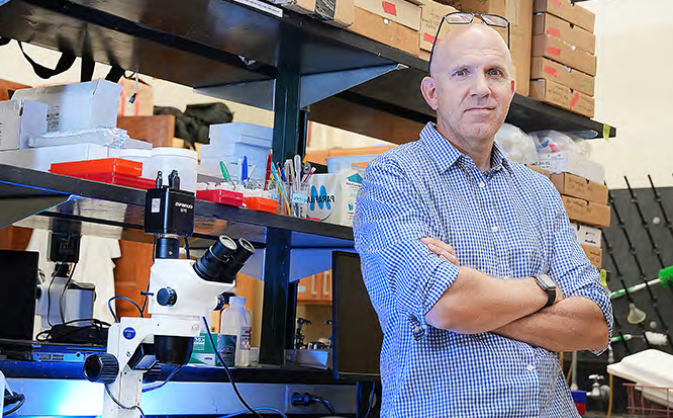




Tomas Höök reflects on his Sea Grant legacy

TOMAS HÖÖK shares his thoughts about his seven-year tenure as the director of IISG.

Reflecting on your time as director of Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, what accomplishments or milestones are you most proud of?

We really worked to broaden our programming. Aquaculture grew into a much larger part of what we do—not just in research but in outreach and communications around aquaculture. We also expanded into coastal resilience, which wasn't a major focus before. Communities have experienced big swings in Lake Michigan water levels—first people worried about “mudflats” when levels were low, then flooding and erosion when levels were high—and we engaged to help people make sense of that.

Our education programs grew, too. The internship program we helped start when I was associate director evolved into a broader professional development experience, not just project work. We've supported more Knauss fellows working in D.C., and we launched a graduate student scholars program.

Big picture, I'm proud that we broadened the communities we serve. Sea Grant has historically supported boating and fisheries, which are important audiences, but we've made real progress reaching more of the totality of communities that depend on Lake Michigan and have tried to address more needs across the region.

How has working with Sea Grant shaped your approach to research, outreach, or leadership?

Before I came to Purdue, I wasn't in a land-grant setting, and I didn't fully appreciate extension. Sea Grant deepened my understanding of the three missions—extension and outreach, teaching, including K-12 education, and applied research—and how they reinforce each other.

My research has always leaned applied, so that didn't change much. But my appreciation for designing work that communities can actually use did. On leadership, helping move a complex program forward gave me a strong foundation for department leadership.

You've worked closely with a wide range of people and organizations. What have you learned about collaboration and community through Sea Grant?

Sea Grant is a healthy, collaborative network. Inside IISG and across programs, people are genuinely cheering each other on. If one effort succeeds, it tends to lift everyone.

One of the biggest leadership lessons came from moving IISG's program administration from the University of Illinois to Purdue in 2018. There was uncertainty around roles, processes, and lots of new hires, and we had to build trust quickly. Then came COVID, which

layered on different rules across two universities and a federal lab, and we still needed to keep people supported and coordinated. We also navigated federal funding uncertainty, which pushed us to learn congressional engagement and to communicate clearly inside the program. Those experiences reinforced how much relationships, transparency, and steady communication matter.

What do you hope your colleagues and partners remember most about your time at IISG?

Stability. Despite real challenges, funding questions, an administrative move and a pandemic, we kept people in their roles, maintained our core work and grew programs at the same time. I hope folks remember steadiness while we continued to deliver impact.

Any final words you'd like to share with the Sea Grant team or collaborators?

At a time when some people question the value of universities and research, Sea Grant can point to real impacts—economic, cultural, environmental, and human health—across a huge region. IISG just marked 40 years; I hope it keeps working this way for the next 40. 🍷