GREAT EXPE

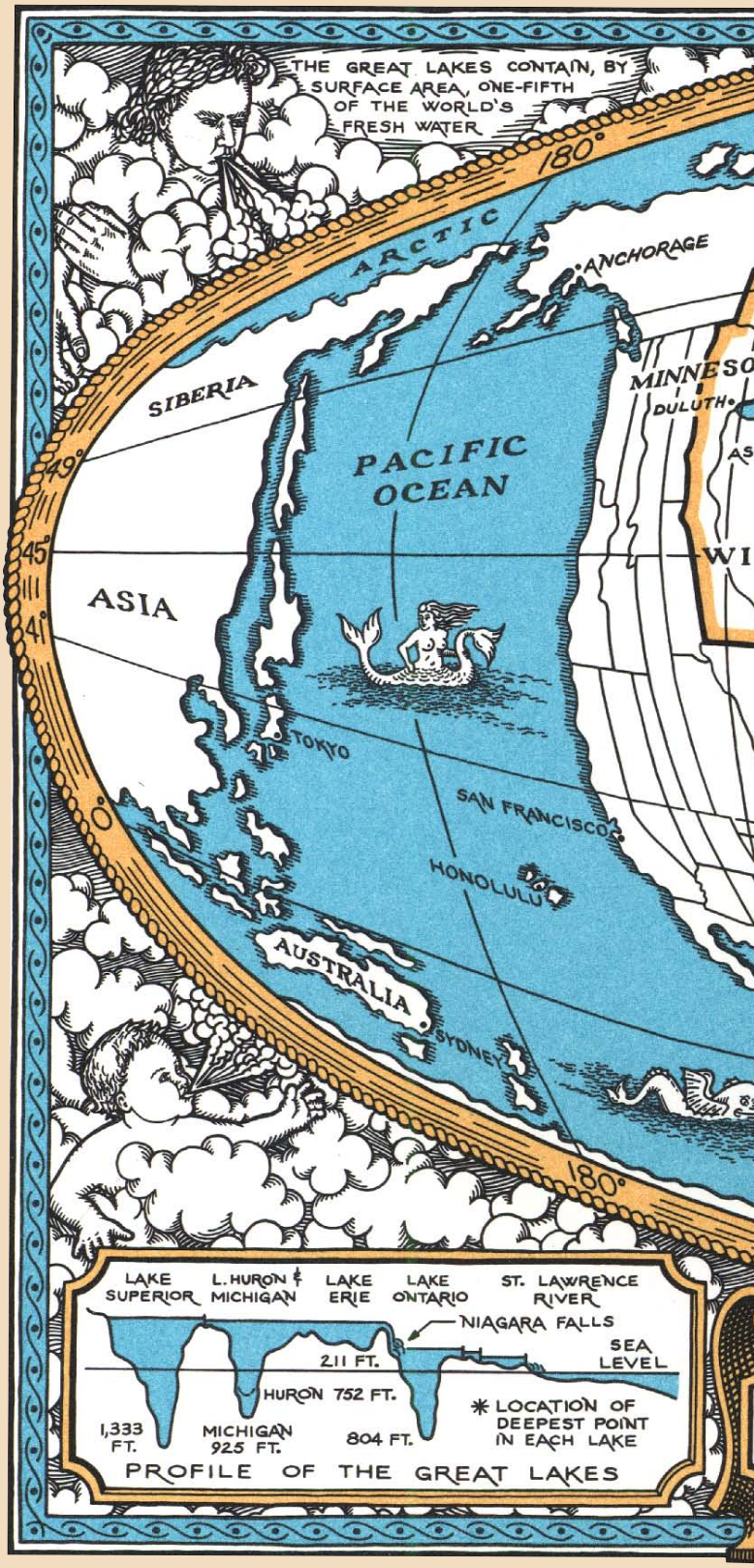
The first major plan to protect the Great Lakes was written more than 30 years ago. It wasn't enough. Will a new plan being developed by a federal task force be able to save the planet's largest surface freshwater system?

The first time the Cuyahoga River in northeastern Ohio caught fire was in 1936. It had become so polluted with oil and floating debris that it took just a spark from a blowtorch to ignite the water. Over the next three decades, the river caught fire several more times, becoming a symbol for America's deteriorating water quality. And because it flowed into Lake Erie, it signaled that the Great Lakes were in serious trouble.

