

Dave Dempsey, author of *Great Lakes for Sale: From Whitecaps to Bottlecaps*
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Q&A with Dave Dempsey, author of *Great Lakes for Sale: From Whitecaps to Bottlecaps*

Renowned environmental writer Dave Dempsey is the author of *Great Lakes for Sale: From Whitecaps to Bottlecaps*, a must-read book about water, one of the most—perhaps *the* most—precious natural resources.

This is a book for anyone interested in saving the Great Lakes, a huge fresh-water system that contains about 25 percent of the world's fresh surface water. The book asks—and answers—important questions about the export and diversion of Great Lakes water. Not only does *Great Lakes for Sale* examine past and present water-diversion practices; it also shows readers what they can do to save this natural resource.



Great Lakes for Sale is an important part of the effort to remind people why commercialization of Great Lakes water is a dangerous threat. It's not simply a matter of how much water in the short term is removed; the long-term threat is control of water and the possibility that non-Great Lakes interests will assert ownership of the very substance of the Great Lakes.

Here, Dave Dempsey answers questions about his book and water issues in the Great Lakes.

You can also listen to this interview on our University of Michigan Press Author Podcast page at: www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/index.jsp.

University of Michigan Press: Please give us some background on why you wrote this book. Why now, and how does it add to the conversation?

Dave Dempsey: I wrote it out of a passion for the Great Lakes, which are dear to me as a native Michiganiaan, and the sense that they are now facing a largely unseen danger – commercialization. The reason I wrote it now is that the decisions on who controls or owns Great Lakes water are being made now and in the next few years.

UMP: Why has Michigan been so vocal about water diversion from the Great lakes and yet so bad at enacting water conservation laws for itself for so long?

DD: Because it's easy to tell others to conserve but harder to practice.

UMP: In the past (and still today), there was a lot of talk and publicity about pollution in the Great Lakes. Is pollution still a threat to the Great Lakes? Between pollution and diversion, which might ultimately have the greater impact?

DD: Pollution, both old and new, is a major threat to the Great Lakes. The latest troubling problem is the interaction of alien species like quagga mussels and phosphorus, which is promoting ugly algae blooms. Persistent chemical contamination is also a profound concern. I'd say commercialization (or diversion) is the greater threat because once privatized, Great Lakes water is going to be harder for us to clean up.

UMP: Anybody simply observing lake levels—both of the Great Lakes and inland waters—would probably have noticed in recent years that water levels are quite low. What do you think is the reason (or reasons) for the low levels of the Great Lakes and even the inland lakes over past several years?

DD: I wouldn't read too much into the recent low lake levels. They could well be part of a long-term cycle related to normal climate fluctuations. Ask me in 20 years what the levels of the Great Lakes mean then and I can tell you whether climate change or overuse are contributing.

UMP: What kind of impact do bottled water companies have on the Great Lakes? Could a company such as Nestle Waters North America really lower the lake levels? (Or the level of the lake or body of water from which it pumps water?)

DD: Nestle-style operations have been found to lower lakes, streams and wetlands in the areas they operate. And while it may seem inconceivable to some that 'mere humans' could affect the levels of the mammoth Great Lakes, over time ingenious and sometimes reckless humankind has shown it is fully capable of altering the Lakes. One straw in the lakes may not be much, but a thousand straws will lower them.

UMP: Do bottled-water companies (wherever they're located) pay for the water they pump out? Is there some kind of per-gallon or per-cubic-foot charge they pay?

DD: Bottled-water companies that get their water from springs or streams pay nothing to the public for the resource. Those that bottle tap water – and that's about 25% of the market – do pay their municipal utilities, but at a fraction of the retail price they charge.

UMP: What do you say to the argument that fresh water belongs to everyone, and thus the water of the Great Lakes shouldn't just be kept within the confines of the Great Lakes states? That is, if the water in the Great Lakes could benefit other Americans such as those living in Arizona, why not send it there, then?

DD: Fresh water does belong to everyone – and except in the case of a humanitarian crisis, it also belongs where it is. History shows that our manipulation of the movements of water leads to unforeseen disasters. Other Americans, including those in Arizona, are welcome to move here and use the water. If they do, most of that water will remain in the Great Lakes. Let's not water desert golf courses with Great Lakes resources.

UMP: You say that the Great Lakes are in danger in an era of globalization and commercialization. What do you mean by that?

DD: The cliché is that water is the oil of the 21st Century. That means a lot of greedy parties are trying to figure out how to turn the Great Lakes into a product they can market and sell, and our trade agreements open the door to that.

UMP: Can you explain the difference between water use and water ownership?

DD: It's analogous to the difference between using soil to grow crops, and mining the soil, putting it into bags and exporting it hundreds of miles away. There is a longstanding legal right of those who live over aquifers or along streams to use water reasonably. There is also a longstanding legal doctrine that says the public owns said water and it can't be privatized.

UMP: Please explain in laymen's terms the body of law known as the public trust doctrine, and how this impacts decisions we make about Great lakes water.

DD: The public trust doctrine reaches back to the Roman empire. It essentially says that some natural resources are so precious they are the common heritage of humankind. Water, the source of life, is one of those. By adhering to the doctrine, the people (through their governments) can assure Great Lakes water is accessible to all now and in the future – not hoarded and owned and sold by giant special interests.

UMP: How does whether water is on the surface or below ground affect water usage issues in the Great Lakes?

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DD: About 50% of the flow of the Great Lakes comes from groundwater, so springs and rivers both play a critical role in the level of the Great Lakes.

UMP: *We've seen some headlines about a report by the CDC that talks about toxins in the Great Lakes. Have you heard about that, and, if so, what have you heard and what does it mean?*

DD: I'm well aware of it. I think people should be more alarmed about the withholding of the report and associated secrecy than about what's in the report. It's time governments stopped treating the public as children who can't handle sensitive information. All the study says is this: some human health problems are worse in communities close to Great Lakes toxic hotspots, and we need to do more research to know if there's a connection.

UMP: *Please outline where we stand today in terms of water diversion from the Great Lakes. Are we on the verge of selling our watery souls, so to speak, to the highest bidder?*

DD: I'm optimistic we're on the verge of saving the Great Lakes for ourselves and humanity for all time. I hope the book helps wake people up to the danger we're facing and the opportunity that's presented. The only way we'll lose the lakes to the highest bidder is through ignorance or apathy.

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