Inland Seas Education Association
2025 Program Evaluation Report

Inland Seas Education Association (ISEA) was founded in 1989 as a non-profit charitable organization whose mission is to inspire a lifetime of Great Lakes curiosity, stewardship, and passion in people of all ages.

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1. Total Program Season Summary

The 2025 program season was largely successful in both quantity and quality of programming, and most categories showed improvement towards our strategic plan goals for the final year of the five-year plan. The 2021-2025 Strategic Plan outlines target goals for 2026, and the 2025 season saw meaningful progress in the right direction, placing the 2026 final goal a very achievable step away for the coming season.

In addition to the continued progress towards these standing goals, several entirely new elements were introduced to the program schedule in 2025. This past year marked a commitment to shoreside programming, with the investment in the new campus property purchases, development of plans for the newly acquired Leo Creek property, and creation of new and updated Watershed programming like Sea Lamprey Dissection and wetland sampling on our own campus wetland area. Public outreach increased drastically this year as well, in a large part due to the 2025 sailing season being a Tall Ship Festival season. Two ships allowed for an immense amount of outreach, both at new locations as well as through day sails and deck tours.

Overall, our sail programs increased, and the number of students reached through sail programs increased. However, shoreside programs such as the Watershed and ROV programs, declined from the previous 2024 season. As our Schoolship sails continue to grow, we will seek to continue the upward momentum of the sail programs in 2026 while improving participation in Watershed and ROV programs, in accordance with our 2026 Strategic Plan goals and planned campus expansions. After 36 years of sailing programs, Inland Seas Education Association (ISEA) envisions a campus with a program season that extends beyond the sailing season, and continues to educate students of all ages about the water that connects the lakes, the land, and life around the Great Lakes.

2025 Season By the Numbers

	2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
Program Type	**Programs**	**People**	**Programs**	**People**	**Programs**	**People**	**Programs**	**People**	**Programs**	**People**
Schoolship Programs (including Fall Detroit)	43	1,403	106	2,647	101	2,467	106	2,698	109	2,826
ROV & Engineer and Explore Programs	19	396	33	832	20	480	30	774	17	363
Watershed Exploration	-	-	21	269	40	536	20	335	12	145
ISEA Public Programs	29	647	21	530	30	794	43	916	21	411
Overnight Sailing Programs	4	36	5	30	4	33	6	51	4	39
Single-Day Sail Programs (all non-TSA charters)	45	995	42	926	48	1035	82	2066	45	1,092
Inland Seas Away Ports	8 ports	-	4 ports	-	5 ports	-	4 ports	-	6 ports	-
Alliance Away Ports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2 ports	-	2 ports	-	3 ports	-
Tall Ship Festival Ports (every 3rd year)	-	-	2 ports	1,133	-	-	-	-	3 ports: 39 sails, 6 deck tours	4,640 total reached: 1,616 on sails, 3,024 on deck
Teacher Professional Development Programs	3	54	3	55	6	86	2	33	5	71
Total	**143**	**3,531**	**231**	**6,422**	**249**	**5,431**	**289**	**6,873**	**258**	**9,756**

Table 1. Summary of 2025 educational programs compared to previous years. Historical values provided since 2021.

2025 Season by Percentages

	2023		2024		2025	
Program Type	**Programs**	**Participants**	**Programs**	**Participants**	**Programs**	**Participants**
Schoolship Programs (including Fall Detroit)	34%	36%	37%	39%	43%	29%
ROV & Engineer and Explore Programs	7%	7%	10%	11%	7%	4%
Watershed Exploration	14%	8%	7%	5%	5%	2%
ISEA Public Programs	10%	12%	15%	13%	8%	4%
Overnight Sailing Programs	1%	<1%	2%	<1%	1%	<1%
Single-Day Sail Programs (all charters)	16%	15%	28%	30%	18%	11%
Tall Ship Festival Ports	-	-	-	-	18%	48%
Teacher Professional Development	2%	1%	<1%	<1%	1%	<1%

Table 2. Summary of 2025 educational programs and people, shown in percentages, compared to previous years. Historical values provided through 2023.

The 2025 percentage values in Table 2 reflect the portions of total Programs, and Participants, of each type of category, shown in tallied numbers in Table 1. The 2025 sailing season saw us move one step closer to our organizational target goals for program allocation, for each respective category.

Inland Seas Education Association is an educational institution first, dedicated to providing hands-on experiences on the Great Lakes to instill positive memories and a sense of stewardship in students and participants all across the Great Lakes watershed. As such, our Strategic Plan outlines targeted percentages for each type of sail, to ensure we are not falling short of our organizational vision. Education is our primary purview and is our first priority for programs, followed by public programs and charters, and this is represented in both the target goals for program distribution as well as the actual distribution of programs in 2025, shown above. In addition to measuring our programs by individual participants and total number of programs offered, we also measure by ‘sail days’, whole days in a given sailing season dedicated to each category of programming types offered.

Sail Days and Strategic Audience

Sail days are a metric of how ship time is allocated during the sailing season. ISEA seeks to reflect our values in the percentages of our programs allocated to different types of programs. With this year being a Tall Ship Festival year, Tall Ship sails are included in the Public Programs category. Sailing days in 2025 began on April 22, and ended on October 11.

Sail Days Devoted to:	**Primarily K-12 Audience**		**Teacher Audience**	**Regional Audience**		**Charter and Partner Audiences**	
Strategic Audience:	Schoolship Programming (Schools)	Educational Charters (All-ages)	Teachers (PD, appreciation)	General Audience (Public Programs)	Volunteers (training, transit, appreciation), Members, Donors	College/ University Partners	Group Charters (non-Instructional, TSA)
2022	65	3	1	26	24	14	4
2022 (of 137 days)	47%	2%	<1%	19%	18%	10%	3%
2023	74	26	1	17	21	17	6
2023 (of 162 days)	46%	16%	<1%	10%	13%	10%	4%
2024	64	32	1	23	40	19	12
2024 (of 191 days)	34%	17%	<1%	12%	21%	10%	6%
	51% *combined*						
2025	**67**	**31**	**2**	**23**	**44**	**5**	**27**
2025 (of 199 days)	**34%**	**16%**	**1%**	**11%**	**22%**	**2%**	**14%**
	50% ***combined***						
2026 Goal (of 190 days)	**57%**		**2%**	**18%**	**11%**	**7%**	**5%**

Table 3. Sail days from 2022 - 2025, compared to ISEA 2026 strategic goal. The total days utilized for sail programs in 2025 was 199.

