

# Ohioans love their lakes, but are concerned for their future

August 16 2012, by Emily Caldwell

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Almost 41 percent of Ohioans have visited a lake, pond, river or creek in the state in the past year, and of those, nearly one-half usually spend their water-related recreational time at Lake Erie, according to preliminary findings in a new report.

These figures and other findings in the report suggest that Ohio residents value their lakes and rivers, and particularly [Lake Erie](#), as natural resources, but also help to clarify the risk that Ohioans face from contaminants in those same bodies of water, researchers say.

Among the risks: Some blue-green [algal blooms](#) release a toxin called microcystin, and E. coli as a fecal indicator bacterium is often elevated in Ohio waters. The state also warns against frequent consumption of certain fish caught in Ohio because of contamination from mercury and PCBs.

The report, released by the Ohio Lake Erie Commission, details preliminary results from two surveys: questions related to recreational water contact and [fish consumption](#) included in the 2012 Ohio [Behavioral Risk Factor](#) Surveillance System (BRFSS), and a separate survey of Ohioans' perceptions about Lake Erie.

The questions for each survey were designed by a research team led by Timothy Buckley, associate professor and chair of [environmental health sciences](#) at Ohio State University.

"Contact with surface waters is an established health risk factor," Buckley said. "For the first time in Ohio, we have a set of questions to establish the extent to which that contact is occurring as a basis for evaluating the risk."

Those questions are part of the Ohio BRFSS, an annual survey of adults conducted with support from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC). This survey is the primary source of state-specific information about health risk behaviors and health status among Ohio's resident population.

The second portion of the report, a perceptions survey of 523 Ohioans, was conducted online and is not representative of the population. In this perceptions survey, 83 percent of those questioned consider Lake Erie to be "very" or "critically" valuable as a natural resource. More than half reported that they would be willing to pay higher taxes to help protect Lake Erie's quality.

Buckley proposed the project to help clarify the connections between the quality of Ohio's water resources - especially Lake Erie - to the health and well-being of the state's residents. This is important, he said, because in comparison to the other Great Lakes, Lake Erie is particularly vulnerable to threats of climate change, population pressures and agricultural practices.

"Among researchers there is a new awakening to the interconnectedness of ecosystems and our natural environment to public health," Buckley said. "It is unclear, however, to what extent Ohio residents recognize this interconnectedness and are willing to invest in the protection of these natural systems. I think we take them for granted, and I think people may miss the connection between protection of natural resources and their own health."

The Ohio BRFSS survey's preliminary results detailed in this report included interviews from 1,663 randomly selected Ohio residents. Of those, 40.8 percent had come into contact in with a body of water in Ohio for work or recreation in the previous year.

Swimming, fishing, wading and boating were residents' top recreational uses. Almost a third of those who visited Ohio waters reported contact one to three times per month, and 24 percent indicated water contact at least weekly. Thirty-one percent reported having eaten fish from Lake Erie within the last year.

After data collection is complete for the year, BRFSS responses will be weighted by the CDC to ensure the data can be used to develop estimates that are representative of the state population.

For the second survey, gauging citizens' perceptions of Lake Erie, Buckley found participants through ResearchMatch.org, an online national registry connecting researchers with people who are willing to volunteer for studies. Of 3,070 Ohioans invited to participate, 523 completed the online questionnaire in early 2012. About a quarter of them lived within 50 miles of Cleveland, and responses tended to come from clusters near Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati.

"Although the perceptions survey was nonrepresentative, it captured broad variability in age and geographic location across the state. Persons living in ZIP codes nearer to Lake Erie tended to value it more strongly than persons living farther away," Buckley said.

Survey respondents indicated they value Lake Erie for its recreation and tourism opportunities, shipping and irrigation, and as a drinking water and fish source. Just more than half consider Lake Erie's current quality as a natural resource as good to excellent, but 43 percent consider the lake's future quality threatened, and 44 percent call its future quality

uncertain.

Almost two-thirds expressed concern for the safety of the drinking water and fish that currently come from Lake Erie, and almost half worried that it's unsafe to swim in the lake.

Nearly 56 percent of respondents would pay higher taxes to protect the lake and 91 percent said they would be willing to change their behavior - by increasing water conservation or reducing fertilizer use, for example - to protect Lake Erie as a natural resource.

"This is good. People value Lake Erie, they are concerned about its future, and they are willing to do something about it," Buckley said.

The results in this report are preliminary. Responses from the Ohio BRFSS assessment will be collected through the year, and researchers hope to build on these early results about citizens' perceptions of the lake as a natural resource. Complete data from the 2012 Ohio BRFSS will be available in 2013.

**More information:** The report is available online at the Ohio Lake Erie Commission's website: [lakeerie.ohio.gov/LakeErieProt...nd/FinalReports.aspx](http://lakeerie.ohio.gov/LakeErieProt...nd/FinalReports.aspx)

Provided by Ohio State University

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