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Indians: 'Our water is not for sale'

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A group of American Indians that has been walking around most of Lake Michigan this spring to focus public attention on the intrinsic value of water spent Sunday night in Muskegon before continuing its journey this morning.

The sixth annual Mother Earth Water Walk <<http://motherearthwaterwalk.com/>> began Saturday in Manistee and continues through May 12, when the walkers are expected to arrive in Hannaville, near Escanaba. A dozen walkers arrived here Sunday evening and spent the night at Love Fellowship Baptist Church, 1404 Eighth.

"The important thing we want to tell people is that our water is not for sale, it's for us to use respectfully," said Josephine Mandamin, an Ojibway Indian from Ontario who co-founded the walk. "It is important to keep our waters clean to ensure the everlasting use for our grandchildren and their grandchildren."

The walk, which involves carrying a pail of water around Lake Michigan, will cover 583 miles and cross parts of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. For Mandamin and another American Indian grandmother who started the Mother Earth Water Walk in 2003, this year's trek will complete a roughly 6,000-mile walk around all five Great Lakes.

Mandamin and a few other American Indians walked around Lake Superior in 2003. They followed that with walks around the northern portion of Lake Michigan in 2004, Lake Huron in 2005, Lake Ontario in 2006 and Lake Erie last year.

Mandamin said the walk was inspired by an Anishnabe tribal chief who prophesied in the 1970s that water would be as valuable as gold by the early 21st century unless steps were taken to protect water quality and quantity. She said the journey is a symbolic attempt to call attention to the threats facing the Great Lakes and other fresh waters.

"People think water is going to be here everlasting -- they don't realize the lakes are going down," she said. "There is a lot of apathy; the majority of people really don't care about water or know what's going on."

Water levels in lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior have been dropping steadily since 1998. Lakes Michigan and Huron have dropped nearly four feet since 1998 and are currently about 21 inches below their long term averages. Lake Superior dipped to a record low last year before rebounding slightly this winter; it remains 11 inches below the long-term average.

Water levels in lakes Erie and Ontario were eight inches above average in March, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.