Tall Ship Festival events account for some deviation in numbers; The large portion of the season spent at the Festival events resulted in slightly diminished educational and public sails, with outsized transit and group charter percentages. Most importantly though, the 2025 season with both boats demonstrated an increased capacity for programming, which can be expected to be more aligned with the 2026 goals when there is no Tall Ships Festival. ISEA is on track to meet the ambitious 2026 programming goals for both making the most of the sailing season, and in alignment with the desired program priority percentages! In extending and better utilizing this season, from 137 days in 2022 to 199 in 2025, ISEA has managed significant programmatic growth, at a time when most science, education, and non-profit groups are struggling.

2. K-12 School Programs (Schoolship and Shoreside Programs)

K-12 audiences are the primary demographic targeted by ISEA programs, reached primarily through the spring and fall Schoolship programs, as well as our season extension land-based Watershed Exploration programs. Grade distribution of K-12 audiences who attended our 2025 programs are noted in Table 3. To evaluate the K-12 programs, teachers were invited to complete an evaluation form. The results of the evaluation are outlined in the sections below.

Grade Distribution	Schoolship		ROV		Watershed Exploration	
	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025
K-3	2	2	0	0	1	1
4-5	42	45	9	4	2	0
Middle School	28	27	11	9	10	5
High School	29	32	8	4	7	2
Adult/College	5	3	2	0	0	4
TOTAL	106	109	30	17	20	12

Table 4. Grade distribution of K-12 programs, 2024 and 2025.

Scholarships:

ISEA delivered 56 schoolship programs to schools that self-identified as Title 1 in 2025. Title 1 schools are institutions that receive federal funding to assist students from low-income families, and being able to offer funding to support Title 1 schools in joining our programs is a significant part of our organizational goal about diversifying access to our programs.

Regarding scholarships, over $40,000 was awarded in schoolship program scholarships to schools that may have otherwise been unable to attend our programs. 64 of our 94 schoolship programs in Grand Traverse Bay were awarded scholarships, 68% of our total programming audience. Additionally, 100% of our autumn schoolship programs in Detroit received scholarships to participate,

For shore based programming, 100% of watershed programs received scholarship support. The four programs connected to Northern Michigan College (NMC), either offered as a class through their extended education or as a module provided in an NMC college course, were not scholarship eligible and are not included in that percentage. 7 of the 17 ROV programs received scholarships as well, representing 41% of eligible ROV programs, which is consistent with the 43% of ROV programs that received funds in 2024.

Together, 69% of K-12 programming eligible for scholarships were subsidized, amounting to over $46,000 in program scholarships for participating schools. This is a slight increase from the year prior, with 2024 having a total K-12 scholarship rate of 63%. Inland Seas Education Association is proud to fundraise for scholarships, which help to enable broader participation in our programming by offsetting the full cost and thereby minimizing financial barriers for schools.

2.A: Schoolship

Between the 2025 spring and fall seasons, ISEA delivered 109 Schoolship programs to 2,826 participants. This is the largest schoolship season since COVID, and the continued increase of programs has much to thank the addition of *S/V Alliance* for, which permitted us to offer two ships for our busy spring season on Grand Traverse Bay, as well as have one ship in Detroit for two weeks in September. NextGen sails continue to be the bulk of programming, with 39. This entire 2025 season saw just 3 Early Elementary and 13 Diving Deeper programs. Spring continues to be the busier season, largely due to the challenges of teachers booking for the autumn, which would require bookings be made many months in advance when many do not necessarily know for certain which class or grade they will be teaching.

Detroit schoolship sails continue to be a highlight of our programming calendar, and accounted for 15 programs in the autumn. The geographical reach enables us to reach audiences and partner with guest educators to offer programs we could never do on our own, to students who would not otherwise be able to experience a schoolship sail. This year, we also for the first time spent two weeks in Detroit.

Schoolship Evaluation

Feedback on schoolship experiences were overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of responses indicating the quality of teaching on their Schoolship experience was excellent. Feedback for specific stations was fairly clear; Among students, Fish was the clear favorite, with 35% of classes selecting this station, and Plankton was close behind with 30%. Benthos was a distant third place at 18%, while Seamanship, Water Quality, and Microplastics were all single-digits percentages. Among teachers, Plankton was the clear favorite, with 40% of teachers voting for this station alone. Benthos comes as a distant second pick at 18%, and Seamanship at 15%. While all stations got at least one vote in their favor, Microplastics was notable for being the clear least favorite among teachers, and one of the less-exciting stations for students.

When asked what teachers appreciated most about their Schoolship program experience, the number one most common answer was the ISEA team, with over half of responses specifically mentioning the staff / crew / volunteers for their passion and teaching excellence. 25% of responses cited communication prior to arrival and organization of the program. The material and lessons themselves, and the hands-on nature of the program, was the third most common response. This speaks to the incredible standard ISEA staff uphold in delivering programming, in making the schoolship experience an impactful and fun learning opportunity that is easy for teachers to bring students out for. An additional note was that in the 2024 feedback survey, zero (of the nine responding) groups said they had watched the Safety Video prior to their arrival. In 2025, 70% of 40 responding groups said they did watch the video with their class before their trip, a significant improvement demonstrating the effectiveness of our communication prior to group arrival.

Of the 40 responses received from teachers regarding our Schoolship programming, every single one of them was highly positive. 100% of responses said they would recommend ISEA programs to others, and 100% said they would like to bring their class back to ISEA for a program again. Some expressed concern about grant availability for transportation and field trips, which made it difficult to plan for, but zero teachers walked away with an experience they were unhappy with.

