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RACINE — Some time eight or nine years ago, Eddie Benton, grand chief of the Three Fires Confederacy, an alliance of the Ojibwa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi peoples of Canada and the upper Midwest of the United States, told a group of native women that he envisioned them doing a great task.

“But he never explained what the work was,” said Josephine Mandamin.

The details would come later through a spiritual calling to Mandamin and her associates, when they began discussing water conservation concerns for the Great Lakes region. It led Mandamin and her sister, Melvina Flamand, and a small group of supporters to walk around Lake Superior in 2003 to draw attention to lake ecology. And every year since, the group, called the Mother Earth Water Walk, has walked around another great lake.

The women’s second walk around Lake Michigan is now under way. The group is about halfway since starting their journey in Michigan on April 26. Rotating walkers in shifts, they try to walk 50 miles each day. The group plans to culminate its current journey in Escanaba, Upper Peninsula, Mich.

Scott Anderson Journal Times A group of Canadian Ojibwa grandmothers walk Monday along Wisconsin Avenue near Lake Michigan as part of the Mother Earth Water Walk in Racine. The group later met with Mayor Gary Becker and finished its program at the Siena Center. The group is walking to raise awareness of water quality issues. Members of the public were invited.

The present group of eight travelers was in the Racine area Monday for an overnight rest stop and native ceremony at the Siena Center in Caledonia. The stop also allowed time for a visit with Mayor Gary Becker, who has worked with other Great Lakes mayors and state and provincial leaders on conservation issues.

Mandamin, 66, an Ojibwa from Ontario, said the purpose of the six-year journey has been to draw attention to what they perceive as abuses of the lakes, including plastic bottling of water for sale.

“We are dead set against plastic,” Mandamin said. “We all know that anything or anyone covered with plastic eventually dies. When water is bottled in plastic it turns to mold.”

According to its Web site, the group is also concerned about how clear water is being polluted by chemicals, vehicle emissions, motor boats, sewage disposal, agricultural pollution, leaking landfill sites and residential usage is taking a toll on our water quality.

“We need to start adapting to climate change,” Mandamin said. “There’s a lot a person can do, even a child. You can find ways to adapt to changes, you can reuse water, recycle it, instead of throwing it out.”

Mandamin said that, while they appreciate the support men have given on the trips, it is natural that women lead the mission because they, like the Earth, are givers of life.

Spring is chosen for the walk because it's a time of regrowth of nature, she said. As a symbol, the group carries with it a bucket of water collected on the Michigan side of the lake.

Becker presented the women with a proclamation honoring their efforts. He also talked about steps the city has taken in an effort to take stewardship of its local waters, including wetland restoration along the lakefront and Saturday's opening of the Root River Environmental Education Community Center, or REC.

Becker also talked about his participation in the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, a group founded by Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley to discuss Great Lakes concerns.

At each stop on their walks around the lakes, the Mother Earth Water Walk participants meet with local leaders and the media to press their cause. Recently, they have done interviews with Time magazine and The Wall Street Journal.

They also are joined in their walk by local supporters. One such person in Racine on Monday was Adrienne Roach, southeast organizer for the Wisconsin League of Conservation voters. Roach said the timing could not be better with the Wisconsin Legislature set to adopt the Great Lakes Compact in a coming special legislative session.

"I think it's very inspiring that women are coming out to celebrate this great resource that we have," Roach said.

David L. Maack, CEM, CPM
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Every individual makes a difference. We cannot live through a single day without making an impact on the world around us. And we all have free choice--what sort of difference do we want to make? Do we want to make the world around us a better place? Or not?
-Jane Goodall, wildlife researcher