Building the Food Web: A Freshwater Voyage

Our Education Team and marketing intern created an educational adventure film exclusively for our Schoolship classrooms that had their field trips disrupted this year. For schools who signed up but could not attend due to COVID-19, this three-part video takes students on a voyage under the surface of our freshwater treasure to learn about the producers, consumers, and decomposers of the Great Lakes food web. Discussion also centers around what it means to be a steward of this ecosystem. In addition to the film, teachers will receive three optional activities that were created to go along with the film that can be used to explore each of the concepts in a classroom or at home.

Changing Course in the Storm

“Storms draw something out of us that calm seas don’t.” - Bill Hybels
“I don’t just wish you rain, Beloved - I wish you the beauty of storms.” - John Geddes

What the world is experiencing through this pandemic is awful and I don’t wish this storm on anyone. However, what I want to communicate in this newsletter is that an organization, much like a captain and crew, is much better as a result of weathering a difficult storm. Storms have a way of making ship repairs, changes in practice, and course alterations readily apparent. While this storm is indeed far from over, it is obvious to me that ISEA is going to be better after going through it.

Rather than lament the fact that this season did not afford us the opportunity to conduct programming as we have grown accustomed to, we wish to celebrate the fact that the course alterations required by this storm have provided us with many opportunities to try new things and reach new audiences in the process. It’s been said that limitations foster creativity. I’m extremely proud that our staff, volunteers, and board utilized the extreme limitations we faced this year to foster wonderfully creative program solutions for all of our key constituencies in a safe and impactful manner. In addition to altering our programmatic course, we also reduced our spending and staffing, much like a captain and crew would reduce the amount of sail in a storm.

Not only has ISEA grown through the difficulties of this pandemic, but in some ways, the work of ISEA has gained importance to people as they cope with this storm. People are connecting with our natural resources, including the Great Lakes, in greater numbers. This confirms what I’ve long believed to be true: Water has tremendous power and we instinctively go there when we need to heal, contemplate, and celebrate life’s biggest moments. I’m confident that the connections people are making with our Great Lakes today will result in a heightened interest in the work of ISEA. A more receptive audience and a better-equipped organization will undoubtedly result in the fulfillment of our mission to protect the Great Lakes through education.

While I don’t wish this pandemic on anyone, and I certainly hope the storm subsides soon, the fact that we will come out the other side of this a stronger, more resilient, and more impactful organization is reassuring. I hope that reassurance provides you the same comfort as it does me.

~ Fred Sitkins, Executive Director
**Programming in the Storm**

The COVID-19 storm altered our 2020 programming but did not halt our progress. We had the opportunity to be creative in the ways that we safely engaged our volunteers, teachers and students, and the public. During the canceled Spring Schoolship season, due to schools not meeting in person, we worked on summer and fall programming that would maintain social distancing as much as possible. The following steps and procedures were adopted:

- Closed the Capt. Thomas M. Kelly Biological Station to the public.
- Staff worked from home. When able to return to the office, temperatures were (and continue to be) taken each morning and masks were (are) worn when staff is together.
- On the ship, capacity was reduced to 50%, masks were worn by all aboard, stations were reduced and sanitized between groups, hand sanitizer was available, and a COVID-19 waiver was signed by guests.

**Spring Schoolship**

We had a full 2020 Schoolship season scheduled prior to the onset of the pandemic. Many of these schools rescheduled for the fall or next spring.

**Summer Public Programming**

COVID-19 erased our travel and overnight schedules but allowed us to focus on local public day sail scheduling. This summer, there were 20 public sails (with 258 passengers), including free member, community appreciation, and teacher appreciation sails. All three Fall Color sails are at capacity.

**Fall Great Lakes Discovery Schoolship Program**

Our Great Lakes Discovery program was adapted for those schooling at home and in learning “pods” during the COVID-19 crisis. Eight programs were offered in September and October with over 75 children and parents participating.

