

▶ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Gone Starfishin'

When my son Samuel was about five years old, his favorite things in the whole world were starfish. He was absolutely fascinated by these unique marine invertebrates. I don't know what triggered this affection, but it seemed to consume him for many months. For those of you who are parents, I'm sure you have similar stories of children obsessed with seemingly random interests. We had crayon-colored pictures of starfish on the refrigerator, on his walls, on the floor—everywhere. Instead of cartoons, he would ask us to show him starfish videos from the Internet. I was glad that he had taken an interest in nature and science, but I was a bit perplexed when he asked me to take him “starfishing” at the pond.

As you may know, we live in Michigan—ground zero for the world's largest accumulation of freshwater. No starfish. I explained to Sam that starfish only live in the salty oceans. I even offered to take him to the zoo to see the starfish in their aquariums. He frowned with disappointment and told me that maybe people think there are no starfish in the pond because nobody took the time to look. You can probably guess where this story is going. We grabbed a bucket, pulled on our boots, and headed to the pond for a starfishing expedition.

Perhaps to nobody's surprise (except for Sam's), we did not discover a new species of freshwater starfish. We did, however, find three painted turtles, a dead bluegill, a snail with a really cool shell, some colorful mushrooms, an old pocketknife, and a whole bunch of mallard ducklings. We also discovered some new trails, an old treehouse, and a couple other little boys (with their dad in

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tow) looking for snakes. Sam joined in the snake hunt and made a couple of new friends. Despite getting skunked in the starfish category, I think we both discovered several lessons learned.

Believe it or not, there is a moral behind the story of the starfishing trip that applies to all of us. As environmental health professionals, I have noticed that we tend to do two things: 1) complain about being too closely bound to our “three-legged stool” of food, water, and wastewater; and 2) cling to that three-legged stool with all our might. I have heard many variations of these tendencies from environmental health professionals from every corner of the country. We hold fast to the programs we are familiar with while lacking the resources to investigate other problems. Meanwhile, we are surrounded

by a world full of illness and injury and we are somewhat reluctant to apply our environmental health expertise to these issues unless they appear related to food safety, water quality, or wastewater management. To be clear, these three issue domains are incredibly important and should always be central to our profession. We should continue to make those issues priorities while also aspiring to discover new opportunities. As a profession, we need to be intentional about looking for aspirational objectives. We may or may not achieve the original mission, but we may discover unexpected opportunities and meet new friends and allies.

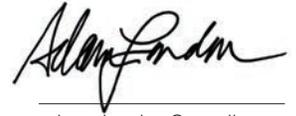
As an example, for the longest time we have complained that all the money is in healthcare delivery and that society does not truly invest in prevention. We have accepted this assumption as an unmovable parameter of the way things are. This assumption is the “starfish don't live in freshwater” problem. The problem with this assumption is that it excludes the possibility of change and extinguishes any hope for creative problem solving. Regardless of your opinions about the Affordable Care Act, most people support its requirement for hospitals to conduct community health needs assessments and to invest a portion of their revenue into population health initiatives for the advancement of community benefits. For many of us, the ability to apply environmental health solutions where regulation is nonexistent has been limited by lack of government funding. The availability of these community benefit dollars from healthcare systems represents

one opportunity for environmental health to make a case for new interventions.

My challenge for you this month is to resist homeostasis and find out how your area is spending community benefit dollars and how you might inform the process with environmental health knowledge. Keep in mind that you might not find the solutions you are looking for, but you could find resources and connections that can help solve other problems. Go starfishing—who knows what you'll find!

I believe there are many untapped ways for environmental health to improve the world around us if we are willing to be curious. I hope as you read this issue of the *Journal of Environmental Health*, you will learn something that will inspire you to think of new solutions. I also hope you can join us in Anaheim, California, for the NEHA 2018 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition and HUD Healthy Homes Conference, June 25–28. Conference and hotel information are now available

on NEHA's website at www.neha.org/aec. Bring your family if you can—I'm probably going to bring Sam. He's a few years older now and the starfish phase has passed, but rumor has it that Anaheim isn't too far from the Pacific Ocean. Maybe I can talk him into another starfishing trip! 🐟



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Did You Know?

Registration will open on April 10 for NEHA's second Enhancing Environmental Health Knowledge (EEK): Vectors and Public Health Pests Virtual Conference, May 15–16. The EEK Virtual Conference is designed to enhance the knowledge of environmental health professionals to help them respond to environmental events of public health concern, as well as bring professionals together to exchange information and discover new solutions to issues in vectors and public health pests. The virtual conference is free to attend. Learn more at www.neha.org/eh-topics/vectors-and-pest-control-0/eeek-virtual-conference-2018.

SUPPORT THE NEHA ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION

The NEHA Endowment Foundation was established to enable NEHA to do more for the environmental health profession than its annual budget might allow. Special projects and programs supported by the foundation will be carried out for the sole purpose of advancing the profession and its practitioners.

Individuals who have contributed to the foundation are listed below by club category. These listings are based on what people have actually donated to the foundation—not what they have pledged. Names will be published under the appropriate category for one year; additional contributions will move individuals to a different category in the following year(s). For each of the categories, there are a number of ways NEHA recognizes and thanks contributors to the foundation. If you are interested in contributing to the Endowment Foundation, please call NEHA at 303.756.9090. You can also donate online at www.neha.org/about-neha/donate.

Thank you.

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Vince Radke, MPH, RS, CP-FS, DAAS, CPH
Atlanta, GA