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## Great Lakes Forever Fact Sheet: Habitat Protection

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Sometimes it's hard to remember that the Great Lakes are more than just water. When we see the familiar shoreline on maps, our mental picture of the Lakes is formed by our memories of weekends on the beach, fishing trips, and summer sailing – experiences had on the water. And certainly the Great Lakes waters are home to an incredible diversity of life, from the tiny plankton and invertebrates to Lake Trout and mighty Sturgeon, but there is an equally impressive diversity of life on land whose future is inextricably linked to the health of the Great Lakes.

The lands that surround the Great Lakes are called the Great Lakes drainage basin. The name is appropriate because the boundary for these lands is determined by where gravity sends everything from rainwater to groundwater to “drain.” Water flows into the Great Lakes from all the lands and waterways within the basin – this is the land and water connection. Chicago sits just inside the western edge of the Great Lakes basin, while some suburbs live in the Mississippi basin. The choices we make in Chicago about how we protect land resources within the Great Lakes basin affect the future of the Lakes themselves.

Approximately 37 million people live within the Great Lakes basin, an area that covers over 200,000 square miles and more than 11,000 miles of shoreline. But if we only consider the human population, we overlook the incredible diversity of plants and wildlife that also call the basin home. The Great Lakes basin lands are a unique habitat, home to countless plants, birds and animals – many of them rare or endangered. White-tailed deer, black bears, coyotes and minks roam our forests while spotted sandpipers, common snipes and herons wade the coastal marshes, hunting for spring peepers and wood frogs to eat. Majestic eagles and osprey soar overhead, fishing inland waters and nesting in nearby trees.

The diversity of Great Lakes wildlife is matched by a plethora of plant species. A Chicagoland favorite, the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore – ranked third of all U.S. National Parks in plant diversity – is an excellent example. There, seaside spurge and sea rocket colonize the shore while further ashore, marram grass, sand cherry and willow shrub coax the smallest dunes to form. Still further inland, the vegetation shifts from cottonwood, milkweed and hoary puccoon to arctic bearberry, jack pine, white pine, juniper and cedar, followed by oak, hickory, ash and maple forests.

At least 50 of the natural communities within the Great Lakes basin are rarely found anywhere else in the world. One of the rarest landscapes in North America features the most extensive freshwater dunes in the world and the tallgrass prairies. The basin wetlands that help keep our lakes and rivers clean, also help prevent floods and provide important breeding grounds for fish and waterfowl. The

basin forests where we camp, hunt and hike, also shelter deer, bears, coyotes and wolves and provided the lumber that built our communities. The Great Lakes have an enormous impact on the region's biodiversity. Illinois' two coastal counties are just one example of the important wildlife habitat the lakes provide. Although they account for less than 3% of Illinois' total land, Cook and Lake counties accommodate at least 288 of the state's 300 known bird species, including nearly 75% of the state's threatened or endangered bird species.

Protecting Great Lakes habitat means protecting the web of life that connects us all, ensuring a natural, healthy future for our families and the Lakes. Yet, careless development and poor land management are rapidly destroying wetlands, shorelines and other critical habitat that is vital to the health of the Great Lakes. When we lose this habitat, we lose critical homes for wildlife and places for our families to go to fish, boat, hike and recreate.

The future of Great Lakes habitat would be more secure if we considered taking these few steps:

**Improve state and provincial land-use planning legislation.** Perhaps the greatest threat to Great Lakes habitat, especially in shoreline and wetland areas, is the expansion of cities and towns. Federal incentives for smart growth initiatives, urban re-development and protection or expansion of existing urban green space could go a long way toward controlling the unchecked growth that contributes to traffic snarls and long commute times.

**Protect family farms.** Agricultural lands provide useful "corridors" for wildlife, serve as groundwater recharge zones and contribute to a regional sense of place. Land use plans, taxes and other creative programs can be designed to help encourage the protection of rural agricultural communities and the enhancement of farmland as wildlife habitat. Organic farming practices, that don't rely on dangerous chemicals, could also receive special incentives.

**Encourage restoration and conservation.** Degraded habitat, such as wetlands ditched and drained for agriculture, can be restored and play a valuable role in improving the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Government programs that provide financial incentives, such as matching funds, tax-breaks, and conservation easements should be expanded with appropriate outreach to landowners in the Great Lakes basin. We all have a responsibility to work for better planning and policies that will protect our Great Lakes habitat and biodiversity.

For more information on the Great Lakes, tips and more, visit [www.greatlakesforever.org](http://www.greatlakesforever.org). Great Lakes Forever is a public education initiative launching in Chicago this June by the Biodiversity Project, Shedd Aquarium and their partners. It's designed to raise awareness of the ecological value of the Great Lakes and concern about the threats to the ecosystem's health.

*Biodiversity Project advocates for biodiversity by designing and implementing innovative communication strategies that build and motivate a broad constituency to protect biodiversity. A national organization based in Madison, Wisconsin, the Biodiversity Project has worked with leaders in policy, advocacy, education, science, religious and grantmaking fields since 1995. For more information, visit [www.biodiversityproject.org](http://www.biodiversityproject.org) and [www.greatlakesforever.org](http://www.greatlakesforever.org).*