

# Making Cinematic Waves

With venues in three Lake Huron cities, this annual film festival spotlights the importance of guarding the world's water supply

By Dianna Stampfer

Over the course of five days, a variety of more than 50 films can be viewed at the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center in Alpena, the historic Rogers Theater in Rogers City, and the Alcona County Library in Harrisville. Some screenings are accompanied by post-viewing discussions, many with filmmakers; educational activities, including some for young people; and social gatherings, such as a Friday night gala reception.

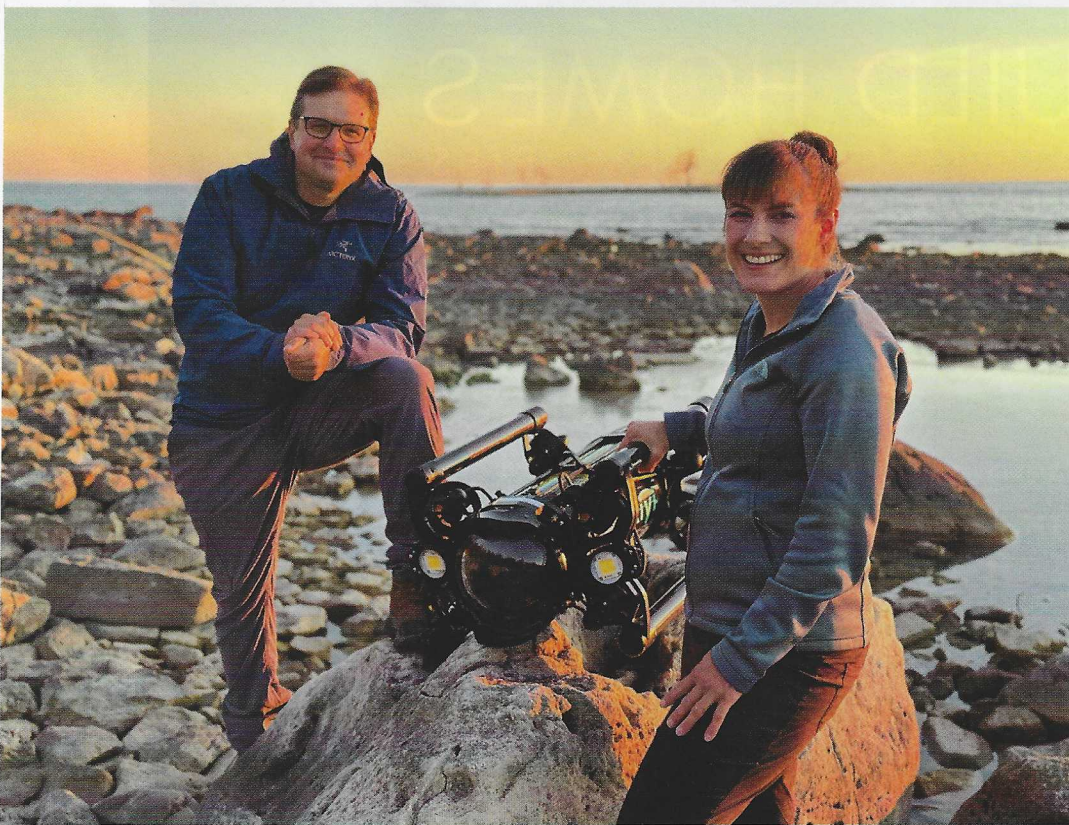
One of this year's featured films is a 90-minute documentary by the Canadian husband-and-wife team of Zach Melnick and Yvonne Drebert.

"The film 'All Too Clear' takes us on a journey throughout the underwater world of the Great Lakes, exploring how quadrillions of invasive quagga mussels have transformed the lakes' ecosystem at a scale not seen since the glaciers," Melnick says. "Nowhere has that impact been greater than in northern Lake Huron, including the waters of the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary."