Future considerations:

Among students in particular, there is a direct correlation between how likely students were to select a station their favorite, and how hands-on that station was for students participating, which both underscores our organizational mission and highlights potential places for improvement. Benthos, Fish, and Plankton are extremely hands-on stations, with students taking and analyzing live samples, and offering student-led learning

through their exploration-based structure. Most of these stations is then a tactile “what do we have here?” format that allows for students to set the direction of inquiry, while instructors are acting largely as facilitators. On the other hand, Microplastics, Seamanship, and Water Quality are much more structured and leave less room for individual student inquiry. Finding ways to introduce more hands-on exploration would likely increase student enthusiasm for these stations.

Student feedback is an element that is missing. While we conduct verbal and informal assessments of what students learn and which stations they enjoy during the sailing program, recorded feedback comes to us from the teacher feedback report. In other words, we’re hearing it through the teacher. Recording direct student feedback could be a point of development in the future to improve programs.

97% of teachers reported an awareness of the lessons currently available on the ISEA website, that can be used before or after programs to support a trip. However, significantly less teachers make use of them, evidenced by click rates on the web pages and teacher reporting prior to arrival. Some of these lessons are outdated, some are excellent, but updating lessons on the website to use with a schoolship program, or making those lessons easier for teachers to implement, might be worthwhile.

While the Safety Video was watched by 70% of reporting groups prior to arrival, several comments stated the video needed updating, citing either incorrect information, different processes on the boat, or just a very outdated feel. The bathrooms were one such example given, as evidently the head in the video is different than the one onboard.

In all, Schoolship is going very well, indicated by soaring approval ratings and steadily increasing participation numbers despite the challenges to budget and transportation impacting many similar organizations to us. Focusing on continual minor improvements while maintaining what makes Schoolship so successful, which is the quality of the program, the hands-on nature, and the excellent communication and teaching of the staff, is key to both past and continued success.

2.B: ROV Engineer and Explore

In 2025, ISEA delivered 17 ROV programs to 363 participants, down significantly from 2024. Of those that participated, over half of all teachers who brought their students out for an ROV program chose to combine an ROV program with a Schoolship program, creating a full field trip day. This significant reduction reflects a sharp break from previous trendlines of steady growth in ROV program interest and participation.

The ROV kits showed significant wear towards the end of each season, with both spring and fall programs the kits experiencing exponentially more technical issues as the season went on. Broken and exposed wires, sediment in the propellers, disconnected wires, blown fuses, and inconsistent battery packs were the most common issues.

Some minor changes were introduced to some of the programs, to minimize student frustration and encourage modification of the ROV in between challenges. Having student groups receive new challenges as they complete their previous ones, rather than moving between challenges as an entire class, requires more volunteers and staff to facilitate but resulted in a much smoother experience for students. Excited students are incentivized to move quickly, while student groups experiencing issues don’t have the frustration and embarrassment of all the other groups being done watching them impatiently before everyone can move on.

ROV Evaluation

Despite the decline in participation, those who did participate expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback about their program experience. ISEA received survey responses from eight teachers regarding their ROV program, with 100% expressing Strong Agreement or Agreement that the program taught their students about the engineering process, teamwork, and that their students were engaged for the full duration of the program. 100% of respondents also specifically stated they enjoyed the student-centric problem solving the program entailed, working through issues as a team towards a stated goal. Some specific teacher quotes worth sharing regarding their favorite part of the ROV program:

- "Watching a team that had imploded fight their way back and become a well oiled machine. Big smiles for that one. Some of the best growth comes through adversity."
- "How well organized this was. I appreciated how engaged the students were the whole time.
- "This is an amazing experience and our 5th year students look forward to it each year."

Just one respondent out of eight said that providing content standards for the ROV program would have helped in preparing for the lesson. The remaining 87% stated either Neutral or Strong Disagreement, that content standards would not have helped at all. This could imply either that teachers are not participating in the ROV program to fulfill science standards, or that little preparation and lesson tie-ins are being made in the classroom to ROV lessons. Either way, it is worth noting that several respondents in the fall season stated verbally the reason for their participating in the ROV program was because they were already coming up for a Schoolship program, so they felt they might as well make a full day of it, and while they liked the ROV program they would have been interested in any additional program we had to offer.

Future Considerations

The professional grade ROVs are also not utilized much in current programming, due to (1) difficulty of learning and the small screen not being suitable for an entire class, and (2) lack of familiarity among staff with the equipment. However, this could be a source of motivation for student groups to complete challenges, if they were offered the opportunity to try their hand at a professional ROV. The anticipated group size of a single group utilizing the ROV rather than a whole class crowding around the small screen would work logistically as well. Additionally, one teacher regarded the program as "excellent" in their review but also observed their kids getting frustrated at equipment failure in the ROV kits. For all these reasons, we are in 2026 improving staff and volunteer familiarity with maintenance and repair of ROV kits to ensure smoother programs.

ROV participation was the lowest since even before COVID. Across the state, field trip dollars are being cut and state funding for transportation is not being renewed, and yet our schoolship programs are thriving. This is not the case for ROV programs. Understanding root causes for the steep drop off in ROV program participation is key to the future of this program offering. Participating groups responding to the survey all ranked their ROV experience highly, which seems to imply the issue is not rooted in the quality of the program. But whether it is a funding, curriculum, field trip, timing with bus drivers, program overlap with similar opportunities in the area, or indeed a retention issue due to programming is unclear. Suggestions to make challenges more engaging, ecology-oriented, unique, or consistent are currently planned for January 2026.

2.C: Watershed Exploration

ISEA delivered 12 shoreside Watershed Exploration programs to 145 participants. These Watershed programs included a combination of programs delivered at ISEA's campus in Suttons Bay and in Traverse City through Northwestern Michigan College. Newly offered this year was the Sea Lamprey edition of Dissect the Watershed, developed in-house. Similar to ROV, this category again saw a decline in participation, continuing a sharp trend downward from its peak in 2023. Unlike 2024, watershed programs were not offered offsite through SEEDS, which is one large contributing factor; The absence of the grant-funded SEEDS programs makes the

decline appear much larger than it would otherwise. Regardless, it is worth noting that of schools that participated in a Watershed program, none were further than a 15 mile radius from the ISEA campus.

