democracy rested on the presumption of equality. Douglas resolved the dilemma by maintaining that non-white races were “utterly incapable of governing themselves” (p. 85). Although northern Democrats, persuaded by this reasoning, considered popular sovereignty a reasonable sectional compromise, most southerners demanded that the federal government protect territorial slavery. Ultimately, Lincoln’s election impelled southerners to abandon a Union that they believed disregarded their rights. Ironically, secession thus illustrated the most fundamental dilemma arising from the political creed of equality. Perceiving secession as a destruction of democracy rather than a defense of liberty, Douglas supported the Republicans’ effort to maintain the Union by force.


On the Brink
The Great Lakes in the 21st Century
By Dave Dempsey


Dave Dempsey reviews the environmental history of the Great Lakes for the last 200 years of their 10,000-year life. In this brief period human occupation of the region has multiplied many times, creating untold problems and making it an open question if humans will ever be compatible with this environment. Although Dempsey reviews the history of the lakes, the real focus of his book is a plea for their preservation. His final thought is that people must force the responsibility for the preservation of the Great Lakes on their governments.

The book starts with a prologue detailing people’s love for the Great Lakes. Virtually everyone in the region enjoys recreation on the lakes. Examples of this recreation abound, as do examples of appreciation for lake commerce and for the endless sports opportunities that the lakes provide.

Dempsey argues that initial awareness of environmental trouble may have been prompted by the decline of local fish populations—fish that had been providing sustenance for humans for thousands of years. People responded to the problems caused by overfishing by introducing “better” fish, but this has resulted in almost continuous unanticipated change in the ecosystem. In the meantime, industry—stimulated by
and drawn to the lakes by their seemingly unlimited pure water and by the incredible ease and efficiency of transportation—ignored the ecosystem until it was almost destroyed. Only civic action begun in the final decades of the twentieth century has remedied aspects of this destruction.

More than anything else, Dempsey’s treatment of sewage contamination represents the conflict between the environmentalist’s and the historian’s point of view. The construction of sewage systems in major cities in the last half of the nineteenth century represented the best scientific knowledge of the day; tens of thousands of lives were saved by the decline in deaths caused by typhoid fever, a point neglected in Dempsey’s text. However, like the unanticipated consequences of today’s rush to manufacture ethanol, the new sewage systems soon brought problems of their own, overwhelming the capacity of the Great Lakes to dispose of the waste. This problem was only exacerbated by the unwillingness of many governments to address the problem for nearly a half century.

With the dawning of the twenty-first century, many people have targeted shipping as the leading environmental problem on the lakes. Species transfer between the oceans and the lakes has become a major issue, although no mention is made here of the hundreds of new species that humans have deliberately introduced to the region. While both environmentalists and recreational boaters have demanded the end of Great Lakes shipping, it seems an environmental impossibility. The non-renewable energy used by lake shipping remains a fraction of the energy used by land-based transportation. Lake shipping also produces far lower greenhouse gas emissions than do the alternatives. The best solutions to problem of the species transfer in ballast water remain in finding ways to treat that water, not in “throwing out the baby with the bath water.”

Dempsey has written a nice summary of the environmental history of the Great Lakes, with an exceptional list of footnotes providing a collection of contemporary sources for further study. Most readers will agree with him in recognizing the limitations of our political systems today and the necessity for the people themselves to force our governments to preserve the lakes for future generations.

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