

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE GREAT LAKES

By Dan Egan

Photo courtesy Marie Zhuikov / UW Sea Grant



**READING GUIDE &
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

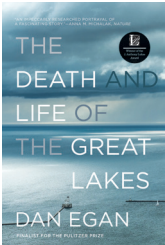
ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Go Big Read is an initiative of the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The program engages members of the campus community and beyond in a shared, academically focused reading experience.

The aims of Go Big Read are to:

- Engage the campus community and beyond in an academically focused reading experience
- Generate vigorous discussions and exchanges of diverse ideas
- Promote connections among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the wider community
- Tap into and promote the intellectual resources of the campus
- Promote educational initiatives and learning outcomes
- Bridge learning experiences inside and outside the classroom

ABOUT THE BOOK



The Death and Life of the Great Lakes, by Dan Egan, is a portrait of an ecological catastrophe happening right before our eyes, blending the epic story of the lakes with an examination of the perils they face and the ways we can restore and preserve them for generations to come.

*“A Great Lake can hold all
the mysteries of an ocean,
and then some.”*

THEMES



RESOURCES

There are many resources to support readers in developing an understanding of the issues addressed in the book, including many on the UW-Madison campus. For additional resources, please visit the Go Big Read website: gobigread.wisc.edu/resources

- **Center for Limnology**
limnology.wisc.edu
- **Office of Sustainability**
sustainability.wisc.edu
- **Water@UW-Madison**
water.wisc.edu
- **Wisconsin Sea Grant**
seagrant.wisc.edu
- **Wisconsin Water Library**
waterlibrary.aqua.wisc.edu

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do the Great Lakes mean to you? Have they had an impact on your life? Do you feel personally invested in what happens to the Great Lakes?
- Harvey Bootsma, an ecologist at University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, has studied Lake Michigan for decades. As he says in the book, “It’s just so sad to see it changing so much. This isn’t the lake it was 25 years ago, and it’s probably not the same lake it’s going to be in 10 years” (p. 130). While change is a constant, how have humans accelerated this process? How are the lakes adapting to this new pace of change?
- As the example of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal illustrates in chapter 5, and the zebra and quagga mussels in chapter 6, with invasive species, problems that start out local can soon become global. Is it possible to effectively address the issue of invasive species at the local level? What would be required in order to address these issues on a more coordinated, global scale?
- Human intervention in the form of shipping, introducing non-native species, and manipulating waterways is a persistent theme in examining the causes of crises currently plaguing the Great Lakes. Given this, can human intervention also provide solutions? If so, what can be learned from the mistakes and successes of past interventions?
- In chapter 8, Egan discusses the legal actions that have been taken to keep control of Great Lakes water in the hands of the states (and Canadian territory) that surround them. What would the danger be in disregarding the guidelines set forth by these laws? Are these laws fair to regions that don’t have their own large freshwater sources?
- Though the focus of the book is clearly on the Great Lakes, Egan includes anecdotes and bits of history about other geographic areas

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

across the United States. Do these asides add to Egan's portrait of the Great Lakes, or detract from the focus of the book? Do any of these passages stand out to you? Why?

- Though Egan is highly knowledgeable about his subject matter, he is first and foremost a reporter, not a scientist. How does his reporting of the history of and issues surrounding the Great Lakes differ from how a scientist might write about the same information? Who do you think the target audience is for a book like this? What is its intended impact?
- In relating this tale of the Great Lakes, the author includes the perspectives of European explorers, water researchers, conservation experts, fisher folk and people in industry. Reflecting on the book as a whole, whose voices are missing from this conversation? What other perspectives might be valuable to explore in tackling these challenging issues?
- Near the end of the book, Egan quotes Aldo Leopold, who said, "A thing is right when it tends to promote the integrity, beauty, and stability of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (316). Looking back at the numerous changes humans have made to the Great Lakes through physical changes and the introduction of various species — both intentional and unintentional — is it possible to restore balance to the Great Lakes' biotic community? How do you think someone like Aldo Leopold would react to recent decisions regarding the Great Lakes?
- The PBS NewsHour-New York Times discussion guide for this book asks whether the book "introduce[s] us to heroes and villains in the Great Lakes story? If so, who are they?" To go a step further, what have been some of the most contentious battles between these heroes and villains? Who do you think the heroes and villains will be in the future?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- While the dangers facing the Great Lakes may have significant impacts on our environment, they don't often make front page national news. What are some other issues related to water that have been on your radar lately here in Madison? In Wisconsin? Nationally or internationally? Do you notice any parallels to the issues addressed in the book?
- What bodies of water have had an impact on your own life, whether for recreation, sustenance, or livelihood? Have you noticed any physical changes in these water sources over time? Reflecting on your own reactions to these changes, what do you think it would take to inspire people to pay attention to the Great Lakes in the future?
- The website for the marine conservation movement Ocean Optimism states that “the way we communicate about the environment is so negative and overwhelming that we are fueling a culture of hopelessness that threatens to seal the planet’s fate.” Despite all the evidence that the Great Lakes are changing dramatically — and not for the better — is there hope for the future? What systems are at work that continue to put the health of the lakes at risk? How can individuals make a difference? Could changing the messaging around the Great Lakes affect their future?

SELECTION PROCESS

Each winter, members of the campus community and beyond are invited to submit nominations for the next Go Big Read book. A committee of faculty, students, staff, and community partners then sifts through hundreds of nominations to arrive at a shortlist which they carefully read and evaluate for inclusion in the program. A select list is then shared with the Chancellor, who makes the final decision.

The ideal Go Big Read book should have the following qualities:

- Be readable, relevant, engaging, and well-written
- Appeal to people with diverse backgrounds and experiences
- Encompass sufficient depth and scope to generate discussions from different points of view
- Be conducive to teaching and learning, and offer opportunities for integration into academic programs
- Lend itself to a variety of activities and programming

The ideal book might also have a subject or author with a Wisconsin connection, an author who may be able to visit campus, cross-disciplinary appeal, and promote the Wisconsin Experience by engaging “issues that matter.”

NOTES

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

An Evening With Dan Egan

Shannon Hall - Memorial Union Theater

Tuesday, October 16th, 2018

7:00 p.m.

No tickets required

Visit the Go Big Read events calendar for book discussions, programs, and events taking place throughout the academic year: gobigread.wisc.edu/events

SPONSORS

Go Big Read is sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor in partnership with Center for the First-Year Experience; Center for the Humanities; Center for Limnology; College of Letters & Science; Distinguished Lecture Series; Division of Enrollment Management; Division of Student Life; Madison Public Library; Morgridge Center for Public Service; Office of Sustainability; Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning; University Communications; University Housing; UW–Madison College of Agricultural & Life Sciences; UW–Madison Libraries; Water@UW-Madison; Wisconsin Alumni Association; Wisconsin Book Festival; and Wisconsin Union Directorate.

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