Watershed programs available for participation in 2025, and the number of each facilitated, was as follows:

- Dissect the Watershed: Sea Lamprey Dissection - 3 programs
- Navigate the Great Lakes - 1 program
- Watershed Watchers - 5 programs
- Study the Stream - 3 programs

ISEA offered two Watershed courses through the Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) Extended Education program, for adults to participate in. This was a trial model of adult program offerings, for which we got positive feedback. Though each program saw about four attendees, participants reported high satisfaction with their experience and stated they would come back for another. The classes counting towards the Northern Naturalist certificate credit seemed to account for several of the participants joining us, who we had never met before. A few other participants were longtime volunteers who did not otherwise have an opportunity to engage with programs like Lamprey Dissection.

Additionally, ISEA trialed the Dissect the Watershed: Sea Lamprey Dissection program as a part of a college class, offered on NMC's campus. The college class enjoyed participating in this program, and interest was expressed by several other college classes in this as well.

Watershed Exploration Evaluation

Feedback on Watershed programs was all overwhelmingly positive. 100% of responses Strongly Agreed that ISEA prepared them and communicated well before their trip. 100% of responses stated their students had a meaningful learning experience. 100% of responses agreed their students learned the value of stewardship and Great Lakes resources. 100% of responses agreed students in Watershed programming made connections to classroom content.

All responses highlighted time spent at Leo Creek as the favorite part of any program for students, and that the hands-on explorational learning allowed students to learn on their own pace and terms. Additionally, the survey question specifically asking for suggested improvements received responses that expressly stated they were very satisfied and had no changes to recommend. Some quotes from teacher responses include:

- "This trip was fantastic. The staff adapted their program to meet the needs of my students. The children were so engaged in all the activities."
- "I enjoyed the fact that we got split into groups and got small group experiences"
- "The program was hands on and all but one of my students were fully engaged. Students were thinking and acting like scientists."
- "Julie, Chris and Lauren were outstanding!"

Future Considerations

The 2023 Watershed season saw 40 programs, reduced to 20 programs in 2024, and down again to 12 programs in 2025. In both 2023 and 2024, ISEA benefitted from limited grant-funded programs with SEEDS, and as stated above the absence of these programs in 2025 is one large part for the decline in numbers. Given the glowing reviews of program participants, and the downward trend in program participation, other reasons for declining program numbers are unlikely to include program content. It could be a survey bias, as individuals who don't come on a program are not offering feedback, but it is likely external factors that are contributing.

These could include cost limitations of travel, too many similar programs, or lack of awareness, among others. As mentioned in the Scholarship section, 100% of scholarship eligible programs received at least partial scholarship funding.

Given that all Watershed program participants are fairly local, and the loss of participation has come largely from schools that were driving from further away, it seems to imply our challenge is transportation. All Watershed participants had a driving time of roughly an hour or less to our programs.

Watershed programming is strongly mission-aligned with our ISEA organizational goals, fits nicely within our program suite and calendar, and is a subject the staff and leadership of ISEA are passionate about; Doubly so, what with the new investments in the campus and Leo Creek property to enable the expansion of Watershed programs. Some actions moving forward might include:

- Develop programs to make them more unique, and better utilizing unique facets of the “place” they are occurring on; I.e., vernal pools in Leo Creek, the constructed wetland areas on campus, special seasonal events like the fish runs in autumn or potentially fairy shrimp.
- Connect Watershed programs with local area curriculum to encourage participation from local schools, for whom transportation is not as much of a barrier.
- Work with local organizations that may be able to better incentivize travel for schools coming from further away. Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, or the Michigan DNR, both have federal and state grant funding for transportation that may be able to be paired with programming from another entity. Both the Nature Awaits program by the Michigan DNR, as well as contacts at SLBE, have expressed interest in working with ISEA in some form.
- Better advertise unique programs like Sea Lamprey Dissection, to the niche target audience that would be most interested; High school and college biology and anatomy classes, mainly. This is a unique experience that very few other places can offer, but it is not widely known that we offer it as a program. Interested classes may simply not be aware of its existence.
- Improve programming options for very young ages: Build a program intended for early elementary, not just adapted for it, and market it accordingly.

3. Summer Programs

The summer season allows us to deliver ship-based programs across the Great Lakes while also offering public programs from our home ports in Suttons Bay and Traverse City. Two ships allows an increase in capacity for both, while providing overnight program opportunities as well.

3.A: Tall Ship Festival 2025

2025 being a Great Lakes Tall Ship Festival year, we made stops for public programs at three locations: Duluth, Alpena, and Detroit. Duluth in particular was a great showing for ISEA, as we sent both *S/V Alliance* and *S/V Inland Seas* to the festival; *Alliance* for sail-aways, and *Inland Seas* for deck tours.

In the previous two Tall Ship Festival years, ISEA made it to two ports, contacting just over 1,000 people total each time over the course of roughly 28 sails. In 2025, ISEA blew these numbers out of the water, making it to three ports, contacting 1,616 people over the course of 39 sails, and conducting deck tours reaching an additional 3,024 people. In total, Tall Ship Festival 2025 brought 4,640 people to ISEA, often who only approached for ship-based reasons, which meant further reach with a new audience.

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. Our deck tours were the only ship at any port that permitted guests to go below deck, and we also had a plankton sample on the microscope for guests to look at, which was a source of great delight. Visitors frequently said they felt like they got a “two-for-one” tour, in getting to see the boat and interact with the science equipment. Similar feedback was received regarding sail-away experiences, where staff were happy to answer questions about the boat as well as Great Lakes ecology, and a plankton sample on the microscope was typically available to anyone interested or who simply stumbled upon it while admiring the *Alliance* main cabin.

3.B: Away Port Charters

This past summer we provided vessel-based programs on three of the five Great Lakes, specifically Superior, Michigan, and Huron, as well as the Detroit River. Away ports for the 2025 season included Duluth, Hessel, Houghton, Alpena, Beaver Island, and Detroit.

