



November 19, 1991

GREAT LAKES UNITED

Maurice Strong
Secretary General
United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
160 Route De Florissant
CH-1231
Geneve - Conches
Switzerland

Dear Secretary General Strong,

We are writing to request that as part of the Conference on Environment and Development a careful assessment, investigation, and reporting be made on the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem.

The Great Lakes are the largest system of fresh, surface water on earth, containing roughly 18 percent of the world supply. Because of the unique nature and structure of the Lakes, a single Basinwide ecosystem exists, an ecosystem which is highly sensitive to the effects of a wide range of pollutants. The study of the effects of toxic pollutants upon this ecosystem has brought new understanding to the complexity of ecosystems and to the disruptive and destructive nature of toxic chemicals.

We are appealing to the United Nations because we feel, first, that the Great Lakes are a premier resource of global significance warranting international attention and scrutiny, and secondly, that the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement is an outstanding precedent setting model for achieving environmental protection of international resources.

The Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, a seminal agreement for the protection of international aquatic ecosystems, is intended to protect the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of the Great Lakes. The Agreement was first signed in 1972 in response to an environmental crisis in the Lakes. At that time Lake Erie was considered dead. Trash, dead fish, industrial waste and sewage washed up on beaches. The Cuyahoga River (a tributary to Lake Erie) erupted into flames.

The central promise of the 1972 Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement was the reduction of phosphorous loadings to the Great Lakes. Substantial progress was made under the 1972 Agreement. Lake Erie came back to life and the other Lakes were much less affected by excess algae.

An international organization dedicated to conserving and protecting the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River
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But the Lakes were increasingly confronted by an even greater threat -- contamination by toxic chemicals. The Agreement was renegotiated and concluded in good faith by the respective governments in 1978, with a Protocol being added in 1987.

The 1978 Agreement pledged the two countries to work together using an ecosystem approach -- one that integrates all components of air, land, water, and living organisms, including humans -- to rid the Great Lakes of toxic contamination problems. The Agreement was based on a fundamental understanding that the only rational approach to managing persistent, bioaccumulative toxic pollutants is by achieving zero discharge and virtual elimination of the presence of those pollutants in the ecosystem. Unfortunately, the two governments have failed to live up to their commitments.

Attached please find a copy of a recent report entitled, "Broken Agreement: The Failure of the United States and Canada to Implement the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement". This report outlines the specific instances where the national governments of Canada and the United States have failed to comply with the terms of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

The Great Lakes are still under great stress. For your information, I have attached a copy of the a report developed by the Canadian Federal government summarizing the effects of toxic chemicals on the Great Lakes Basin.

One of the themes of the 1992 conference will be freshwater. The implementation of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and the disruption of the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem by toxic substances present critical lessons to our understanding of how to protect international resources. Therefore, we feel it is essential that the conference investigate the breaches of the Agreement and assess the lessons from the experience in the Great Lakes for the success of other international agreements respecting the environment.

Sincerely,


John Jackson
President Great Lakes United

cc: Tommy Koh, Chairman
Peter Sand, Principal Programme Officer