Watermarks

Marking 20 Years of Adopt-a-Beach Data Collection: What have we learned?
Securing A Sustainable Future for The Great Lakes

At the Alliance for the Great Lakes, optimism is one of our values. We believe there are always solutions to the challenges facing our lakes. In fact, our work is driven by a specific goal: to protect the lakes and ensure that communities can depend on them. The Great Lakes have profound social, economic, and environmental significance, not only to us and our region but to the nation and the world. While considerable progress has been made to protect and restore the Great Lakes, much work remains to be done. In this issue of Watermarks, we share our top priorities for the Biden administration and Congress and share the incredible work we are doing in partnership with volunteers across the lakes.

Our federal policy priorities identify the five best opportunities we see for Congress and federal agencies to take action for the lakes. Our leaders must continue their enthusiasm in recent years to make sure every Great Lakes community has safe, clean, and affordable water, prevent the spread of invasive species, and maintain momentum in protecting the communities hardest hit by pollution.

This year, we also see two special opportunities to address critical Great Lakes problems. First, legislation known as the Farm Bill is passed only once every five years. 2023 presents an excellent opportunity to modernize federal agriculture programs, so they incentivize farmers to produce clean water as part of their harvests instead of the pollution that is fouling our lakes. And as Alliance volunteers show, plastic pollution continues to flow into the lakes. Congress must intervene to reduce the proliferation of plastic and give our Great Lakes communities a fighting chance at stemming the tide of microplastics in our water.

In 2023, we have our sights set on changing the systems necessary to restore and protect our waters. The Alliance is here to protect the health of the lakes that we all rely on for our well-being today and into the future. Expectations should be high for federal leadership on the lakes, and we’ve been encouraged by recent bipartisan enthusiasm for rebuilding safe and clean water infrastructure and restoring our lakes from past damage. We will ensure that our decision-makers follow through on their pledges in an action-packed year ahead! With your ongoing commitment and support, we are inspired with great expectations of a healthy Great Lakes future for all.

In gratitude,

Joel Brammeier, President & CEO
Plastic and The Great Lakes

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers are on the front lines of keeping litter off our beaches and out of the Great Lakes. But did you know that these volunteers are also citizen scientists?

This year marks twenty years of data collection by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers. The Alliance for the Great Lakes created its online Great Lakes litter database in 2003 and added data collection to the Adopt-a-Beach program.

Filling a Data Gap, Identifying Troubling Trends

While scientists have been studying plastic pollution in the ocean for decades, there is much less research about plastic pollution in the Great Lakes. Adopt-a-Beach data collection is one way our Great Lakes community is beginning to fill that gap. The litter data collected by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers spans beaches and shorelines across all five Great Lakes. No lab or individual researcher could collect this extensive data set on their own. Volunteers have steadily created this dataset with each cleanup over the past twenty years.

Volunteers use a datasheet at every beach cleanup to tally each item they pick up. The event’s team leader tallies up all the data collected at the event and enters it into our online system. Counting each cigarette butt, bottle cap, or piece of tiny trash can sometimes feel a bit silly on the beach. But the power of all that information in one place is impressive, and it is showing us some troubling trends.

So, what do the data tell us? It’s not a pretty picture. Roughly 85% of the litter picked up at cleanups is made entirely of fines broken down over time. Food-related trash, such as plastic bottles, plastic cutlery, and takeout containers, is about 25% of the litter picked up by volunteers.

A Clear and Present Danger

While beach litter is a serious concern, it is just the most visible part of a bigger problem. Sun, waves, and other environmental factors break down plastic left on the beach or other places into smaller and smaller pieces. And microfibers from our clothes or plastic packaging from detergent packs wash down the drain into our waterways. These microplastics are often invisible but are dangerous to wildlife, which mistake them for food.

Plastic has been found in Great Lakes fish dating back to the 1950s. That means, for nearly seven decades, there have been microplastics in the lakes, which are a drinking water source for about 40 million people. Today, researchers from the Rochester Institute of Technology estimate that over 22 million pounds of plastic enter the Great Lakes annually. And University of Toronto researchers calculated that the amount of microplastics in the surface water of the Great Lakes is estimated at 1.2 million particles/km². This is higher than plastic concentrations in the widely publicized Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Microplastics have been found in drinking water, bottled water, and beer. And it’s estimated that we each ingest about a credit card-sized amount of plastic each week. Much remains to be learned about the impacts of plastic on human health, but the early picture is concerning.

How do we solve this problem? A Clear and Present Danger

Funds additional research on the public health impact of plastics

Congress to be a leader in curbing plastic pollution and pass legislation that:
- Makes plastic producers responsible for reduction of waste
- Reduces the federal government’s use of single-use plastics
- Funds additional research on the public health impact of plastics

How you can help

Solving our Great Lakes plastic pollution problem will take all of us. Here are several ways you can help.