Of our away-ports this 2025 season, Tall Ships America sail-aways at Beaver Island, Duluth, Detroit, and Alpena were particularly successful, selling out every seat on every sail and having dozens of individuals requesting for us to come back again in 2026. Our Beaver Island programs also included a charter sail with teachers and students from the school on the island, which was particularly well-received despite the challenging weather conditions. Sail-aways at other ports, like Hessel, were still popular and still sold most of the tickets on offer.

Detroit River Story Lab, in partnership with the University of Michigan and the Michigan DNR’s Outdoor Adventure Center, accounted for two weeks of excellent programs in Detroit. Guest educators joined us on board from a variety of partners, including Huron-Clinton Metroparks, Michigan Maritime Museum, MI SeaGrant, Detroit Historical Society, Detroit Outdoors, Vibes with the Tribes, Audubon Society, Historic Fort Wayne, and Museum of African American history, among many others. This incredible program accounted for 22 sails, adapting place-based education to suit local audiences with local guest educators, who can tell stories and relate to local Detroit audiences in ways we alone could not.

3.C: Overnight Programming

Overnight multi-day programs are individually catered and specially built programs, each built uniquely for the participating group to offer the most in-depth and impactful experience on a sailing ship. They require much more time and effort in recruiting, planning, and delivering, but provide participants a Great Lakes experience we can say with confidence they will remember for the rest of their lives. This year we delivered four overnight programs, totaling 14 days and reaching 39 participants. Our 2025 overnight programs delivered were:

Chicago Yacht Club Foundation Youth Overnight

Suttons Bay to Suttons Bay - 5 days - 9 participants

This all-girl program is a leadership-based youth sail, for some participants the first time they had ever left Chicago, been out on Lake Michigan, or seen the Milky Way. While some science sampling is conducted, the focus is more on sailing; Participants are taught to crew the boat by day three.

Program Feedback:

- All participants responded Strongly Agree, to the question “Would you recommend this experience to others?”
- All participants responded with a 4 or 5 (out of 5), to the question “How motivated are you to act on behalf of the Great Lakes?”
- “[This experience] makes me want to change my lifestyle a bit to help Lake Michigan.”
- “I really believe learning in real life or hands-on experiences impact your life and you as an individual over anything you could do in a classroom.”
- In reference to the 5 min walk alone on one of our shore landings: “I didn’t expect something big… but I am feeling so alive right now. Spending time on the phone doesn’t give this special feelings… people never have enough time to look at waves.”

Young Women in STEM

Traverse City to Traverse City - 3 days - 9 participants

This program explores the health of the Great Lakes with science sampling, at the direction and inquiry of the participants. They pick subjects to research, and allow their chosen topics and methods to inform the sail itinerary.

Michigan Tech Summer Youth Programs “Ship to Shore: Freshwater Ecology”

Houghton to Marquette - 3 days - 9 participants

Students select a science research question, and sail three days conducting their research along the way. Results can vary tremendously depending on the subject and method the students choose, as well as natural variation of the season or weather, but this is part of the student-centric learning experience.

Women on the Water

Traverse City to Traverse City - 3 days - 12 participants

This adult-only sail offers participants a science and sailing experience at a pace of their choosing. Science sampling regarding the health of the lakes and learning to crew the boat are conducted, and participants can help set the itinerary.

Program Feedback:

- The crew is strongly praised in feedback, for enthusiasm, support, and skill. All reviews gave crew and staff a full 5/5 points for being knowledgeable and passionate.
- The diversity of offerings to participate in is a highlight (sailing and science and operations).
- Clarifying program expectations of science and sailing may be helpful.

3.D: Public Programming

Two vessels operating full-time this season allowed us to have a more consistent public sail schedule from Suttons Bay and Traverse City. Through this, ISEA offered 21 public sails reaching 411 participants. Public program options included 3-hr Great Lakes Discovery sails, 2-hr Fishes of Lake Michigan and Steady the Ship sails, and specialty 2-hr Fall Color sails. The one planned public Night Sail was cancelled due to weather. While these numbers for public sails are half of the number of programs delivered in 2024, the public programs conducted through the Tall Ship Festival more than make up for the outreach.

Evaluation Results

Our 2025 post-sail survey received 45 responses, a significant increase in rate of return from 2024, which indicates the measures taken to tighten the post-sail survey and increase responsiveness were successful. Responses were positive across the board, with respondents rating their experience on a scale of 1-5 (5 indicating strongly agreeing with the question).

Average response to the following survey questions are below:

- How knowledgeable were Inland Seas' staff and volunteers? **4.81**
- How passionate were Inland Seas' staff and volunteers about Great Lakes issues? **4.98**
- How helpful were Inland Seas' staff and volunteers? **5.00**
- How beneficial was the program information to you? **4.61**
- How was the balance of "learning to fun" that you experienced? **4.70**
- How was your overall experience? **4.80**
- How likely are you to recommend this experience to others? **4.86**

Positive written comments included:

- "Information presented was appropriate for all ages. As a former Michigander, it is concerning that we share some of the same destructive invasive species. My fishing waders are soaking in disinfectant since we got back."
- "Science educator Julie was amazing and her enthusiasm rubbed off on all of us. This team truly does an outstanding job representing what Inland Seas is all about. "
- "It was the highlight of my summer so far! I'll definitely recommend it to others. Great job ISEA!"
- "This was an unexpected, but wonderful experience for the whole family - adults and kids alike. The hands-on experiments were interesting and very educational…as a college educated adult I learned a lot that I didn't expect. Learning line handling and sailing skills was fun too. The staff are friendly and engaging - it's clearly evident they love what they do and care about our fragile environment. The captain piloting the ship was jaw dropping skillful in maneuvering the ship. Highly recommend this sailing and discovery cruise! Definitely will do it again when other family are here visiting. Well done!"
- "The crew… accommodated the various experience levels and interests with professional presentations, age appropriate Q&A, situational awareness, and joy, not to mention a first aid kit. Their stellar reputation is well earned and deserved."

