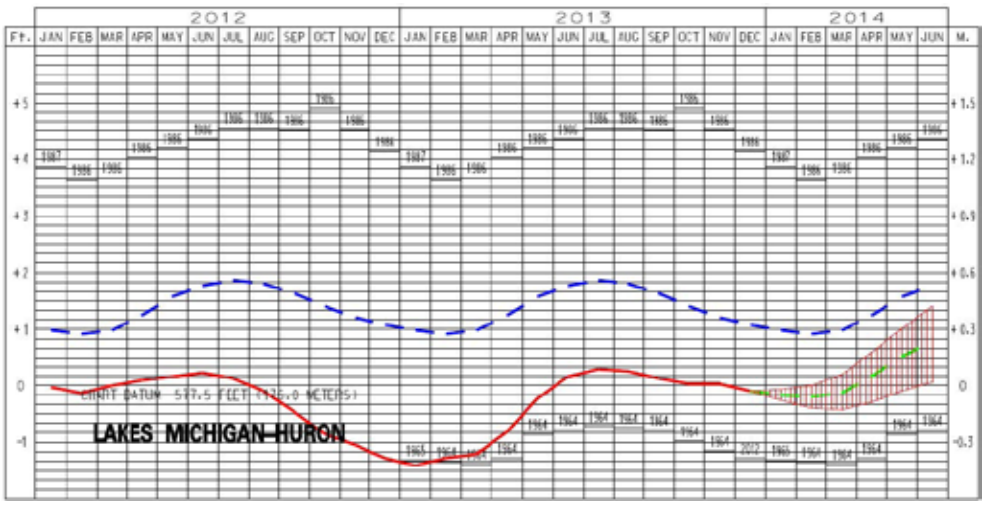
Contact georgianbaykeeper@georgianbayforever.org to volunteer for our community based "Coastal Wetland Invasive Species Removal in South-Eastern Georgian Bay" project.

OUR WATER LEVELS UPDATE: WHAT'S CHANGED AND WHAT'S COMING NEXT

By David Sweetnam

December has come and gone and as we begin another year the US and Canadian Governments have not responded to the April 2013 International Joint Commission Advice to government with their plan to address water levels in the Upper Great Lakes.

In January 2013, Lake Michigan–Huron (M-H) fell to its all-time lowest level since the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) began keeping records in 1918. Levels plummeted to 175.57 m (that is 70 cm or 28 inches below the long term seasonal average and 1.94 m or 6 feet 4 inches) lower than the all-time highs of 177.50 m reached in October 1986.



USACE MONTHLY WATER LEVELS. SCALE IS RELATIVE TO CHART DATUM. BLUE DASHED LINE IS THE LONG TERM AVERAGE, RED LINE IS THE ACTUAL. DATES DENOTE YEAR OF ALL TIME HIGH OR LOW WATER LEVEL RECORD FOR THE MONTH.
SOURCE: US ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, DETROIT DIVISION.

These alarmingly low record levels brought mounting public pressure to address this issue. Indeed if not for the unusual rains this past April, the dire predictions about business closures, suspension of ferry operations, diminished power production, drastically lowered carrying capacity of freighters, damaged fisheries and lack of access to coastal communities would have had immediate and substantial economic repercussions all around the 4.6 trillion dollar Great Lakes Region. Even the uncertainty these water levels brought resulted in significant costs to businesses, marinas and cottagers who had to dredge and blast to keep their docks open.

The January 2014 monthly USACE report on Great Lakes Water Levels shows that while each of the Great Lakes saw near or above average yearly precipitation, in the last month of the year the entire basin received less than 70 percent of average with Lakes Superior and Michigan-Huron receiving only 68 and 51 percent of average respectively. Levels are once more below chart datum in Lake Michigan–Huron with the attendant risks and warnings to navigation. The water levels problem is still very much with us as we head into 2014.

Lake Michigan-Huron ended the year 36 cm (14 inches) below its long term average and remains 5 – 10 cm (2 – 4 inches) below chart datum as we head into 2014. It is the only Great Lake to start the New Year below chart datum.

At the same time, this year's severe 'polar vortex' resulted in one of the coldest Decembers and Januaries in recent history. Great Lakes ice cover increased from 12 to 26 percent, the highest early ice cover on the Great Lakes in 20 years. With evaporation considered a major cause of declining water levels, this year's ice cover should reduce water loss over recent winter months. Ice coverage on the Great Lakes has declined by 71% since 1973.