**Additional Programming**

Professors from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Michigan used our lab and dormitory space for their research projects. Through an NAAEE/NOAA grant, SEEDS staff received hands-on environmental STEM training from ISEA which will be used at their after-school 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

**Financing in the Storm**

While programming continued this summer, it was done at a loss. Schoolship revenue was eliminated, public sail and charter revenue was greatly reduced, and our dormitory space was not utilized as we had anticipated.

We are thankful to our committed grant funders who allowed us to extend school scholarship funding to next season and/or use the funding to adjust programming. Grants to provide programs around the Great Lakes have been extended to future years. Our generous donors also continued their support during our Membership Drive.

On the expense side, we reduced programmatic and office spending. In July, staffing was reduced to coincide with the reduced programming and office traffic.

Storms come in many forms and will always be a part of our lives. Regardless of the storm, the importance of protecting our Great Lakes remains. ISEA will stand fast in our mission to educate through any storm we encounter. Here are ways in which you can join us to weather this and other storms:

- Create an endowment with the income designated to ISEA
- Support ISEA through your required minimum distribution (RMD)
- Donate to our year-end ask starting in November
- Complete a matching gift form from your employer or civic organization
- Donate your boat or nautical items for our Flea Market and Boat Sales
Staffing in the Storm

Year-Round Staff
At the beginning of the pandemic, all 10 staff members worked from home. We had many Google Meet meetings! We began discussions on what kind of remote or social distancing programs/activities we could offer and how to run our programs to follow CDC guidelines when it was possible to do so.

ISEA applied for and received a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan and kept all staff employed through the end of July. As part of the PPP process, we are working on getting this loan forgiven. Once we realized that programming for summer and fall would be limited, staffing was decreased to seven staff members.

Summer Intern Staff
With the reduced programming on the ship this year, we hired one education intern instead of two. Logan Waggoner worked on data cleanup and entry, created social distancing physical activities, used the GoPro and ROV to capture underwater footage of our sampling, and assisted in creating the video for teachers. Gavin MacDonald, our marketing intern, was literally behind the camera and computer screen as he captured and created photo and video content for specific projects and future needs. Both interns began their employment with ISEA remotely, moving to campus in mid-June.

Engaging Volunteers
Volunteer engagement is the foundation of our programming. Volunteers give their time to instruct our programs, crew our ship, input data into the database, keep our campus looking beautiful, share our work with the community, and so much more. One of the hardest parts of these past few months was not getting to see our volunteers in person.

To stay connected in 2020, we created online volunteer training and Q&A, hosted an outdoor spring campus cleanup, offered educational programming on the ship and on shore August-October, hosted two volunteer appreciation sails, and ran our Nautical Flea Market and Boat Sales. We are also in the process of creating a new volunteer recruitment video featuring interviews from a handful of current volunteers. We miss seeing our volunteers and will continue to provide opportunities to engage virtually this winter!

Summer Intern Experience by Gavin MacDonald

As many of my friends and classmates had their internships canceled, I was incredibly lucky to be able to spend the summer in Suttons Bay. My time at Inland Seas was an experience I will never forget. I dove right in to helping ISEA build its photo and video library, beginning with planning projects virtually due to the pandemic. Once I was on campus, I was able to capture hundreds of promotional photos and hours of video content with the help of the entire team. We even completed an educational video about the Great Lakes food web so that teachers would be able to give students a glimpse of the Schoolship experience in their online teaching.

While I did not get to see ISEA at its full potential of running daily Schoolships and public programs, I met some incredible people with a passion for stewarding the Great Lakes that is unmatched. With the leadership of Fred and the “dream team” of ISEA employees, Inland Seas will be giving kids unforgettable experiences post-pandemic and for generations after that. It was an honor to be a part of such an amazing organization.

Gavin is on the right in the intern photo above. You can view some of his work in our Going to the Water Video Series at schoolship.org/news-events/gttw-video-series.
Inland Seas Education Association
Executive Director’s Newsletter

What’s Inside

Changing Course in the Storm
How ISEA is Weathering the Global Pandemic

Read about the changes ISEA has made in our programs, finances, and staffing to weather this storm.

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