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# Lessons in environmental law

by Amy Oprean

From battling the entrance of an invasive species into Lake Michigan to investigating health-related problems of Detroit's incinerator, a WSU law clinic is giving students a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to pursue some of the most pressing local, regional and state-level environmental cases in Michigan.

The Environmental Law Clinic, taught by Nick Schroeck, adjunct professor in WSU's Law School, gives students the opportunity to work alongside lawyers at the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center, a nonprofit organization founded to protect the Great Lakes and the communities that depend on them. Established in 2008 by Noah Hall, assistant professor of law in WSU's Law School, the center represents the public's interest in legal cases concerning environmental health and sustainability for Michigan and its resources. Among its major environmental projects are reducing greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning to clean energy and reforming water law.

Schroeck said the center, which was founded on the belief that law students can and must play a significant role in shaping the future of environmental law, enables its students to hit the ground running after graduation. "The first day on the job, our students will know things such as where to look for problems in permit applications, the inner workings of the Freedom of Information Act and how to challenge agency decisions," he said. "That's the goal for WSU – to turn out law students who are not just book smart, but have the practical experience that lets them jump right in and be effective attorneys from day one."

Among the students' projects in the spring of 2010 – the clinic's second semester – was to prepare an amicus brief to the United States Supreme Court from a bi-partisan group of Michigan legislators addressing the threat of Asian carp entering the Great Lakes. The students' work supported the argument for temporarily closing the locks that connect a Chicago shipping canal to Lake Michigan, demonstrating that keeping the locks open would potentially be more damaging to Michigan than closing the locks would be to Illinois – to the degree of billions versus millions of dollars.

Along with working for Michigan interests, the center is equally dedicated to offering legal services to people or community groups that have been affected by environmental law violations and cannot afford representation. On these projects, students learn the skills necessary for investigating potential cases, including where to look for potential violations.

"When working in an urban area, it's important to know that the biggest polluters often locate in the poorest areas," Schroeck said. "These are the types of real-world lessons we teach our students, so that they can find violators and stand up for the people who are being affected."

Schroeck said the students' work has helped grow the center's reputation as an advocate for environmental sustainability and a watchdog for public health.

"For the first time, Michigan has a public interest environmental law organization dedicated to ensuring that environmental laws are being followed, and it has been made possible because of



## About Nick Schroeck:

Mr. Schroeck received a B.A. in urban studies and political science from Elmhurst College in Illinois and a J.D. from Wayne State University Law School. He joined WSU as an adjunct faculty member in 2009.

the students' work," he said. "It sends the message to polluters and state and federal agencies that we're watching, we're doing the research, and if rules are being broken, we will be in touch. Hopefully, our students will continue to apply that ethic long after they graduate."

To learn more, visit: <http://www.law.wayne.edu/students/clinics.php> and <http://www.glelc.org/>

