

Our water legacy

By Kristi Evans

Alexandra Cousteau, granddaughter of famed undersea explorer Jacques and a global water advocate in her own right, has said, “There’s remarkably little we can do to shape productive conversation on water issues until we return to a simple truth we all learned as children: we share a single hydrosphere and are connected through the water cycle—each of us positioned quite literally downstream from the other.”

Cousteau’s point is illustrated by a satellite view of Charlevoix, situated on a strip of land sandwiched between the interconnected bodies of Lake Michigan, Round Lake and Lake Charlevoix. **Ben Scheelk ’11 BA** credits his hometown with instilling an appreciation for the outdoors and reinforcing the importance of protecting natural resources. Those interests led him to NMU and ultimately a position with Cousteau’s non-profit Blue Legacy International, which inspires people to take action on water issues through traditional and new media projects.

“Alexandra’s father and grandfather were primarily focused on marine ecosystems, or oceans,” Scheelk says. “Alexandra is often referred to as the ‘freshwater Cousteau’ because she looks at the entire water cycle and promotes ‘watershed-first thinking.’ Water impacts every aspect of our lives, from food security to community health. It’s the vehicle through which we’ll feel the effects of climate

change,” explains Scheelk. “But a Nature Conservancy poll recently showed 77 percent of people surveyed don’t know where their water comes from. When we don’t have that connection to the source of our water, we tend to ignore the impacts of our daily activities and how they work their way downstream. We ignore that at our own peril.”

Scheelk first met Cousteau when he was president of NMU’s geography honors society and

secured student finance committee funding to bring her to campus for a presentation. After studying abroad in Chile, finishing his final semester at NMU and volunteering in India, he contacted Blue Legacy. Based on the organization’s immediate need for a new website and fueled by his commitment to the cause, Scheelk taught himself to build websites as a volunteer and was rewarded with a paid position in Washington, D.C. He is currently on leave, but continues to volunteer as the webmaster and provides technical support. In his 18 months with the organization, Scheelk served as head writer/editor, managed its social media accounts, supervised content licensing and presented Blue Legacy’s latest film about the Potomac River, *Our Nation’s River: A System on the Edge*, at



Water activist Ben Scheelk

fundraising galas and a film festival. He also was Cousteau’s executive assistant.

Scheelk helped to organize two major Blue Legacy events. One was a congressional film briefing on the 2012 Global Water Security Intelligence Community Assessment. “Water has a big impact on foreign policy,” he says. “If shared, it can bring countries together. If scarce, it can cause instability and put pressure on a weak regime or democracy.” For the other event, he worked with the Waterkeeper Alliance on a Clean Water Act 40th anniversary panel discussion.

“A major impetus for the 1972 legislation occurred in 1969, when Ohio’s Cuyahoga River caught on fire and caused major devastation,” Scheelk adds. “There was almost no federal oversight. The primary intent of the act was to make U.S. rivers fishable, drinkable and swimmable. While we have come a long way, there’s major concern that we’ll slip backwards if House Republicans succeed in diverting regulatory authority from the federal government to the states.

“But it’s important for everyone to be a part of this; it can’t be just the government or environmental organizations. If communities rally around the idea of taking back the watersheds that have been neglected so long, it not only ensures future protection, but also brings that community closer together. Social media has made that easier. It’s led to a democratization of activism and conservation.” ■