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In Michigan, water is our destiny

By **TERRY SWIER**
GUEST COLUMNIST

For Michigan, Earth Day might as well be nicknamed Water Day. We are at the heart of the world's greatest freshwater system, and that's a source of pride and responsibility.

If there's one thing history teaches about Michigan and vast public resources, the lesson is that we can close our common heritage if we don't act together to secure it.

It's happened to us a couple of times before. In the 1800s and early 1900s, millions of acres of virgin timber were plundered for private profit and a ruin left behind. It took the taxpayers of

Michigan over half a century and riches of public money to build up a sustainable forest benefiting all of us.

In the mid-20th Century, polluters clobbered Michigan's air and water. Spills and recklessness blackened the skies and discolored our rivers and streams. The air we need to breathe, our fish and wildlife, and the economic treasures created by our water all paid the price. We've spent billions since then to build sewage plants and police pollution laws.

Every young person in Michigan should learn this history in grade school. But too often, the adults in charge of governmental decision-making in our state seem ignorant of those same lessons.

It was shocking a few years ago when the city manager of Evart, justifying the giveaway of public water resources to the Nestle Corporation, said of the lumber era, "The trees were shipped out of here ... I don't see water as any different."

Did he really think the tragedy that resulted from the thoughtless waste of our forest heritage was a good precedent for the management of Michigan water?

Over 2 billion people in 52 nations will lack clean water they need to survive by 2025. Fast-growing regions of our own United States in the Southwest and Southeast are outstripping the capacity of their water resources. Water is becoming

scarce in relation to people – and some want to capitalize on that not for public good, but for private profit.

Historically, water has been regarded as a public asset. When we begin treating water as something corporations can buy and control, we're writing a recipe for a taxpayer rip-off bigger than any seen before – and massive human suffering.

The Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation are confident the people of Michigan want to learn from the past, not repeat it. Here's how:

1. Become good water stewards in our daily lives. Use less water, and shun commercialized water in plastic bottles.

2. Support changes in Michigan law and our state constitution to make it clear water is and will always remain a public resource.

3. Support a fix to the new Great Lakes compact to prevent the private ownership and exploitation of the Lakes and their tributaries.

4. Like our forests and water, history is our common heritage. During Earth Week 2009, let's cherish that heritage, and chart a future for Michigan that benefits from clean, safe water that we manage for the good of all.

Terry Swier is president of Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation. You can reach her at www.savemewater.org.