To begin healing the watershed, the United States and Canada signed the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement in 1972. Its purpose was to "restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem." It outlined three broad policies: limit the discharge of toxic substances into the lakes; use local, state, provincial, and federal funding to construct publicly owned waste treatment works; and develop better coordination between parties to ensure compliance.

In many ways, the agreement was successful. Remediation schedules were set for the most polluted sites. Goals and timelines were developed to reduce the number of toxins entering the watershed. By 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was able to declare, "Nutrient targets have largely been achieved and contaminant levels are decreasing or leveling off."

However, as the old problems were being addressed, new problems emerged. Conservationists discovered that aquatic invasive species were infesting the lakes and throwing the ecosystem out of balance. Toxins such as mercury, which were being emitted by industrial sources, were accumulating in the fish and sediments and rising to dangerous levels. And the



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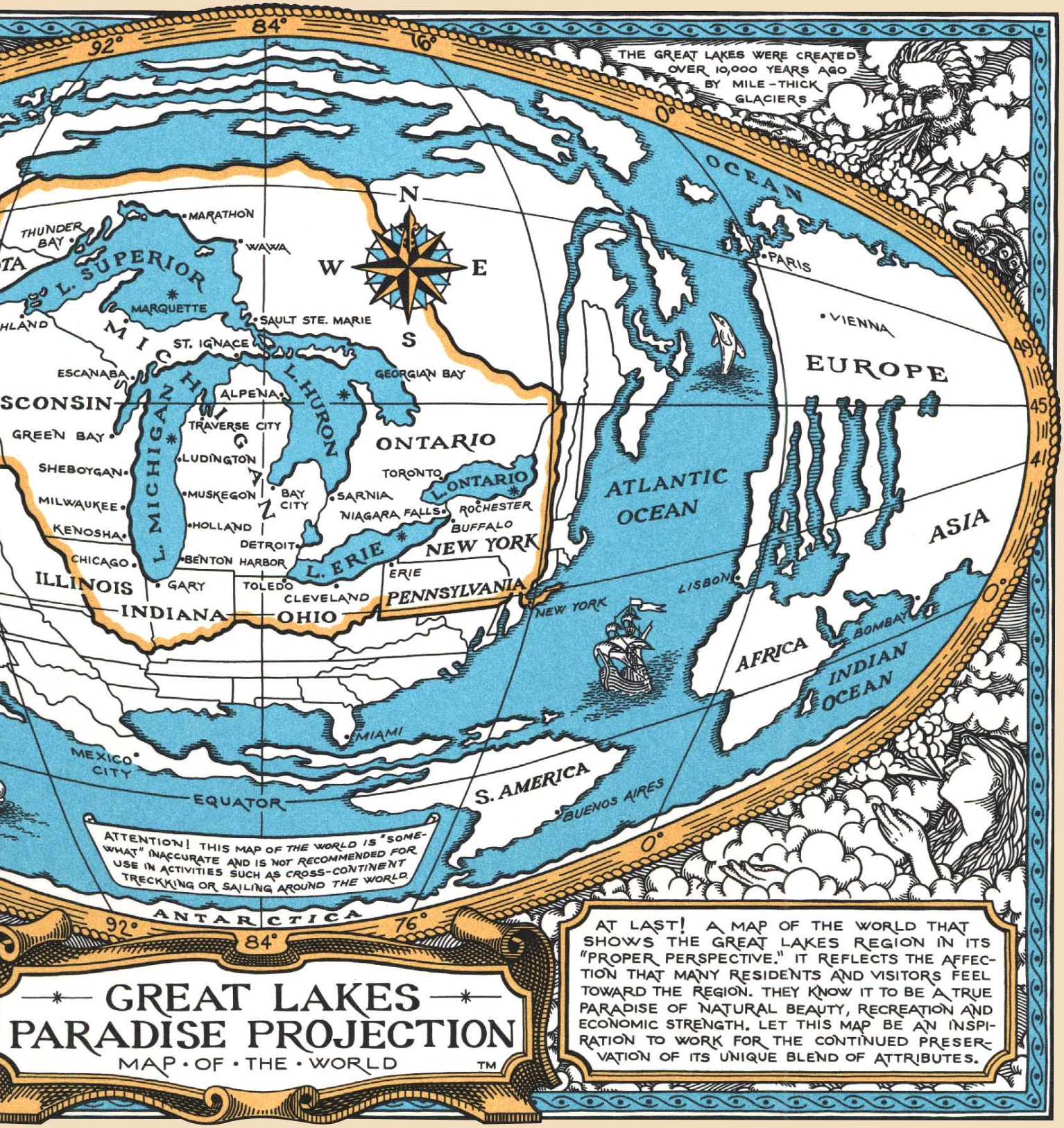
BY JASON McGARVEY



human population in the Great Lakes watershed began shifting from the cities to the suburbs, placing a greater strain on water, land, energy, and other resources.

