

## Habitat/Species Problem Statement (1/7/05 draft)

The Great Lakes watershed is richly endowed with a broad range of unique and valuable habitats—many of which are found nowhere else in the world. In addition to the Lakes themselves (which contain nearly 20 percent of the world's and 95% of North America's fresh surface water and provide water for 40 million people and hundreds of thousands of businesses), the watershed is defined by high quality inland lakes, expansive forests, blue-ribbon trout streams, dunes, prairies, bogs, fens, and the largest freshwater coastal wetland systems on Earth. These natural habitats are critical to maintaining the health of the entire Great Lakes ecosystem. From the deep water portions of the Lakes to the smallest tributary streams, natural habitats in the Great Lakes watershed support a wide diversity of plant and animal species that generate billions of dollars in economic activity.

Despite the grandeur of the Great Lakes, habitats throughout the watershed and the species that depend upon them are being lost or damaged through incompatible development, hydrologic alterations, unsustainable forestry and farming practices, resource extraction, toxic discharges, and the introduction and spread of invasive species. These problems have not only impacted the health of the ecosystem, but have impacted the health of the region's economy—beach closings, fish consumption advisories, reductions in wildlife populations, and the hundreds of millions spent each year to control exotic species provide a glimpse of the value lost.

Both the causes and impacts of habitat degradation and species loss transcend state and (in the case of the Great Lakes) national boundaries. As well, the benefits of Great Lakes restoration will go far beyond the Great Lakes states. Successful habitat restoration will require substantial financial resources, the talents of the broad range of stakeholders, and coordination among local, state, tribal, federal, and international agencies. To be successful, we must prioritize work on the key stressors to the environment and implement policies and programs that will assure long term environmental and economic sustainability of the Great Lakes basin. All citizens in North America will benefit from this endeavor.