Suggestions for improvement included:

- "I have to admit, getting up from the relaxation station to move on was difficult!"

- “Our threesome would have preferred more time just enjoying the sail… there was a bit too much teaching.”
- “The science was good, but just a little bit more of enjoying the ride would have made the experience a little better.”
- “Would like a few more minutes at each station”
- “We were seated at the back of the boat and couldn’t see or hear any of the initial program involving collection of samples. Person leading program should be using some kind of voice amplification system or not have people at back of boat initially. There were too many people on the tour and boat was crowded, making it difficult to move around or see. Thought we would get more detailed info on sailing.”
- “Absolutely nothing came up in the net when it was cast out. Just seemed they could have tried again. How can you get nothing. At least more should have been said about that. I made a big deal about that being the program.”

Future Considerations

Roughly 25% of reviews specifically praised the staff and crew, with many mentioning people by name for exceptional program delivery. A mark of the impressions we make can be seen in people recalling names and memories, as much as ecological facts.

Like in 2024, Public Program feedback is very positive, with the recurring point that people wish they were given more time to relax and enjoy the boat a little more. Some people want more time at the science stations, others want more time to just enjoy the breeze, but there is a trend of people on public sails wanting the science a little dialed back. Additionally, almost every sail utilized the microphone, with very few exceptions for technical difficulties. Comments received both verbally on public sails and recorded in our feedback forms reaffirm the need for audio amplification, on those few occasions when a mic was not used, especially with a bigger boat and more crowded deck.

It was also a light year for fish catches, from Lake Superior to Detroit to Grand Traverse Bay. The fish trap proved invaluable on many occasions. A reminder that weather and sampling doesn’t always go according to plan, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t efforts that can be made to prepare for or pivot from something going wrong. We should also be ready to talk about how that can happen in science, to diffuse disappointment.

As we look to next season, we will continue to ensure that our staff and volunteers remain passionate about the programs they are delivering and helpful to the participants. Instructor training will continue to incorporate teaching methods for different age groups and demographics. ISEA staff will discuss directional signage that is more clear for participants and fine tune the balance of active learning time to time for relaxation on public programs.

4. Outreach

4.A: Teacher Professional Development Opportunities

(1) Great Lakes Watershed Field Course Alumni Reunion:
A group of 13 teachers returned to ISEA's campus in June to celebrate and reflect upon their work and meet a cohort of teachers from other years of GLWFC, an increase from the seven hosted in 2024. During this two-day period they shared their projects with one another, discussed challenges and successes, and traveled to workshops throughout the region to continue their watershed learning. As the GLWFC cohort grows, we expect this program to grow as well. Teacher feedback was positive and included:

- "The creation of a real community of educators and community partners is very unique and a wonderful model of what we as educators should be encouraging and creating in our own schools"
- "love running through the stations on the boat--as a participant it provides a new perspective and new ideas to approach the content"
- "This was perfect to get me reenergized and ready to plan for next school year."

Additionally, in the post-event survey question, 100% of respondents Strongly Agreed the reunion supported them to be effective and responsible educators towards stewardship action in their local watershed.

(2) Great Lakes Watershed Field Course 2025:

For the seventh iteration of the Great Lakes Watershed Field Course, 22 educators traveled from Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and across Michigan to spend an immersive four days learning how to facilitate a student-led environmental civic-action project. The educators will be supported by ISEA staff throughout the '25-'26 school year as they facilitate student-led stewardship action projects in their classrooms.

Additionally, over 90% of the teachers answered Very Effective, regarding both the field course training conducted on the boat, and in the group work and planning time sessions to prepare the teachers to lead projects in their own classrooms. 82% responded that after the training, they felt confident teaching about watershed issues in their classroom. The Earth Force process as a tool for implementing stewardship projects with students was also well-received. As of the end of 2025, over 60% of the teachers in the 2025 GLWFC cohort have begun a civic action project with their classrooms.

Teacher feedback included:

- "I've been teaching for almost 20 years and I can't remember the last time I was entering a new school year with as much energy and enthusiasm as after this training."
- "Both personally and professionally, I want to spend more time outside, enjoying the natural world. I found great benefit during the field course and want to share with my family and students."
- "I look forward to coming back for the alumni reunion next year!"
- "Build in a little more work time for the educators"
- "More hands on learning, water quality testing, soil testing, observation notebooks."
- "This was such an amazing opportunity and I am so thankful I was able to participate in it. It is by FAR the best PD session/class I have attended."
- "I can't say enough positive things about Julie and Chris. Both were extremely knowledgeable and connected with our group in meaningful ways. Their personalities supported our learning and their thoughtful take on the field course was clearly evident."

(3) Teaching Great Lakes Literacy Teacher Partnership:

ISEA partnered with Michigan SeaGrant and the Center for Great Lakes Literacy, to pair up with teachers in building a curriculum-aligned series of lessons from the Inland Seas Schoolship sample data set. All 35 years of schoolship data, only recently made publicly available online, were the basis of an integrated math/science lesson series where students utilize real data in making determinations about Great Lakes health. Our hope is to offer these lessons, either in conjunction with participating in a schoolship experience, or even simply making them available for any students that want to use real data in their own classrooms.

This trial saw ISEA paired up with two teachers who have been on schoolship programs, and brought their classes out for a sail as part of testing out the lesson. The lesson outline will then be refined and developed into a polished final product that ISEA will host on our website.

Teacher and Student feedback cited a heightened interest in the data, due to personal connections from participation on the sail. Students said they enjoyed working with data they, and students from their school in years before them, recorded. Our teacher partners reported overall success in trialing the lesson, and reported that one of the most rewarding aspects was the students getting excited about helping refine the lesson, because they wanted to contribute to something other students could work with in the future.

4.B: Presentations & Events

Outside of direct program delivery, ISEA participates in other outreach opportunities to connect with organizations and audiences throughout the state about the importance of protecting the Great Lakes through education. In 2025, we reached over 2,467 people through presentations at local community events, conferences, summits, and for interested groups.