Refuse single-use plastics.

The best way to prevent plastic pollution from getting into the lakes is to stop using it in the first place.

Your voice makes a difference. Visit our action center – www.greatlakes.org/takeaction – to send a letter to your members of Congress, urging them to adopt extended producer responsibility legislation.

Join a beach cleanup. Adopt-a-Beach volunteers are on the frontlines of keeping plastic pollution out of the Great Lakes. It’s fun, easy, and an excellent way for your family, community group, or business to give back to the lakes. Learn more at www.greatlakes.org/adopt
Planned Gifts Through the Lee Botts Strategic Fund Create a Lasting Impact for the Lakes

Years ago, the Alliance for the Great Lakes created the Lee Botts Endowment, named after our founder, who was a force of nature in creating, leading, and nurturing the Great Lakes environmental movement. Her legacy across the Great Lakes and the now-named Lee Botts Strategic Fund continues to sustain our work and the lakes themselves. For that, and for so much more, we are all deeply indebted and thankful that Lee chose to share so much of herself with the Great Lakes. Thanks to several generous six- and seven-figure gifts, the Fund has grown from less than $100,000 at its inception to more than $5 million in 2022.

Paul Botts, Lee’s son and executive director of the Chicago-based Wetlands Initiative, shared, “The Alliance’s growth in reach and impact is exactly what my mother most hoped for from the very beginning; seeing the long-term possibilities when things were difficult in the moment was one of her gifts. She’d be delighted to see that the organization she loved is reaching and impacting so many people and wildlife. Planned gifts build a foundation for the future of our work to protect the Great Lakes.

Planned giving options include:

- Name the Alliance for the Great Lakes as a beneficiary in your will or living trust
- Make a gift of cash or appreciated securities to establish a charitable gift annuity with the Alliance for the Great Lakes
- Create a charitable remainder trust or charitable lead trust and name the Alliance for the Great Lakes as the beneficiary of a paid life insurance policy or a retirement account
- Transfer gifts of stocks, bonds, and mutual funds

For questions about the Lee Botts Legacy Society, how to leave a gift to the Alliance for the Great Lakes in your will, trust, or other estate plan, or to let us know you have already included the Alliance in your plans, contact Genevieve Fletcher, Individual Giving Manager at (312) 445-9736 or gfletcher@greatlakes.org. We encourage you to contact a financial advisor and/or attorney for recommendations for your specific situation.

Planned Giving Today
Estate gifts are a continuation of your legacy. Regardless of the size of your estate, you can make an impact by giving a gift to an organization you care about. The Lee Botts Strategic Fund provides a trusted option for estate giving to benefit the Great Lakes. Our Board of Directors governs the Fund to provide annual support for the Alliance’s programs while growing the base to ensure the funds last in perpetuity.

Including the Alliance for the Great Lakes in estate plans allows you to enjoy the benefits of a gift to charity while making a powerful statement about your love for the Great Lakes. It allows us to fulfill our mission – to protect, conserve, and restore the Great Lakes, ensuring healthy water in the lakes and in our communities for all generations of people and wildlife.

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Philanthropy for the Future
Donna Latham and Nick Longo recently chose to include the Alliance for the Great Lakes in their estate plans. Nick was involved with the Alliance in the 1970s when it was known as the Lake Michigan Federation. The organization “helped drive my early environmental interests, so it was only natural to look to the Alliance for the Great Lakes as part of our estate planning to pay it forward to future generations of environmental leaders,” Nick shared with us. He and his wife now split their time between Chicago and Houston but look forward to returning to Chicago when Nick retires and volunteering with the Alliance.

Philoanthropy for the Future
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Have you tuned into our podcast? Our Lakes Chat podcast features guest appearances and deep dives into Great Lakes issues. Over 14 episodes, we have covered everything from plastic pollution to invasive carp and water affordability. Our guests include staff experts from our team at the Alliance for the Great Lakes, community members, and researchers studying the lakes. It’s a great listen during your commute, gym session, dog walk, or while working at your desk. Learn more at www.greatlakes.org/lakeschat

SAVE THE DATE
Visit www.greatlakes.org/events to learn more.

Adopt-a-Beach Spring Kick-Off Team Leader Training Sessions:
Thursday, March 30th at 1 pm Eastern/Noon Central
Tuesday, April 4th at 7 pm Eastern/6 pm Central
Spring Kick-Off
Friday, April 21, 2023 – Sunday, April 23, 2023
Great Blue Benefit
Thursday June 22nd, 2023
September Adopt-a-Beach
Saturday, September 23, 2023
The Alliance for the Great Lakes works across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.