

GREAT DEFENDERS



Each Great Lake has its challenges, and each has its champions. The nurse who has spoken out against one of Lake Huron's biggest corporate polluters. The chemist who risked his career to warn the public about Lake Superior's mercury and acid rain problems. The coalition builder whose people skills have helped to preserve Lake Erie's open spaces. The husband and wife who have spent half a century protecting Lake Michigan's shoreline. And the environmental planner from Lake Ontario who has proven that patience pays off. Meet six people who demonstrate that commonsense conservation works.

BY CINDY HAN



MICHELLE HURD RIDDICK LAKE HURON

PHOTO BY JAY CLARK

WHEN SHE'S NOT DRESSING WOUNDS OR MEDICATING PATIENTS as an emergency room nurse, Michelle Hurd Riddick devotes herself to tending to the environment as a citizen-activist.

"Environmental issues are always health issues," she says. "Clean air, water, use of your land and spaces—they're the sustenance of life." Beyond that, Riddick sees the costs to public health that environmental ailments can bring. Flareups in asthma patients in the ER. Rivers and lakes that are deemed unfishable and unswimmable. Cancer rates and cognitive disorders in kids.

The health of the Great Lakes has mattered to Riddick all her life. She played on Lake Huron's shores as a child. Then, as an adult, she found she couldn't sit back and watch her environment deteriorate. Early in her avocation as an activist, she rallied for recycling and management of solid waste, then turned her attentions to lead poisoning in children. Along the way, she learned how valuable it is to work with the media, and to know how to articulate threats to the environment.

Riddick has brought these skills to the decades-old battle being waged over dioxin contamination near Dow Chemical's world headquarters in Midland, Michigan. Since 2000, she has railed against Dow representatives and govern-

ment officials who have quashed the efforts of citizen groups to get Dow to acknowledge and address the high levels of dioxin found in the Tittabawasee River. The chemical plant sits right on the river's banks, and the waters flow into the Saginaw River, which empties into Lake Huron. Since the 1970s, the chemical company has denied that dioxin levels are a problem, or that the toxicity can be proven. Riddick and others have called attention to studies that show levels of contamination many times higher than maximum levels set by the state. They've also found Dow's "fingerprint" on the contamination. But progress has been sporadic. The latest setback was last year when citizens were shut out of discussions among Michigan's current administration, Dow, and the Department of Environmental Quality, erasing years of effort toward requiring the company to be responsible for its contamination.

Riddick will continue to press for action. "Sometime I want to walk away, but I'm like a pit bull who sets her jaw and won't let go," she laughs. "I imagine what it'll be like to live to see the day when the governor says, 'Michigan's largest watershed is going to be cleaned up.' That'll be a cool day."



GARY GLASS LAKE SUPERIOR

PHOTO BY DAN MARSHALL

GARY GLASS CAN FEEL THE ANGER BOILING UP when he thinks back on all the years he devoted to science as a research chemist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, only to be beaten down by politics. There was the time in 1989 when he provided his data on mercury to the Sierra Club, which took it to Washington “and whacked the EPA over the head with it.” Next thing Glass knew, he was moved from a 200-square-foot office to one that could barely fit a desk. And there was the other time when he presented some of his findings to a group in New Jersey concerned about contaminated fish in their lakes. EPA managers chastised him by cancelling his research program. So he filed a whistleblower suit against the agency, and was given as his settlement a four-year sabbatical to complete his mercury research at a university.

“That taught me a lot about what the environmental problem was,” he says. “The problem remains political, not technical.”

It was a hard lesson to learn for someone who joined the EPA fresh out of graduate school with a Ph.D. in chemistry and an interest in water quality issues. His first study, the “green water” of Lake Superior, led to the discovery of asbestiform fibers in drinking water supplies and helped win a case against the Reserve Mining Company.

In the wake of the Clean Water Act, Glass was in the trenches, finding new ways to measure pollutants. He developed a monitoring system for acid rain, compiling a body of data that helped Minnesota and Wisconsin reduce acid rain impacts. “From this work, I saw that air and water quality must be considered together as component parts of the hydrologic cycle of water,” he says. “Without clean air, there cannot be clean water.”

Later, he pursued the idea that monitoring rainfall could explain how the atmosphere contributes to mercury in places like Lake Superior. “From 1990 to 1995, we did it all on a shoestring,” he remembers. “We put buckets out, collected the rain, cleaned the buckets, analyzed samples.” His data suggested a link between coal-fired power plant emissions and levels of mercury in rainfall, but the agency discouraged him from exploring it further.

Despite the roadblocks, Glass hasn’t lost his fire. Since retiring from the EPA in 2002, he has continued working to improve the mercury standards for Minnesota.

“You can’t overpower the political system,” he says. “But you can keep shooting off an occasional rocket so people can see what’s going on.”



RICK GRAHAM • LAKE ERIE

PHOTO BY JAY CLARK

RICK GRAHAM IS NOT SOME ANTIDEVELOPMENT TREEHUGGER. “I know what it is to plan a community,” he says. “I spent eight years managing a private lakefront development. I’m not anti-growth—I’m for smart growth.”