ISEA presented at:
Traverse City Optimists Club: 20
Michigan Science Teachers Association conference: 11
SEEDS EarthForce Civic Action Project Model: 14
Place-Based Education Conference: 24

ISEA tabled at:
Michigan Science Teachers Association conference: 300
NMC Career & Majors Fair: 30
MakersFest: 350
Natural Resources Fair & Feast: 450
EcoCareers Expo Alpena: 600
Freshwater Summit: 140

Other Events Led or Attended:
United Way Volunteer Recruitment: 130
Thunder Bay International Film Festival: 100
Nature Center Summit: 100
Great Lakes Day Conference: 100
Discovery Pier Fishing Day: 78
Tour Leo Creek: 20

Future Considerations

The Earth Force model continues to be well-regarded and well-received as a way to introduce student-centric civic action projects into a classroom. Teachers sometimes initially struggle to make peace with "leading" a project that students choose, out of fear the teacher may not know much about that subject. But our trainings and cohort follow-ups with each of our GLWFC groups received resoundingly positive feedback from participants, and the easiest reassurance is that the teachers don't have to be the ones to lead; The Earth Force model is intended to be student-led. All a teacher has to be comfortable doing, is facilitating with questions and helping direct the conversation to keep the project moving. This model has been popular enough with our teacher professional development courses that we do expect to continue with it as a core part of our GLWFC program.

The Place-Based Education Conference represented the other big win in our outreach this year, with ISEA presenting on the Detroit River Story Lab and adapting Place-Based Education for local cultures and contexts, who may have varying backgrounds and experiences and feelings with the water. ISEA presented in a shared time slot with another duo, both of whom were also speaking to their time with DRSL as teachers on our schooner. The program was exceptionally well-received, with 24 people in attendance, some of whom know us and have been on a sail with us before but simply wanted to "come support", and they shared with the room how highly they regard our organization and how much the students enjoy the program. With both the cohesiveness of the shared slot, and the avid interest and support of those in attendance, this program was a big hit. We were popular enough at the conference that teachers were approaching us in between sessions to ask about our programs; We did not table at the Place-Based Education Conference, on account of the fee being $500, but in hindsight that might have been a worthwhile price to pay after all given the enthusiasm of the assembled group.

5. Staffing

Internships

Four interns were brought on to the Education Team in 2025; Two for just the spring season, one for the spring and summer, and one for the full spring, summer and fall. Three of these interns utilized the dormitory. The interns all performed more than satisfactorily. They received great praise from students, volunteers, and staff alike for being quick learners, passionate educators, and sparklingly pleasant people to work with. ISEA continues to thrive thanks to organizational investment in its people and culture.

The interns themselves also offered feedback on their experience. 100% of respondents said they felt well trained and supported from the very beginning of the season, citing the wet runs (practice runs) of the schoolship programs and multiple shadow opportunities as crucial. 100% also reported that their time with ISEA positively influenced their desired career paths towards education or environmental advocacy.

Some direct quotes from the interns worth sharing:

- “I felt like I was meant to work for ISEA. This job has been career and life altering and I have learned so much from my time on this team, as both a young professional and personally as a human.”
- “Everyone was so welcoming, friendly, and inclusive throughout the entire duration of time at ISEA. This has been by far the best (and my favorite) work environment I've ever been a part of… The staff is a model of positive work culture.”
- “My experience with the ISEA team was incredible. Everyone, including staff, volunteers, and the supervisor, was extremely supportive and welcoming. The work culture at ISEA is one of the best that I have ever experienced.”
- “With no hesitation: I LOVED the ISEA team. Everyone made it very known that you can reach them and lean on them for support at any time.”

Additionally, after completing 1.5 seasons with ISEA as an intern, Lia Cook has joined the ISEA staff and Education Team as a full time member in the Volunteer Coordinator position!

Future Considerations

In 2024 and 2025, *Alliance* began schoolship programming the week after Inland Seas in the spring, which allowed for an easier training period. Adjustments will need to be made if both ships are to begin spring schoolships at the same time. However, this seems workable; Intern responses indicated it was the program flow, not the material itself, was the most challenging piece to get right and feel confident before leading programs. This is a change that can be made to training for future seasons, but will need to be approached with intention as ISEA continues to grow its programming. Interns in 2025 reported they were impressed and confident thanks to support received from staff, which 100% reported as “better and more in-depth” than training they’ve received at other jobs. This is something to be proud of and strive to maintain!

6. Dormitory Use

Tables below summarize dormitory usage by audience (volunteers, interns and seasonal staff, school groups, and other groups). ISEA dorms have supported volunteers from a long distance, created accessible housing for interns and seasonal staff, and provided affordable overnight accommodations for school groups participants. ISEA also takes pride in being able to help active science and research communities, by offering available housing to researchers conducting surveys on the Great Lakes.

Volunteers	# Volunteers Housed	# Days Stayed
2021	5	22
2022	12	64
2023	5	15
2024	16	69
2025	20	62

Volunteer use has increased as more volunteers come to utilize the dorms, for either maintenance or for schoolship programs; Driving from far away, volunteering two days in a row, and spending the intermittent night in the dorm. Interest is quite high during the sailing season, so volunteer use might even go higher if interns and school groups were not already visiting at these times.

Interns and Seasonal Staff	#Interns & Seasonal Staff Housed	# Days Stayed
2021	8	163
2022	4	415
2023	8	315
2024	4	585
2025	9	377

Seasonal and intern use also increased in people, though not in hours. Three education team interns used the dorm for the spring season, with crew utilizing the space in the shoulder seasons. Crew stayed on the boat during the sailing season, only moving into the dorm once the space was no longer occupied by visiting school groups, outside the sailing season. The high cost and low availability of rentals in the area means none of our seasonal staff or interns could feasibly accept a position from us without the dorm housing, unless they were already living locally. This makes the dorms instrumental in securing stellar candidates for our sailing season team. As ISEA expands, more dorm space for staff will be critical; It is challenging to accommodate the numbers of interns we are hosting even now.

