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Great Lakes faces record low ice coverage impacting weather, recreation, wildlife

by Trevor Roubadeaux

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GREAT LAKES, Mich., (WPBN/WGTU) -- Ice coverage plays an important role for us here in Michigan.

And it's no surprise with the recent conditions, there's not a lot of ice.

December 2023 was one of the warmest Decembers on record for northern Michigan, with daily average highs well above freezing.

The direct consequence: no ice on the Great Lakes.

"So with fewer areas covered by ice or snow ice, you're going to have higher wave activity which could contribute to flooding, erosion and destabilization of shorelines. And again, that plays into weather, where the ice is kind of acting as a cap," Watershed Council Water Resources Manager Marcella Domka said. "And when you don't have that cap you have wind turning over open water, you'll have increased evaporation increased precipitation, so there's some shoreline and some you know meteorological effects."

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Great Lakes are at about .35% ice coverage, with the norm at this time of the year being around 10%. A near historic decline with the least ice coverage we've seen in 50 years.

"That has a huge recreational and tourism impact. There's a decline in recreational activities like ice fishing, and I know winter sports are obviously very popular in northern Michigan," Domka said. "So it affects recreation in that aspect and then in terms of other economic effects, there is kind of a side to it as well, where you might see an increase in the activity of the commercial shipping industry. And so that net environmental impacts as well in terms of you know, burning of energy and fossil fuels, and that can contribute to the problem. It's kind of a cyclical issue."

And if the decrease in recreation and tourism wasn't bad enough, Domka says this issue could be a major concern for the ecosystem as well.

Something called re-suspension happens, removing nitrogen and phosphorus.

"Without the ice that is preventing that mixing, you'll see a suspension of those nutrients which can lead to algal blooms and Abalones have so many effects for wildlife decreased dissolved oxygen," Domka said. "It can produce toxins like microsystem, which are toxic to animals and humans. You would see lower biodiversity and unstable food webs as well."

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