When you’re trying to solve problems, it helps to have a knack for seeing things from different angles. As a conservationist living by Lake Erie’s shores, Graham works on a rotating plate of issues, from land stewardship to water quality to calling for the decommissioning of a local nuclear reactor. He’s known for getting into the other guy’s shoes and building coalitions in his advocacy for wiser use of Ohio’s land and water.

When a local nursery began digging a huge ditch in the coastal wetland of Sheldon’s Marsh along Lake Erie in 1999, Graham stepped in. Local conservation groups, including the League, wanted the Army Corps of Engineers to stop the nursery owner from gouging the wetland. Graham opened dialogue with a Corps representative—originally an opponent—and ended up finding common ground and working together on a solution. The fight to save Sheldon’s Marsh took five years, but the Corps finally ordered the nursery to halt the digging and repair the vital ecosystem.

“Rick works with the system, treats everyone with respect,

yet he is dogged in his determination to see the right outcome,” says Jim Baird, director of the League’s Sustainability Education Program, who has worked with Graham through the years, particularly on protecting the state’s open spaces.

Graham has pulled together a diverse coalition of farmers, sportsmen, and environmentalists to work with state agencies on a plan to provide landowner incentives for walk-in recreational access. He has also taken his open-space message to developers. “In a state where 95 percent of the land is private, you can’t have low-density housing spread all over the land,” he says. “Out of 25 million acres in Ohio, hardly any public land exists.”

When Graham is talking to developers about the importance of concentrating housing around an infrastructure rather than taking up precious land, he is able to tap into his own development background. “It’s kind of a trump card that I can play, to say ‘I understand where you’re at, and this is why.’ If you play the shared concerns, then you can work to a solution. That’s my style,” he says. “You seek out information, then you take a little tidbit and you show people the way. Did you see this? Did you see that? I’m not trying to get from A to Z in one step. I’m looking for progress.”



HERB AND CHARLOTTE READ LAKE MICHIGAN

PHOTO BY HANK ERDMANN

Herb Read likes to tell people he visited the wild and beautiful sand hills along Lake Michigan even before he was born. “My parents visited the dunes while my mother was carrying me,” he says. In fact, conservation of the Indiana Dunes is in Herb’s blood. Back before World War I, his father was among the first people to call for their preservation.

In 1952, the Save the Dunes Council was formed and Herb not only jumped on board, but he also founded the Porter County Chapter of the Izaak Walton League in 1959, in large part to bolster the efforts to create the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Soon after, his wife, Charlotte, joined him in conservation, dedicating what time she had while also raising their five children. Among their victories was a 10-year battle to prevent the building of a nuclear plant right next to the dunes. Plans to erect the facility were scrapped in 1981.

The couple testified before Congress, agitated and pushed for the sake of the dunes. “We started as a few rabble-rousers saying there was value in conservation, and slowly but surely others agreed,” says Herb. “An outsider cannot go in and save an area. It has to be grassroots.”

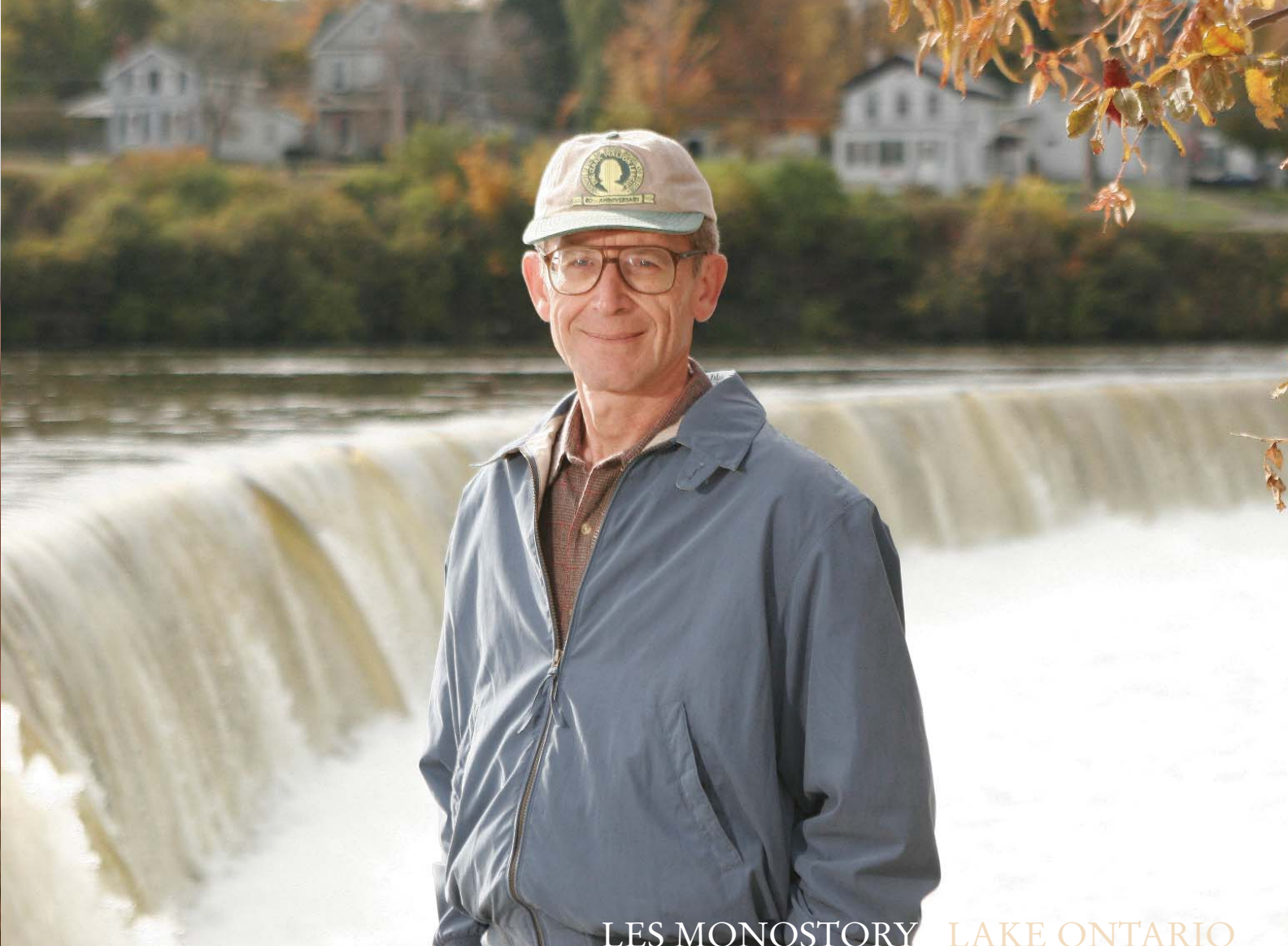
“Our successes were the result of working with many people for many years,” adds Charlotte.