Quagga mussels, which are native to the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions, made their way to the Great Lakes through ballast water from commercial ships in the late 1980s. Living up to five years, the small aquatic bivalve mollusks are wreaking havoc on these freshwater seas. "All Too Clear" delves into uncharted waters to tell their complex story.

"We spent 150 days using advanced underwater drones to film under the waves of the Great Lakes, with more time in Lake Huron than anywhere else," notes Drebert, who produced and co-directed the film. "I believe that even people who think they know the lakes are going to be shocked and amazed after seeing this film."

In addition to Great Lakes filmmakers, TBIFF sources thought-provoking movies from the International Ocean Film Festival in San Francisco and presents them to new audiences. Topics range from invasive species to climate change, watershed protection, behavioral changes, and other issues related to water and the organisms, wildlife, flora, and humans that are dependent on the conservation of the world's



Canadian husband-and-wife filmmakers Zach Melnick and Yvonne Drebert are shown near their Lake Huron home with the remotely operated vehicle they named Kiyi. Their film, "All Too Clear," takes viewers to the underwater world of the Great Lakes. It will be featured during the Thunder Bay International Film Festival.

**R**ecognizing an opportunity to enhance its mission in a creative and immersive way, the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in Alpena launched a multi-day, regional event more than a decade ago that continues to spark thoughtful conversations about protecting and preserving the Great Lakes' aquatic resources and maritime heritage.

The 13th Annual Thunder Bay International Film Festival (TBIFF), the only

water-focused cinematic event in the state, takes place Jan. 22-26 at three distinct venues along the Lake Huron shoreline. The national sanctuary's vast boundaries run from Cheboygan to near Oscoda and all the way to the lake's Canadian border.

**Below:** A variety of films will be shown during the festival weekend in three different locations, including the Rogers Theater in Rogers City. Another location, not shown, is the Alcona County Library in Harrisville.



**Above:** Festival attendees await a film at the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center in Alpena. It's also the site of the 2025 opening night gala.

most important natural resource.

“You have to connect with something before you can care about it and this event does that, visually,” says Stephanie Gandulla, the sanctuary’s resource protection coordinator. “This festival is truly a unique event, as attendees bond with others who really care about the ocean and the Great Lakes, while also being entertained and educated.”

The festival has become a mainstay of the sanctuary’s education and outreach program, creating awareness about the countless treasures underneath the waves. It’s an opportunity to share information with the public, many of whom may not otherwise have access to the documentary world and certainly don’t have personal interaction with those who bring these stories to the big screen.

“We have essentially created a passport for attendees to travel around the world and learn about these places under the water, as well as showcase how Thunder Bay is part of a national marine protection system,” Gandulla adds. “What we do here affects the world’s water, and what happens in the ocean impacts us here on the Great Lakes. The festival a powerful

way to engage the public.”

In 2000, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration designated the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary as the nation’s first such preserve in the Great Lakes region. The designation is similar to that of a national park. The boundaries were expanded in 2014 and today the sanctuary encompasses 4,300 square miles that are home to more than 200 shipwrecks — only half of which have been identified and cataloged — and eight historic lighthouses, along with other unique aquacultures.

“Alpena is lucky to have this resource-rich event to inform and inspire

us to continue to care for our natural resources,” says Mary Beth Kline-Stutzman, president and CEO of the Alpena Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. “Residents and visitors can stay connected with larger-scale projects and thought leadership regarding our water resources, whether it be about the oceans or our Great Lakes.”

### PLAN IT!

Tickets for the Thunder Bay International Film Festival include an All-Access Thunder Pass for \$125, and the Great Lakes Gala Reception & Films on Friday, which features hors d’oeuvres and dessert, along with a cash bar, for \$30. Tickets for individual viewings and events are \$10 to \$20.

**Thunder Bay International Film Festival**  
[thunderbayfriends.org](http://thunderbayfriends.org)