School Groups	# Groups Housed	#Individuals Housed	# Days Stayed

2021	2	68	2
2022	11	260	12
2023	20	435	24
2024	12	322	16
2025	8	208	10

Several cancellations of school groups resulted in a slight decrease in dorm utilization. Two separate teachers also indicated they could not use the dorm due to their classes being too large, one of those teachers had their class size increase just this year beyond current dorm capacity.

Other Groups (e.g. Teachers, non-school use)	**# Groups Housed**	**#Individuals Housed**	**#Days Stayed**
2021	3	49	7
2022	4	150	11
2023	3	29	12
2024	8	99	14
2025	5	41	39

The other groups include Great Lakes Watershed Field Course participants and USGS employees conducting scientific surveying in the area, connected to the System-Wide Invasive Species Management (SWIM) Project. ISEA is proud to support ongoing research efforts, and in doing so bringing science efforts closer to our educational space for potential collaborative opportunities as well.

Future Considerations

All three education team interns utilizing the dormitory in 2025 expressed that they would not have been able to accept the position without the offered housing, so the dormitories continue to prove their worth in bringing in exceptional candidates. The only negative feedback expressed by interns was regular disruption due to sharing the space with visiting school groups. All three interns in the dorms reported students often trying to open their locked doors, sometimes after midnight, which resulted in challenging sleeping conditions. All three interns maintained they were grateful for the dorms despite this issue.

Increasing seasonal staff as our program needs grow is almost certain, which will almost certainly require more dorm housing; But there isn't much available currently already. It's difficult to plan for housing as well, as split gender housing must be accounted for. Either way, increased demand for staff dorm space is very likely in the near future.

With transportation being an increased challenge, paying a driver for two days could be one of the limiting factors resulting in a downturn in schools utilizing our dormitories.

7. Conclusion

Virtually all feedback on 2025 programming was overwhelmingly positive, praising the programs and staff for excellence in program delivery and organization. The 2025 season for ISEA is overall a big success, and the organization continues to grow thanks to glowing reviews from participating teachers, enthusiastic support of volunteer and donor community members, and a deeply passionate and tight-knit staff.

In a time when most non-profits, education, grant-funded, and place-based institutions are struggling, Schoolship programs continue to grow in popularity and interest in our programs is still exceeding availability in our schedule for programs. Despite high program approval ratings, ROV and Watershed participation dropped significantly, but whether this is due to teacher time constraints, economic reasons, transportation issues, or some combination of these factors is not clear. Investment in these programs is important to the mission of ISEA and our developing campus and we will seek to expand shore based programming in the coming years.

The 2025 Tall Ship Festival was also a great success, in introducing a new audience to our programs. While most participants seek our programs out with some sense of an idea of what our organization is about, being able to offer festival attendees a quality classically rigged schooner experience, while also introducing science and Great Lakes stewardship features into our sails, was a highlight of the 2025 season. Utilizing two boats for Duluth, and then splitting the summer between the two boats for both local programming and away-ports, netted explosive growth for programmatic reach. Public programs in Suttons Bay and away-ports similarly brought us to some new audiences, Beaver Island and Alpena in particular, that were very eager to receive us and met us with great enthusiasm for our programs.

Underpinning all these successes and positive reviews is the team that is making this organization function. The crew, educators, admin, and incredibly cooperative way the ISEA team works together is tangible to ISEA employees and program participants alike. Duluth passengers commented on how much more enthusiastic ISEA staff were than other boats, Great Lakes Watershed Field Course participants shared that it was the facilitation of the course that made it so energizing, passengers are continually impressed with the energy and skill of the volunteers, and teachers shared time and again in the feedback forms that it is the quality and professionalism of our staff that keeps them coming back year after year.

Future Considerations:

Leo Creek
The donation of this property to ISEA represents both a step in the future of shoreside programming ISEA is moving towards, as well as the strong vote of confidence in our organization by the local community. Intern Lia Cook began an iNaturalist project, titled Walk the Wetland, that aims to generate citizen-science monitoring in this new space we are responsible for. This could serve as an excellent community engagement tool to be utilized year-round, while we expand our Watershed programming to better utilize this beautiful space.

Lending station for EGLE
ISEA in 2025 became the northwest regional lending station location for the Michigan Dept. of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy's education material lending program. Teachers can seek out their closest lending station and borrow water quality sampling equipment, or Enviro-Scapes, for use in their classroom. ISEA has seen four teachers borrow equipment, and has ourselves implemented some of this equipment into our Watershed programs and teacher trainings. Over 200 students have learned more about watersheds due to

ISEA hosting this equipment, either on our campus or from teachers borrowing the materials for their own classrooms, and we plan to continue being a hub for localized and citizen science learning in 2026.

Student Voices in Program Assessment
Our current models for assessing feedback on our programs is lacking a crucial voice: Students! While we have informal methods in the program for assessing student engagement and material retention, a student-centric program like ours would benefit from more direct feedback from the mouths of students to assist in our reporting and program improvement.

Transportation Scholarships
With field trip budgets statewide seeing reductions, teachers managing larger classrooms, and several transportation grants from the state and federal government being interrupted, reduced, or cut entirely, the current model that sees participation from across the state could change drastically in the coming years. Utilizing our unique ability to bring our ships to other places like Detroit is a huge advantage. Seeking opportunities to help interested teachers utilize existing scholarships like Wheels to Woods, or partnering with other organizations, may help teachers get to us despite these setbacks.

New Campus Expansions
With the purchase of the properties on either side of the current campus, and the new learning spaces that campus seeks to offer, in 2026 ISEA is on track for a benchmark new era in the schoolship story. The leadership's efforts to engage closely with staff in assessing needs for the new facility will certainly play a big part in building a campus that supports the bright future ISEA is working towards. Watershed and shore-based programs especially stand to gain from these campus expansions, both in quality of facilities and in the strategic vision of the long-term educational plan for ISEA.

Strategic Plan 2026 and On
With ISEA's existing Strategic Plan ending in 2025, we have an opportunity to look at how we want to see the organization grow in the coming years, and how we assess that growth. Permitting the campus expansion to move forward, and developing the next Strategic Plan with it, will likely offer the most coordinated vision for ISEA's future.