There are a number of cross border public policy initiatives underway that will ultimately put the spotlight on Michigan-Huron and Erie, which unlike Lakes Superior and Ontario, have no regulatory control structures that would allow them to be managed.

The Council of Great Lakes Governors, including Ontario and Quebec and US States that border the Great Lakes, along with the Great Lakes Commission have put forward resolutions to protect The Great Lakes Navigation system as an integrated system. This past October the US Water Resources Act of 2013 (WRRDA 2013) was passed by the US Senate with changes sent back to the House for approval. The purpose of the Act is "to protect, conserve, restore, and understand the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes of the United States, ensuring present and future generations will benefit from the full range of ecological, economic, educational, social, cultural, nutritional, and recreational opportunities and services these resources are capable of providing."

WRRDA 2013 calls for prioritizing capital investments to "maximize system-wide benefits and minimize overall system risk" and enabling the Corps "to participate with federal or international organizations and foreign governments to address issues relating to water resources, infrastructure development, and environmental protection."

WRRDA 2013 will also authorize the USACE to act to prevent invasive species from entering the Great lakes through the Mississippi River system including taking emergency action.

Water levels are expected to continue well below long term averages for all of the Great Lakes through 2014 except for the regulated Lake Ontario according to the US Army Corps of Engineers forecasts. Georgian Bay Forever has and will continue to research and educate on important issues related to water – levels, quality and ecosystems.

David Sweetnam is the Executive Director of Georgian Bay Forever and the Georgian Baykeeper.

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GEORGIAN BAY FOREVER THANKS THE ABOVE MARINAS FOR THEIR STEADFAST SUPPORT OF OUR WATERKEEPERS' BOAT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH. WITHOUT THEIR HELP, WE WOULDN'T STAY AFLOAT!

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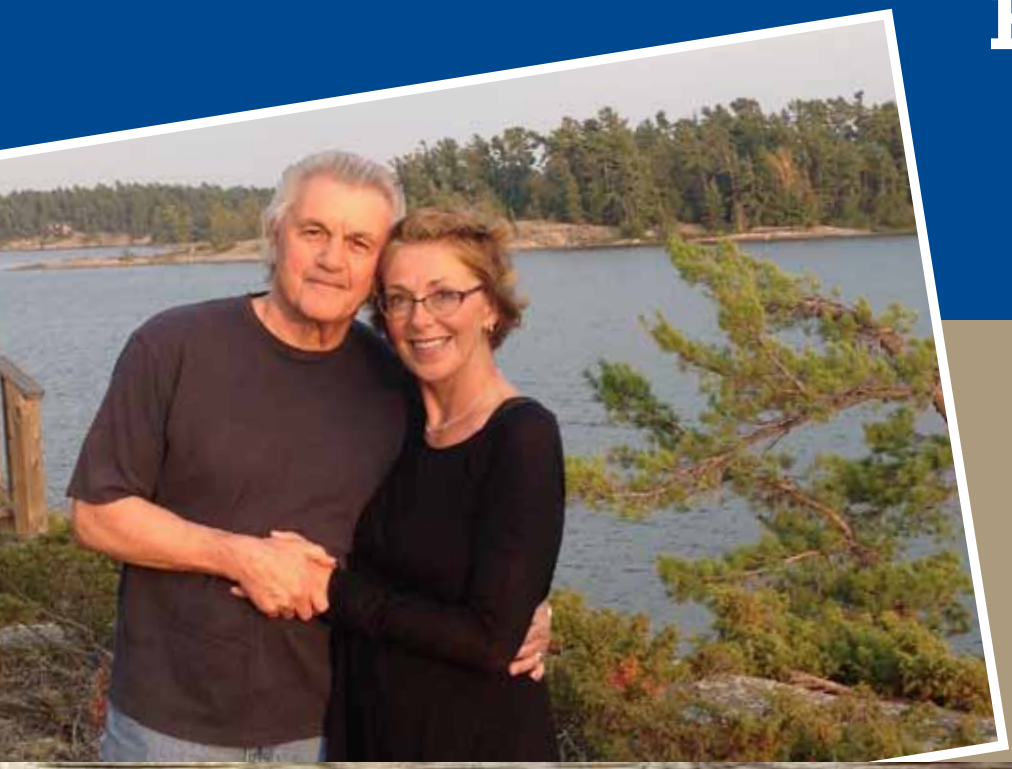

- Janet Turnbull Irving, pictured here with husband John Irving
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