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# On The Brink: The Great Lakes In The 21st Century



## Synopsis

As one of the world's great natural treasures, the Great Lakes have also served in recent decades as an early warning system for many emerging environmental problems. In the early twenty-first century, as the Lakes face unprecedented challenges, we need to revisit both the wonder of the Lakes and the perils plaguing them, and to take action to protect this majestic ecosystem. Dave Dempsey weaves the natural character and phenomena of the Great Lakes and stories of the schemes, calamities, and unusual human residents of the Basin with the history of their environmental exploitation and recovery. Contrasting the incomparable beauty and complexity of the Lakes, and the poetry, folklore, and citizen action they have inspired, with the disasters that short-sighted human folly has inflicted on the ecosystem, Dempsey makes this history both engaging and relevant to today's debates and decisions. Underlying the neglectful treatment of the Lakes are two irreconcilable and faulty human assumptions: that the Lakes are a system so big that human beings cannot do great harm to it, and that the Lakes are a resource that can be bent to the will of humankind. Dempsey finds evidence that, despite great changes in the laws governing the Lakes and public attitudes toward them in the last fifty years, government policy and institutions are still dominated by these dangerous attitudes. A central theme of *On the Brink* is that citizens, who have displayed an increasing sense of commitment to the Lakes and a growing sense of place, must challenge their leaders to reform Great Lakes institutions. While everything from large-scale water exports to global climate change looms in the future of the Lakes, single-purpose solutions do not suffice—no more than a Band-aid would on a gaping wound. Dempsey shows that it is necessary to create a governing system that reflects the realities of life on the ground—in communities and that taps into the passion and determination of citizens to protect these treasures.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dave Dempsey is the author and coauthor of eight nonfiction books and was named Michigan Author of the Year by the Michigan Library Association and the Michigan Center for the Book in 2009.

As a sailor on Lake Ontario and a concerned parent and citizen this book gives you a great history and status of the condition of the great lakes from an environmental viewpoint. You learn about the lakes from the early days of European settlement in the late 1700's through the overfishing and degradation of the lakes in the later 1800's through the "improvements" by the army corps of engineers of the 1900's on. What we see of the Lakes today is only a shadow of what they once were and might once again be if people begin treating them as the resource and treasure they should be. This book really makes clear the changes man has brought to the lakes the last 200 years and shows where a small group of conservationists or even one person can make positive changes into the future.

Written by Dave Dempsey (an environmental policy teacher of Michigan State University who served by President Bill Clinton's appointment on the Great Lakes Fishery Commission), *On The Brink: The Great Lakes In The 21st Century* is a clarion wake-up call to the dangers the Great Lakes ecosystem face today. Summarizing a history of the Great Lakes' environmental exploitation and gradual recovery, and blending in thoughts on the poetry, folklore, inspiration derived from the Great Lakes as well as citizen action to preserve them, *On The Brink* brings true environmental history to life in an exciting manner that challenges the reader to get involved and join the fight to protect a national treasure.

Dave Dempsey's book, *On the Brink: The Great Lakes in the 21st Century*, is a comprehensive history of the environmental challenges the Great Lakes have faced since cities began to sprout on their shores in the early 1800's. Dempsey records an encyclopedic account of the unrelenting assaults on the land, water and wildlife of the region. I was alternately fascinated by the stories and

repulsed by the effects of so much wanton exploitation. Of course, there are stories of hope as well as degradation. Stories of national parks created and environmental laws passed through the actions of responsible citizens. That, in the end, is Dempsey's message: challenges remain, the lakes are in peril, but hope endures as long as people are willing to take action. The book is so comprehensive that at times I found myself wishing it dealt more thoroughly with a topic. On the other hand, there are some obscure stories I've not seen elsewhere that I would have hated to miss. At times it can be a challenging read, but overall it's an engaging tale, and well worth the effort.

Dempsey's research is simply breathtaking and mind boggling. He presents the history of the Great Lakes from the opening of the book which takes place 50 years in the future, into thousands of years in the past. We learn about the explorers we only know today because they have cars named for them. We learn of the ordinary people who have helped preserve this reservoir of 1/5 of the world's fresh water supply. We learn about the fragile life forms that hug these ancient and majestic shores. But the real excitement is found in the book itself that reads at times like a 'page-turner' of a novel. We see how political expediency wins time and time again against the pressures of modern day life and industry. We are made to understand the trust of stewardship that has been placed upon us to preserve these marvels of nature, and most importantly, why. Personally, I was left aghast at how quickly various species of fish and aquatic life could, and have, disappeared forever. Others that have gone to the brink and returned and others that still hang on balanced on the precarious beam of nature. All presented in an exciting read to boot! Being able to distill such voluminous research into an imminently readable book such as this is a rare talent. If you drink water, you need to read this book.

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