When the 1972 agreement was written, it didn't anticipate these issues. As such, a new plan for restoring the Great Lakes was needed.

In May 2004, President Bush took a major step by establishing the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force. This body included the heads of nine federal departments, ranging from the Environmental Protection Agency to the Department of Homeland Security. Its mission was to develop a "strategic action plan" to protect and restore the Great Lakes. To achieve this, the task force formed the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC), comprised of representatives from federal, state, and local governments, tribes, and other stakeholders.

Conservationists began to mobilize, too. In the same month President Bush established his task force, representatives from regional and national conservation and scientific groups, including the Izaak Walton League, met in Michigan to hammer out their own strategy for restoring and protecting the lakes. The coalition published a report in September 2004 called "Healing Our Waters: An Agenda for Great Lakes Restoration." It identified three roles for which the federal government should take the lead: restoring Great Lakes water quality, controlling the spread of nonnative invasive species, and cleaning up concentrated toxic pollution. The report also offered specific recommendations for ways to achieve these goals, starting with $30 billion in state and federal funding. Peter Wege, the philanthropist and conservationist who organized the coalition, dubbed the report "the Magna Carta for Great Lakes restoration."

Ten months later, the federal GLRC released it own draft report, "A Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes." It identified the same threats to the Great Lakes as the "Healing Our Waters" report and included recommendations for addressing each threat. The GLRC then asked the public for input.

The Izaak Walton League answered the call. Several League members from Great Lakes states formed an ad hoc committee to examine and respond to the GLRC report. Working with staff, they wrote and submitted comments in September. These comments, along with those submitted by other groups, were considered by the GLRC as it prepared to release its final report in December.

Now the work of getting funding, rallying citizens, and passing legislation begins. The League's Great Lakes committee believes League members should play a strong role, given that more than one third of them live in the eight Great Lakes states.

Jim Sweeney, a committee member from Indiana, where more than 1,700 League members live in the Lake Michigan watershed, says, "To make headway, we need to build relationships with elected officials and agency employees. We need to let them know that we're not a bunch of starry-eyed treehuggers. We have legitimate concerns."

Most important, League members need to learn about the problems and solutions, says John Trimberger, another member of the committee and former Michigan Division president. "On the local level, the most important thing I think the Ikes can do is to educate the members of their communities and their state and federal lawmakers on how important the Great Lakes are and what they can do to help," he says. "Most people don't even know what the issues are."

So, here they are, along with the League's recommendations for solutions.

PHOTODISC

WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT

During the same month in 2004 that President Bush created the Great Lakes Task Force and proclaimed the lakes a "national treasure," more than 10 billion gallons of raw sewage and stormwater were dumped into Lake Erie and Lake Michigan by the cities of Detroit and Milwaukee. That summer brought a record number of sewage-related beach closings and advisories in the Great Lakes Basin—1,854.

With more than 30 million people living inside the Great Lakes watershed, sewage pollution is a major problem. Because of it, much of the water fails to meet the Clean Water Act's requirements of being fishable, swimmable, and drinkable. Boil-water notices, closed beaches, and fish consumption advisories are part of life for many Great Lakes residents.

It doesn't have to be that way.

The GLRC report has recommended that the federal government eliminate all sewage dumping and fulfill the Clean Water Act's requirements by 2020. The League feels that is too late, suggesting a 2015 date instead. Most government plans have set 2010 as the deadline by which wastewater treatment plants should implement plans to end sewage overflows.

Also, the League believes stormwater management technologies should be improved to eliminate all combined sewer overflows and ensure only good water is discharged into the Great Lakes basin. The Ontario Ministry of the Environment is already helping Canadian municipalities test new techniques for diverting and treating stormwater, such as creating artificial wetlands that can hold runoff until the contaminated sediments settle out. Similar technologies are being developed in the United States.

Finally, in accordance with the Clean Water Act, all industrial wastewater should be pretreated with the latest available technology before entering a municipal treatment system or discharged to the surface waters of the Great Lakes.