



Map Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

Upper Michigan - A surprising landowner in the Upper Peninsula (UP) was the Kamehameha schools, a school for children of Hawaiian descent in Hawaii. The school had diversified its investments by purchasing timber lands in Michigan. However, by the early 2000s, the school decided to sell holdings far away from its home base in Hawaii. When these forest lands, came up for sale, it initiated the largest conservation project in the state. The deal, called the Northern Great Lakes Forest Project, became affectionately titled the Big UP Deal. The Nature Conservancy came to the Department of Natural Resources with a plan and negotiated a deal with the new landowner, The Forestland Group, for conservation easements and acquisitions of more than 271,000 acres.

“This leap is crucial for large conservation implications, but it matters on a smaller scale just as much.”

The negotiation began with the idea that, rather than the state owning the land, they could own easements – the rights to protect the land from development and subdivision – and ensure it was managed sustainably. The conservation easements, first purchased by The Nature Conservancy and now transferred to the state, protect the land for public access and sustainable forestry purposes forever. Trees could be cut, but only in a sustainable manner. The deal also guaranteed permanent right-of-way and access for snowmobile trails, hunting, fishing, hiking and other outdoor recreation.

The Conservancy developed an idea to purchase working forest conservation easements, paying 30-40% for the protected rights under the easement, instead of having to pay for 100% of the forest. Of course, the cost of such a project would still be in the millions, so partners were necessary to make the acquisition work. The Michigan Trust Fund provided much of the public funding, and private philanthropic gifts from donors and foundations provided much of the rest.

Understanding the Significance of the Region

One concern of land being sold was that the land could be subdivided and sold into small parcels, negatively impacting habitat, wildlife species and wood production, among other things. The Two Hearted River Watershed, part of the area for sale, is one of the least impacted watersheds in the state. If the land had been sold piecemeal, then the chances that it would have remained intact were not likely.



Site dedicated to the Northern Great Lakes Forest Project. *Photo Courtesy of Jason Whalen/Big Foot Media*

One of the reasons this project was met with such enthusiasm is the scope of what was protected under the deal, which included 80% of the Two-Hearted River Watershed, 660 lakes and streams and 423 square miles of forest, lakes and rivers. Some of the state's most prestigious natural areas were also protected by the creation of a buffer area around them, including Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park and Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

Helen Taylor, state director in Michigan for The Nature Conservancy, describes what occurred with the Big UP Deal as a nested scale of impact, symbolic of a conservation leap from site to scale systems. This leap is crucial for large conservation implications, but it matters on a smaller scale just as much. Instead of disparate pieces that work to different ends, the pieces add up to one resilient system that supports the area's economic base, which includes tourism and the timber industry, while protecting the natural biodiversity of the land.

How It Worked for the Good of the State and the Land

The conversation easements ensure sustainable forestry that provides a livelihood for those living in the area but limits future development; it provides a healthy forest and tourist industry that includes conservation. Like all projects with The Nature Conservancy, science drove this initiative. The science-backed conservation tactics that were used to protect the forest and waters can be implemented to protect and conserve other watersheds across the Great Lakes.

The Big UP Deal enabled the Conservancy and their partners to not only protect the ecosystem but provide continued economic return on the property. The success of the deal means we can achieve conservation while supporting Michigan's economy for lasting significance for the area and the earth.

More Information

<https://vimeo.com/15041649>

http://www.mlui.org/energy/news-views/news-views-articles/the-big-up-deal.html#.WDoIo_krI2w

<http://wlns.com/2015/08/13/gov-snyder-celebrates-the-big-u-p-deal/>

<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/michigan/newsroom/the-nature-conservancy-in-michigan-big-up-deal-finally-done-largest-con.xml>

<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/michigan/newsroom/big-up-deal.xml>