

Achievement Award

The Good Stewards

2007 *Lake Superior Magazine* Achievement Award honors The Earth Keepers Initiative

by Konnie LeMay

The Earth Keepers Initiative in Michigan's Upper Peninsula can measure its success by the ton:

- 1+ tons of unwanted pharmaceuticals collected for proper disposal in a 2007 "Clean Sweep."
- 320+ tons of defunct computers and other electronic items collected in 2006.
- 45+ tons of hazardous household products collected in 2005.
- 1+ tons of wild rice seed planted by at-risk teenagers in seven U.P. lakes, rivers or streams to help restore the region's wild rice beds.



That's 734,000 pounds worth of environmental impact just since the signing of the Earth Keepers Covenant in July 2004 by nine faith communities.

And that's not even counting the group's promotion of Lake Superior Day activities, annual beach sweeps and a recent regional energy summit through which 500 northern Michigan churches, temples, businesses and homes learned about how to conserve energy.

It is the blessed blending of environmental awareness with spiritual zeal - a winning combination that merits the 2007 *Lake Superior Magazine* Achievement Award.

The annual award, established in 1994, recognizes organizations or individuals who have improved the well-being of Lake Superior and its residents. This spiritual role model of Earth Keepers certainly has improved both the well-being and the environmental awareness of Upper Michigan's residents. It has offered a concrete way to



action.

The Rev. Jon Magnuson, a Lutheran pastor and head of the Cedar Tree Institute, articulated the idea of the Earth Keepers while in the car on a long road trip with Carl Lindquist of the Superior Watershed Partnership. The two were members of the Lake Superior Binational Forum and were traveling to a meeting in Ontario from their homes in Marquette, Michigan.



Courtesy Mackinac Island Recycling Program

“We were brainstorming,” says Carl. “That’s really where the idea was launched, on a long drive. Together we drafted this agreement, the Earth Keeper Covenant. That was key.”



The second Earth Day Clean Sweep by the Earth Keepers Initiative generated so much response in 19 U.P. communities like Marquette, top, and Mackinac Island, right, where cars are banned, that extra trucks had to be hired to haul away the computers and other electronic equipment.

“I thought that I could bring the interfaith coalition,” recalls Jon, “and then Carl said to me, ‘Let’s do it together.’”

Working together meant that environmental organizations such as the Watershed Partnership, which could raise necessary funds, could then tap the human resources of faith communities.

“A lot of people involved in their respective faiths have been waiting for an opportunity to do more (environmentally),” says Carl. “They wanted to be part of something bigger.”

The Earth Keeper Covenant was signed by nine different U.P. religious faith leaders: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Jewish, United Methodist, Baha’i, Unitarian Universalist and Zen Buddhist.

Since its origin, the Earth Keepers Initiative has now been embraced by more than 144 congregations (and growing) from 50 U.P. communities and includes as additional partners the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community and Northern Michigan University.

“Every week, we seem to add one or two,” says Carl.

“The Earth Keepers are the living example of how to build community through sharing ideas and resources that help make lifestyle changes

that improve the quality of life,” says Lissa Radke, U.S. coordinator of the Lake Superior Binational Forum.

Catholic Bishop Alex Sample, the youngest head of a U.S. diocese, says that the initiative also plays well with young people in his Marquette congregations.



COURTESY EARTH KEEPERS
The Manoomin Project teams at-risk teenagers with Native American guides to help restore wild rice beds through planting. The project has seeded beds in seven Upper Peninsula lakes, rivers or streams.

“Young people have a great passion for the environment and for protecting the environment. They want to preserve it, to keep it clean, to keep it beautiful, to keep it healthy. ... I think young people are touched by the fact that religious leaders are willing to step forward ... and to make these connections.”

The bishop also says that the inter-religious initiative gives a common point on which various groups can cooperate. “I don’t know of any faith tradition that teaches us it’s okay to trash the creation that God has given us. It’s neat to come together; it’s one of those things that we can do together.”

Paul Lehmborg, head priest of Lake Superior Zendo in Marquette, also expresses the connection with keeping Lake Superior and all of the earth healthy.

“In Buddhism, interconnection is important. ... You live on this earth now; what you are consists largely of your relationships with people and places.”

During its three years of existence, the Earth Keepers Initiative has been able to deliver volunteers while its environmental organization partners have arranged financial support for things like the Clean Sweeps. So with means to haul away the items and with the 20 or so church and other collection sites and about 300 volunteers, the program has made its tons of impact.



The first Lake Superior Day benefit concert was organized in 2007 by Earth Keepers in Marquette. It featured the Boreal Chamber Symphony and interpretive dance. DVDs of the concert are available through the Superior Watershed Partnership (www.superiorwatersheds.org).

“It’s staggering how effective it is,” says Carl Lindquist. “We can tap into hundreds of volunteers who are dependable at the drop of a hat. ...

“It helps us to get our costs down. It’s a fraction of what the state and federal government could do for the same event.”

It also creates a truly effective way to educate people about environmental issues. “It’s helpful because we can get our message out through churches all year long, in bulletins, etc. ... Outside of their church, they (faith members) may not give that issue a second thought, but when they’re getting the information through their church, it seems to work. They pay attention.”

Going forward, Jon Magnuson believes that the Earth Keepers Initiative will become integrated into the U.P. spiritual community ... and, he hopes, around the lake.

“My vision is that ... if you’re part of a faith community up here, you’re going to be part of an Earth Keeper culture.”

Earth Keeper Covenant’s 4 Pledges

- **To support The Cedar Tree Institute, the Central Lake Superior Watershed Partnership and The Nature Conservancy in providing resources for our local faith communities, educating us about environmental issues, inviting us into a more creative, responsible stewardship of creation.**



Carl Lindquist and Jon Magnuson

- **To initiate annual clean sweeps in collaboration with state and federal programs, encouraging our spiritual communities to collect and dispose of toxic chemicals that threaten our neighborhoods, towns and villages.**

- **To work alongside the Lake Superior Binational Forum, a citizen advisory body for the Canadian and U.S. governments, to coordinate a network – a spiritual shield – of faith communities committed to protecting air and water quality in the Great Lakes Basin.**

- **To encourage partnerships of our faith communities with American Indian tribes and agencies in Northern Michigan, addressing issues of environmental concern, sharing a common vision for future protection of the Earth’s natural resources.**

Past Award Winners

2006 Ray Clevenger and creation of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore

2005 Gaylord Nelson
2004 Nature Conservancy
2003 Davis Helberg, Retired Executive Director, Duluth Seaway Port Authority
2002 Elmer Engman, Diver, Founder of "Gales of November"
2001 Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
2000 Crisp Point Light Historical Society
1999 C. Patrick Labadie, Maritime Historian
1998 John and Ann Mahan, Authors/Publishers
1997 North of Superior Marina Marketing Association
1996 Cities of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan & Ontario
1995 Lake Superior Binational Forum
1994 Craig Blacklock, photographer

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