

Canadian Environmental Law Association  
L'Association canadienne du droit de l'environnement

517 College Street, Suite 401, Toronto, Ontario M6G 4A2  
Telephone (416) 960-2284  
Fax (416) 960-9392

May 14, 1993

Kathy Bero  
Lake Michigan Federation  
647 West Virginia Street, suite 307  
Milwaukee, Wis. 53204

Dear Kathy,

Re: Great Lakes Women's Network

Thank you for all your efforts to initiate the long overdue Great Lakes Women's Network. There are so many things that surface when I think about Great Lakes issues from a woman's perspective. Here are my initial thoughts.

The social impacts of recent Great Lakes Health findings are profound for women and their children. While these findings raise a flood of moral and ethical questions which will be difficult to answer, it is imperative to be asking those questions of Great Lakes agencies and decision makers responsible for health protection and preventative programs.

So many women's networks are already organized around the issue of reproductive choice but many are not aware that their choice may be severely limited by contaminant exposure. The wildlife evidence of deformities, still births, and the miscarriages (unhatched) in Basin bird and mammal populations points to human parallels. So many couples are having difficulties conceiving and carrying to term. However, most medical research still focuses on intervention which aids in conception rather than on research on the role of contaminant exposures in reproductive success. Choice groups are natural allies for this work.

The experience of DES daughters should have long ago alerted scientists to the transgeneration impacts of harmful substances. We may want to invite a speaker from the DES daughters network to our meeting as we would have a lot to learn from their struggle and organizing.

One of the most disturbing findings of wildlife studies in the Basin is the evidence that some contaminants are hormone mimickers and cause gender changes. The difficulties this presents when extrapolating this impact to humans are very sensitive ones. While

it is important not to deny these findings we must avoid associating something as complex as human sexuality with a mere chemical reaction and great care should be given to avoid demeaning anyone's sexuality in these discussions.

Great Lakes scientist Mike Gilberson's observations of herring gulls is almost a parable of our own society in transition. He has found that contaminants in colonies of herring gulls are causing gender behavioural changes. Male gulls have abandoned their role in protecting the nests and young. As a result, to compensate female gulls co-operate to protect the young.

The other aspect of scientific findings is that contaminant body burdens act as immune system stressors. The increase in auto-immune diseases in the past several decades has been significant. We should be involving environmentally sensitive persons, persons living with AIDS and those with other auto-immune diseases. (I understand AIDS victims are often found to have high contaminant body burdens.) Linkages with the health care network are beginning to be established. Another group which should be involved is teachers particularly those involved in early childhood education. Educators will be interested in the demonstrated neurological and developmental impacts on children.

Every day some other bad news substantiates our growing concern. Most recently there is the finding of a correlation between DDE levels in breast tissue with breast cancer and that dioxin in bleached tampons has been linked to endometriosis in women. Had there been similar evidence that male sexual functions, health and reproductive abilities were being seriously threatened, we all know that medical and research priorities would have been immediately applied to their problems. The politics of inaction is gender related.

We should be honouring our women Great Lakes scientists, such as Thea Colbourn and Rosalie Bertell who have been insistent that Great Lakes research come out of the labs into the environment and work to force consensus on how our research can be strategic. Can we incorporate a celebration of their work into our conference?

I think the issues of equity and equal opportunity are important ones as well. There are not enough women in decision-making positions in the Basin. Great Lakes meetings like the Biennial are a sea of suits and have a feeling of a men's club. It can be very disempowering to operate within a patriarchal atmosphere of cronyism. We should seek to articulate an alternative model for Great Lakes decision-making--one that integrates half of the Great Lakes population, the half that is at risk.

Economic issues and poverty of women and children cannot be ignored. Local economies of scale could enable women to foster community development and community economics which lead to healthy

self-sufficient communities throughout the Basin. Male driven macro-economics where profits and resources are exported to wealthy multi-nationals is the most destructive force we have to fight with NAFTA and other globalization trends. When jobs and natural resources are lost in the Great Lakes, the societal discontent that results is often directed at women and minorities in the form of violence.

The Canadian Environmental Law Association would be very interested in helping to establish a Great Lakes Women's Network. We would be willing to do organizing in Ontario, articles in our newsletter, mailings, and to seek funds to carry out Network work in Canada, as well as dedicating staff time. While it is hard to place an exact amount we could probably initially offer at least \$1,000's worth of work and organizing in kind over the next six months.

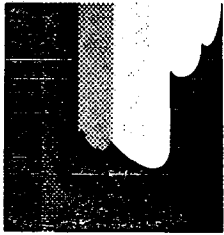
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**CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW ASSOCIATION**



Sarah Miller  
Co-ordinator



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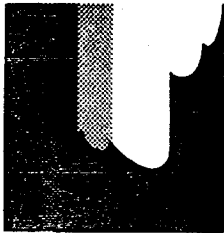
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