



# IDEAS TO ACTION FUND

BRINGING YOUR IDEAS TO LIFE

## Great Lakes, Great Reads

### A Community Read for Our Watershed

Final Report - Ideas to Action 2023

*By Laura Sauser (Wisconsin Library Association) and Anne Moser (UW-Madison Wisconsin Water Library), February 2025*

**Number of people involved in or impacted by the project since Ideas to Action funding:**

Approximately 2000; the project website had 12,145 views from April through December 2024.

**Do you anticipate that your project will continue after Ideas to Action funding?**

Yes.

**Did your project encourage partnerships and collaborations with any community partners or other WiLS members? Who did you connect with during this process and how might you sustain those connections?**

Great Lakes, Great Read was a wonderful opportunity to create partnerships and collaborations with WiLS member libraries and other cultural organizations.

Anna Stadick, the director of UW-Parkside Library, a WiLS member, was a key member of the planning committee. Her library hosted two Great Lakes Great Read events in its two surrounding counties. The first was their Freshwater Fun Day on August 5th at the Petrifying Springs Biergarten in Kenosha County. Library staff and biology faculty and students helped forty-six participants discover aquatic life in and around the Pike River. Activities included a water exploration table with live invertebrates, a caddisfly craft, stories from the books, and frog and insect origami. Library staff offered similar activities and a round of Great Lakes Fishing Bingo to a group of five eighth-grade students from JS Global School in Chennai India visiting UW-Parkside, who were enthusiastic participants. Partnering with the UW-Parkside Root River REC Center, librarians and REC staff led families on an afternoon paddle on the Root River, on August 13th. Twelve participants enjoyed the afternoon, some paddling for the first time. In addition, Anna was able to promote the Great Lakes Great Read events through a July 22 interview with Greg Berg, host of The Morning Show on WGTD in Kenosha.

Wisconsin Humanities was also an enthusiastic partner in this project. In October, we offered “How to Share a Great Lakes Story” a two-part storytelling workshop at the Vaughn Public Library in Ashland. Led by Jen Rubin, executive producer of Love Wisconsin, a digital storytelling project of Wisconsin Humanities, participants learned how to turn their everyday experiences and memories of the Great Lakes into stories. Fifteen participants learned the skills of powerful storytelling and four returned the second day to record their story. The stories are housed on the [Great Lakes. Great Read website](#).

Wisconsin Public Television served as a media partner and helped promote the project. Nicolet Federated Library System, a WiLS member, coordinated six visits in northeast Wisconsin in the fall of 2024.

The author of the children’s selection visited northeast Wisconsin and shared stories and experiences about The Water Walker with the First Nations Program at UW-Green Bay, with 125 elementary students in Green Bay, with an after-school environmental club, based at Pulaski Middle School, and with Oneida Tribal High School students at the Oneida Community Library.

**Thinking about your project, what was the most innovative part? What can you, or your community, do now that it couldn’t before?**

This project has given us the knowledge and experience to lead an environment-based one book, one community program. It has the potential to reach a very broad audience through partnerships with a variety of types of libraries and institutions. The project has given us opportunities to forge new relationships with cultural and other institutions.

**How do you think other WiLS members could use what you learned and accomplished at their own organizations?**

The idea for a basin-wide community reading initiative grew out of discussions between an informal group of librarians, educators, nonprofits leaders and others passionate about stewardship of the Great Lakes. This group, which included the Wisconsin Water Library, had been discussing how to engage community members in Great Lakes literacy but had been unable to align their work to bring it to fruition. The Wisconsin project funded by the WiLS Ideas to Action Grant was intended to serve as a pilot and, hopefully, as a catalyst to mobilize the 7 other states and two provinces in the group.

Now that the pilot is complete, we have learned some valuable best practices that may be helpful to other organizations interested in coalition building. Key takeaways include:

1. **Clearly define roles and expectations.** The larger group was involved in both large and small decisions about most of the fundamental work being done in Wisconsin, such as the logo and website design and the selection of the books/authors. It was difficult to find consensus within the group which, at times, was a barrier to moving the project forward. In retrospect, it would have been more efficient if we had clearly defined the role of the larger group in the formation of the pilot project early on.

2. **Start small.** A statewide reading initiative is itself a big undertaking. A basin-wide community reading initiative is even more ambitious. Although our work did help move the needle with certain individual members of the larger group, we believe we are still years away from the establishment of a formalized basin-wide reading initiative. We look forward to more firmly establishing Great Lakes, Great Read here in Wisconsin through strategic planning, and anticipate playing a leadership role in a larger initiative when we are ready to scale up our work.
3. **Don't underestimate the importance of place.** Program participants told us that they were most interested in books by Wisconsin authors. We also believe we would have received more media attention and engagement with other cultural groups around the state if we had selected books by Wisconsin authors. This will inform future programming.

### **Is there anything more you'd like to share?**

While plans for 2025 are still in the early stages, we anticipate that Great Lakes, Great Read will continue as an annual statewide reading initiative in Wisconsin into the foreseeable future. It is uncertain if the other regions in the Basin area will continue with the project, but if so, they have the option of continuing to use the program website to post their information and to use the logo to promote their work.

We learned through the pilot program that Wisconsinites seem to be most interested in book selections from local authors, so future programs will lift up Wisconsin authors. Program goals around engaging a variety of library types with this program and other natural partners will continue.

**Project product(s):** [Great Lakes, Great Read website](#) and its [toolkit](#). Event photos below:



*Author Joanne Robertson at the WLA Annual Conference*



*Photos from the Storytelling Workshop*