Today, the Reads are synonymous with the dunes and the successful efforts to establish and expand the national lakeshore. But they don’t see saving the dunes as an isolated cause. They know that the air, water, and land around their precious lakeshore are intertwined with those wild sands. That’s why Charlotte also devotes her energies toward fighting water pollution. From the 1970s on, in the wake of the Clean Water Act, she has addressed water quality issues—from upsurges of fish dying in the lake to setting stricter water discharge standards in Great Lake states. For 20 years, she helped push the state to establish a coastal program, and she now chairs Indiana’s Coastal Advisory Board.

At the same time, Herb has focused his efforts on land. He prompted Porter County to establish its first county park 20 years ago. He has worked on issues of sewer overflows and agricultural runoff, and he currently dedicates his time fighting sprawl and preserving open space in the region.

The Reads don’t plan to sit back and count their accomplishments. They can’t, says Charlotte. “The dunes are not yet saved, the lakes are not as great as they should be. In conservation, eternal vigilance is a constant.”

Herb agrees, saying that victory can be as fleeting as the shifting sands. “You need to stay at it.”



LES MONOSTORY LAKE ONTARIO

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OKONIEWSKI

A CHAMPION FENCER, LES MONOSTORY KNOWS that winning is not about strength or speed—it's about strategy. "It's more mental than physical," he says. "You have to be able to constantly change tactics. You have to study the other guy, then figure out your move."

That same calculated approach has worked for Monostory in his bouts against environmental damage in western New York over the last 40 years.

Monostory has been conscious of problems with his local waters ever since he came to this country at the age of nine, when his family left his native Hungary and arrived in the Great Lakes region, in Cleveland, Ohio. His early impressions of America were of fishing and exploring the outdoors, yet being restricted by closed beaches, polluted rivers, and a memorable Lake Erie gone aflame.

Concern over the Great Lakes environment stayed with him through college, where he studied forestry and water resources, ending up in Syracuse in the late 1960s. There he learned that Onondaga Lake, which feeds Lake Ontario, was designated by the EPA as one of the most polluted lakes in the country due to its long history as a dumping ground for industrial waste and sewage. Similarly, in the 1970s, nearby Oswego Harbor was listed by the EPA as one of 40 Great

Lakes "hotspots" in dire need of help. In another related problem on Oswego River, a hydroelectric plant was severely hampering the migration of salmon and other fish into Lake Ontario.

Throughout this time, Monostory was working as an environmental planner for Onondaga County. But outside of his job, he joined numerous organizations that were focused on repairing the local watersheds, and he helped found the League's Central New York Chapter. Over the decades, he brought his scientific background and his steady determination to the table. "My strong suit is patience," he says. "After all those years of attending meetings and negotiating agreements, I've seen some considerable improvements."

Today, the pollution in Onondaga Lake has been cleaned up significantly. Oswego Harbor was recently singled out as the first water body on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes to be taken off the list of contaminated sites. And after 10 years, the hydroelectric plant has signed an agreement that provides for the passage of fish through the Oswego River.

"I've lived long enough to see the worst in the 1950s through today," he says. "I feel fortunate to have been around professionally in the years when the changes have been taking place. We've come a long way."