

The Sea Grant Files, Fresh News About Fresh Water

Sea Grant is Golden: New Director, New Directions (6:41), Aired 2/16/2016

JESSE: Hi I'm Jesse Schomberg and you're listening to the Sea Grant Files. Today I'm here in the studio with Dr. John Downing. Minnesota Sea Grant's new director and professor in the department of biology at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Thanks for joining me on the Sea Grant Files John.

JOHN: Jesse, it's a pleasure to be here

JESSE: So you've come to our community from Iowa State University on small nutrient rich lakes, are your research interests transitioning now that you are here looking at the largest freshwater lake in the World by surface area.

JOHN: Well I should say, I kind of miss working on those awful green lakes, just a little bit, because they are some of the biggest problems on the planet right now, what a pleasure it is to be able to look out and see that beautiful lake with some of the best water quality on the planet. So clearly it's changing the way I look at things. I worked actually in northern Minnesota for off and on for about 40 years on the smaller lakes. So getting to work on Lake Superior is a real treat. My research will be at the large lakes observatory mostly, what I'm not doing through Sea Grant, and plans are to look at the harmful algae in the coastal zones that are popping up every once in awhile and also I'm really interested in the deep benthic Organism as well as the overall problem of nutrient and transport. So there are a lot of new problems that are showing up that we have to keep track of.

JESSE: So there is some value in that your background in those nutrient rich lakes and tracking those nutrients, even in our very oligotrophic, nutrient poor lake here.

JOHN: Well, like it or not, Human impacts are everywhere and are increasing every place so I thought I would keep an eye on those really nasty algae. Make sure they don't start causing problems for this beautiful lake.

JESSE: So you've had a colorful and successful career as a scientist educator and a leader, which we expect to continue. Why did you want to move to Duluth to become Minnesota Sea Grant's director?

JOHN: Well first off, the Minnesota Sea Grant is an absolutely terrific group of people and to be able to have the chance to work with such motivated and interesting people is really a delight. The mission of Sea Grant is something that really attracts me because Sea Grant does what I really like to do. We support research, we get that research to the people that need it, and we educate people with that science that they need to know to deal with water problems. So those three different missions together make it immensely exciting. In the past, I've been involved mostly with education and research but to be more involved with outreach is really a pleasure to me. Another thing that attracted me to the area is just the quality and the strength of the water science that is going on here. It's almost unimaginable, the strength of sciences that's here. There's the Large Lakes Observatory, National Estuarine Research Reserve, EPA lab, there's the Water Resources science program. Resources Research Institute and a terrific Biology department and Environmental Sciences department all focusing on water. Pretty exciting. The quality of the science is absolutely wonderful, Class A. So it's kind of the center of Aquatic sciences in the world as far as I'm looking at right now.

JESSE: So the National Sea Grant program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and the Minnesota program has been active for over 40 years. What new directions or momentum do you hope to add to the Sea Grant story?

JOHN: Well first of all, the Minnesota Sea Grant program is already great, it's just such a pleasure to be involved in such a wonderful program. But basically we are supposed to assist the public in dealing with water problems and water questions and there are lot's of them emerging and some that we could do more on. I mean things like Lake Superior and climate change. What's going to happen in the future is really important. I think we need to be thinking about Lake Superior as a global resource. The problem of aquatic invasive species will always be here and it's something that we have to deal with. I think we want to be looking and the value of the resources in the ecosystems services more. There are lots of directions that we can go in but basically the future is, keep doing the good things Minnesota Sea Grant does, do more, help more stakeholders, solve some more problems and be proactive while maintaining the strengths of this traditionally excellent program. Another thing about Sea Grant that's really fun being that it's the 50th year, what a great time to come. Sea Grant really was born in Minnesota and many people don't know that. It's now 50 years old and it's a special pleasure to be associated with one of the early Sea Grant programs from the State where the Sea Grant program was born.

JESSE: As a reminder I'm talking to Dr. John Downing Minnesota Sea Grant's new director. John what has surprised you most about the twin ports or Minnesota Sea Grant over the two plus months that you have been here so far?

JOHN: Well I was really familiar with the area before I can because my family has lived in Minnesota now for well off and on 80 years or so. Duluth was familiar to me already, but I think the most exciting part is to find that it is in fact a world center for the aquatic sciences and the incredibly vibrant university community that is here. The terrific foundational educational programs offered in the area. So not totally surprised but absolutely delighted with the community.

JESSE: So is there a message you would like to give to KUMD and our podcast listeners?

JOHN: Well, don't ever let a day go by without looking out at Lake Superior, and remember that Lake contains probably 10% of the world's surface fresh water and it's some of the best water in the world. For me, moving from my lakes in Iowa to here, I go from some of the worst water in the world to the best. So appreciate that wonderful water that's out there. A lot of people don't realize that the Great Lakes in total contain almost 20% of the world surface water and the coastline of Lake Superior alone is equal to the coastline of California, Oregon and Washington. The Great Lakes actually have more coastline that all the rest of the United States involved. So it's an absolutely fantastic resource and it's something that one should appreciate every day.

JESSE: So I've been talking to Dr. John Downing, Minnesota Sea Grant's new director.

JESSE: This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Sharon Moen, Mariah Schumacher, and me Jesse Schomberg. For more information or to listen to more episodes of The Sea Grant Files visit Minnesota Sea Grant at www.seagrants.umn.edu. You can also follow Minnesota Sea Grant on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks for listening.