

# Sheboygan River: Great Lakes Area of Concern

## Why is this river an Area of Concern?

In 1987, the Sheboygan River was designated as one of 43 Great Lakes Areas of Concern – areas that are severely degraded and fail to support aquatic life beneficial for human use (such as fish and wildlife that are safe to eat). The lower 14 miles of the river and the Sheboygan Harbor are included in the Area of Concern. This is primarily due to contamination from industrial waste that persists in the environment – polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). The designation is also due to the decline of fish and wildlife populations and habitat.



People enjoy clean, healthy rivers and lakes for many types of outdoor recreation.



## Everything is connected

The goal is to revitalize the Sheboygan River by reducing health threats to people, fish and wildlife; improving fish and wildlife habitat; and increasing recreation and economic opportunities. This also helps improve the entire Great Lakes ecosystem – the largest fresh surface water resource in the world.

## What are PCBs and PAHs?

PCBs are a group of more than 200 chemical compounds used in the U.S. from 1929-1978 to stabilize liquids and plastics. They have been linked to reproductive problems, are known to cause cancer in animals and probably cause cancer in people. PAHs include more than 10,000 chemical compounds produced when materials burn incompletely. Some PAHs cause cancer and may cause other ailments, like skin rashes.



## Mink: Sheboygan's canary in the coal mine



In the early 1980s, a trapper reported to WDNR scientists that mink were not present along the lower Sheboygan River. This was peculiar and prompted scientists to sample sediments in the Sheboygan River and its floodplain. Sampling showed high levels of PCBs.

Mink are known to be especially sensitive to PCB contamination. Their reproductive rates plummet and local populations may disappear. Like canaries that indicated unsafe air quality in the early days of coal mining, mink indicated the need to improve environmental quality in the Sheboygan River.

*Explore & Restore the Sheboygan River*  
 Part of the largest fresh surface water resource in the world – the Great Lakes ecosystem

Exhibit paid for in part with support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, under Assistance Agreement No. GLO0E00651-0. Exhibit planning and writing by Debbie Beyer, UW-Extension Regional Natural Resources Program. Graphic Design by Jeffrey J. Strobel, UW-Extension Environmental Resources Center.