Photo by Tyler Stabile

Geauga Lake is known for being a backdrop to amusement parks over the years, but scientists say the glacial lake harbors unique plants important to Ohio's natural history.

Glacial link

Green space would connect residents to Geauga Lake's history

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

As discussions continue in Bainbridge Township and Aurora about future development around Geauga Lake, the body of water itself remains a hidden gem with its distinguished natural history.

Bainbridge Trustee Jeff Markley said that's one important reason why plans should include green space. Rather than simply dining or shopping, "people need to really enjoy the natural attributes and pick up on (Geauga Lake's) history," he said.

Local officials have been looking at ways to structure the balance of business and housing growth on the former amusement park property owned by Cedar Fair of Sandusky that is for sale.

Though many local residents don't know the science behind Geauga Lake, its past has been carefully documented by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History for years.

Turn to Lake on A2

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Jim Bissell, curator of botany at the museum, recently shared with officials and residents the lake's storied past.

"Our plant collection (from Geauga Lake) is a window to the past," he said.

The lake formed in the aftermath of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago after the Pleistocene Epoch. Human activities changed the 50-acre lake that lies mostly in Bainbridge, and is one of the nine glacial lakes in Geauga County.

Dr. Bissell said that at one time there was a bog around Geauga Lake.

A bog is a type of wetland with wet spongy ground and acidic rich soil composed of accumulated plant matter surrounded by open water and characteristic plants such as moss. The Geauga Lake bog contained rare plants that were documented beginning in the late 1800s by many collectors.

"Everyone collected plants there," Dr. Bissell said. "It was one of the most spectacular bogs in the state. Northern St. John's Wort was collected there in 1903."

Bogs in Ohio developed within numerous glacial lakes in Geauga, Portage and Summit counties at the end of the last glacial ice advance into Ohio.

Geauga Lake was an important bog in Ohio prior to 1900, Dr. Bissell said. Around 1903, plants growing on the shore got into the wetlands.

Bogs, he explained, developed as sphagnum moss grew along the shores. The sphagnum moss died and decomposed into peat beneath new generations of sphagnum moss. Today, peat depth around some bogs is as much as 30 feet.

Most bogs in Ohio were formed where giant chunks of ice were buried by sand and gravel. The ice melted and the lake was formed. Some glacial lakes in Ohio have only minor deposits of peat along their shorelines.

"We surveyed the whole lake in 1991, and the Sea World staff went too," he said of the years when Sea World of Ohio was still in operation on the east side of the lake.

"When we went in 1991, nothing was found on the shore of the lake and there were no remnants of the bog, but there were a lot of plants including bog plants in wetlands near the park at a quarry," he said.

"In 1991, I found the rare St. John's Wort in the quarry pond. The last time it was found was in 1903 in Geauga Lake. They were hiding there in the quarries. We found sphagnum moss, typical bog and cranberry with the St. John's Wort in the quarry."

The wetlands near the quarry are very important to Ohio, Dr. Bissell said. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency oversee it. "The gravel pit is harboring some rare species."

Alfred P. Dachnowski did an Ohio Geological Survey in 1912 and published "Peat Deposits of Ohio." An image of the 1912 Geauga Lake is in the publication full of Tamarack trees, cranberries and pink lady's slippers, all found at the lake, all gone today.

"Lots of people collected around Geauga Lake. One of my favorite collectors is Leslie Stair, an engineer who gave many scientific specimens to our museum. A pink lady's slipper, a type of orchard, was collected from Geauga Lake and he gave it to us. We have pink lady's slipper at only a few locations in northern Ohio today. They are more common now in southern Ohio. Historically, however, they were very common in many bogs in our region 100 years ago," Dr. Bissell said.

Most of the specimens collected from Geauga Lake are in the museum's herbarium and also at Kent State University and Ohio State University. "We probably have the most," Dr. Bissell said.

Savory Rorimer, who owns an organic farm on Geauga Lake Road, said she would like to see the area near the lake devoted to parks, hiking trails and even an area for gardeners to grow their own food.