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Scientists named Saginaw Bay as one of the top five areas of high concern
in the Lake Huron basin. © Melissa Soule/TNC

Scientists Say Lake Huron In “Fair” Condition

New Report Says Action Taken Now Could Avert Problems Later

LANSING, Mich. — The health of Lake Huron’s biological diversity is in “fair” condition, but the long-term outlook could be a different story, according to “The Sweetwater Sea: Strategies for Conserving Lake Huron Biodiversity,” a new report and strategic plan compiled by conservation experts in the United States and Canada.

The report assesses the current health of the lake’s biological diversity and examines what current trends could mean for the future of the lake. According to the report, habitat degradation and loss to incompatible development present major stressors that may impact the lake’s long-term health for people and nature.

“Lake Huron is really on the brink of recovery or further degradation, depending on how you look at it and what actions may transpire in the next 10 to 20 years,” said Dr. Patrick Doran, The Nature Conservancy’s director of science for Michigan and the Great Lakes. “This report stresses that now is the time to take action before it’s too late.”

According to the report, the most critical threats to Lake Huron’s biodiversity are: invasive species, incompatible development, climate change, dams and other barriers to water flow, and pollution from industrial and other sources. The experts ranked the scope and severity of the threats and matched strategies for abating those threats to priority areas.

The top five areas of high concern, based on their concentration of biodiversity coupled with threats, are: northeast Michigan, Saginaw Bay, eastern Georgian Bay, southern Georgian Bay and the southeast shores of Lake Huron.

Doran said the report outlines specific actions to protect and manage the open water, islands, shoreline, coastal wetlands and other natural components to improve these habitats and the services they provide to people and wildlife. It also lays the groundwork for forming an integrated multi-agency approach to improve the health of the lake and its surrounding habitat.

“While many places around Lake Huron could benefit immediately from conservation action, some need it more urgently than others to protect the entire basin,” Doran said. “This report lays the foundation for what we need to do now, and what we need to do later.”

More than 250 scientists and natural resource managers from at least 100 public and private agencies from around Lake Huron spent the last two years working on a plan to improve the health of the

lake and its surrounding area. The plan also includes new ways to measure the effectiveness of conservation programs to determine the most cost-effective methods.

“Lake Huron is an ecologically rich and globally significant ecosystem,” said Amy Derosier, wildlife action plan coordinator for the Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment. “Not only is it home to a variety of plant and animal species, Lake Huron provides enormous social, recreational, and economic benefits to the residents of Michigan and Canada, and visitors that seek out these very qualities.”

“This plan was a truly collaborative science-based effort,” Derosier said. “The people working on this plan took great pains to understand both the ecology of Lake Huron as well as the overarching causes of its past decline; we worked with hundreds of experts and stakeholders to understand what it will take to get the Lake back on track. Now we must continue to work together to protect and restore this unique ecosystem to ensure the viability of the species that rely on it, which in turn will continue to provide benefits to people.”

Participating organizations to the Lake Huron Biodiversity Conservation Strategy team included: Environment Canada, Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment, Michigan Natural Features Inventory, Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Michigan Conservation Districts, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation Ontario, Michigan Dept. of Agriculture, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Anishinabek Nation, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Parks Canada, Michigan Sea Grant, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Chippewa/Ottawa Resource Authority, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Metis Nation.

“This report has already led to the next step of looking at migratory fish patterns in Lake Huron,” Doran said. “With this information, we can improve or adapt what we and other organizations are doing to help sustain and increase fish populations in Lake Huron.”

John Paskus, senior conservation scientist, Michigan Natural Features Inventory agrees: “One of the biggest accomplishments of this large scale, bi-national effort was bringing together all of the disparate biological information housed within dozens of agencies and conservation organizations from two different countries and making it accessible.

“Ultimately, the true success of this bi-national endeavor will be measured by our ability to implement priority strategies identified in the report, our commitment to evaluating results, and our willingness to adapt to changing conditions within the Lake Huron Basin,” Paskus said.

The Lake Huron planning process followed a similar model that resulted in a strategic plan for Lake Ontario in 2009. That report then led to the prioritized action of public agencies and private organizations working to strengthen the health of Lake Ontario. The Nature Conservancy and partners will next develop biodiversity plans for Lake Erie and Lake Michigan through The Nature Conservancy’s Great Lakes Project.

A full copy of the report and an abridged, reader-friendly version are both available at: <http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/lakehuron.bcs/documents>. Organizations are encouraged to use the report to:

- Identify and refine local and regional priorities for conservation actions
- Justify applications to fund protection or restoration of native biodiversity
- Incorporate actions from the Strategy into local and regional plans
- Contact a member of the coordinating organizations to access GIS data to support mapping and planning in your local area
- Identify research interests, emerging management issues and monitoring priorities

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Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) is a program of Michigan State University Extension and serves as the natural heritage program for the state of Michigan. MNFI is part of an international network of 74 other natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the U.S., Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean dedicated to the collection of information on biological diversity within the Western Hemisphere. Since 1980, MNFI has been developing and maintaining the most comprehensive biological and conservation database on Michigan's rare plants and animals, exemplary natural communities, and other significant natural features.

Michigan Sea Grant helps foster economic growth and protect Michigan's coastal Great Lakes resources through education, research and outreach. A collaborative effort between the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, Michigan Sea Grant is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Sea Grant network of more than 30 university-based programs.

The Nature Conservancy is the leading conservation organization working to protect the most ecologically important lands and waters around the world for nature and people. To date, the Conservancy and its 1 million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 120 million acres worldwide, including 360,000 acres in Michigan. The Nature Conservancy is working to make the Great Lakes the best managed freshwater ecosystem in the world. For more information, visit <http://nature.org/michigan>.