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## THE GREAT LAKES

The Laurentian Great Lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario—are visible from space. This world-class natural resource, shared by two countries, eight states and two provinces, has many commonly associated superlatives – that they contain approximately 20 percent of the world's available fresh surface water, that they are five of the top fifteen large lakes in the world – however, other facts are less commonly known.<sup>1</sup>

- The Great Lakes boast ~95,000 miles<sup>2</sup> in surface area and a drainage basin of over 195,000 miles<sup>2</sup>;
- Lake Superior is the largest of the Great Lakes in both surface area, 31,700 miles<sup>2</sup>, and volume, 2,935 miles<sup>3</sup>. It also contains the deepest point of all the lakes at 1,333 feet, or just shy of the Sears Tower's 1,450 feet;
- Including islands, the Great Lakes have almost 11,000 miles of shoreline, making them an important fourth coast for both the United States and Canada;
- Michigan's Great Lakes coastline, at 3,288 miles in length, is second only to Alaska in the United States;
- Together the lakes contain approximately, 5,500 miles<sup>2</sup> of water or enough, back of the envelope calculations suggest, to cover the lower 48 states in about nine and a half feet of water;
- Despite the volume of water in the lakes, only one percent is annually renewed through precipitation, the remainder is an artifact of the last ice age;
- Approximately 33,000,000 people live in the Great Lakes basin, about one tenth the US population and one quarter that of Canada;
- Most of these people rely upon the Great Lakes to provide their drinking water;
- The eight Great Lakes states were responsible for approximately 27% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

The lakes vary remarkably in natural resource base, population, and economic activities in their respective drainage basins.

See: Lake by Lake facts on the back

1. Source for the fact sheet: Michigan Sea Grant, 2000. Great Lakes Facts: The Great Lakes Basin; Lake Superior Basin, Lake Michigan Basin, Lake Huron Basin, Lake Erie Basin, Lake Ontario Basin (MICHU SG 00 401-406)

2. Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; Adapted from Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, 2004 (released 10/26/05) See: [www.bea.gov/bea/regional/gsp.htm](http://www.bea.gov/bea/regional/gsp.htm)



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# THE GREAT LAKES



## St. Mary's River

Although called "rivers" the Great Lakes connecting channels, St. Mary's, St. Clair, Detroit, Niagara and St. Lawrence Rivers are really straits. The St. Mary's River drops 24 feet from Lake Superior to Lake Huron. A group of four parallel locks, including the 1,000 foot Poe Lock, provide ships transit between the two lakes.

## Straits of Mackinac

Home of Mackinac Island and the "Mighty Mac," the world's largest suspension bridge, that joins Michigan's Upper and Lower peninsulas and is five miles long.



## Lake Superior

Home to less than two percent of the basin's population, Lake Superior is known for cold, clear water, rocky shoreline and agate beaches. Lake Superior is the largest of the Great Lakes in surface area and volume.



## Lake Michigan

This lake is the sixth largest freshwater lake in the world and the only Great Lake to lie entirely within U.S. borders. An engineering project to reverse the flow of the Chicago River early in the 20th century diverts approximately 3,200 cfs into the Mississippi River drainage to combat water quality problems that caused 90,000 people to die of waterborne disease during one outbreak in 1885 alone.



## St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair and Detroit River

This stretch of Great Lakes is both a commercial shipping and recreational boating hot spot. The Detroit River annually sees more than 8,000 commercial ships.



## Lake Erie

The shallowest, warmest and most nutrient-rich of the Great Lakes, Erie is also the most densely populated with the majority of its population found along its southern shore. Lake Erie is the only Great Lake to be entirely above sea level.

## Lake Huron

Sometimes termed the "forgotten lake," Lake Huron is remote, sparsely settled and ruggedly beautiful. When you include the shoreline of its 30,000 islands, Lake Huron has the longest shoreline of any of the Great Lakes and has the largest freshwater island in the world, with Manitoulin Island.

## Lake Ontario

The last in the Great Lakes chain, Ontario is also the smallest in surface area of the five lakes. In contrast to Lake Erie, Ontario's northern shore is heavily populated while its southern shore is rural and dominated by agriculture.

## Niagara River

This strait is marked by the romantic Niagara Falls, really three separate falls, the American Falls, the Bridal Veil, both on the U.S. side of the border and the Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side.

