



What Is a Natural Area?

Deer Park Site – 60-acre Natural Area

Photo Courtesy of Kim Herman, Department of Natural Resources

Deer Park, Luce County - Michigan Just north of Muskallonge Lake State Park in northern Luce County there is a unique stretch of Lake Superior shoreline, extending three miles east of the small town of Deer Park. The wild, undeveloped shoreline is part of a cooperative agreement between the State of Michigan landowner and The Nature Conservancy, a state-wide land trust.

The Nature Conservancy identified the area as a high quality example of an open dune and interdunal wetland complex, a type of natural community found along the Great Lakes shorelines. This particular area has remained intact and has not been impacted by humans. This sites protects habitat for the Piping plover.

Piping plovers, a federally and state endangered shore bird, nest in undisturbed, sandy beaches that contain natural debris such as sticks, logs, and small rocks. Their “nests” consist of small areas hollowed out in the sand. The natural pebbles and sticks help their small speckled chicks go unnoticed on the beach. The chicks are able to run and feed within an hour of hatching but need the parents for warmth and predator protection.

The area is managed as a State Natural Area by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). This wild stretch of beach provides hiking, scenic vistas and birdwatching. The autumn gale wind storms and winter ice formations are particularly interesting to observe.

What is a State Natural Area?

The story of Michigan's Natural Areas begins with concern over the fate of the Porcupine Mountains in the wester Upper Peninsula. In 1925, P. J. Hoffmaster, then chief of State Parks, recommended the acquisition of

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the Porcupine Mountains to prevent further tree cutting. Twenty years later, the State acquired the area, establishing the State Park in 1946.

However, the Porcupine Mountains continued to be threatened by copper mining in 1958; a proposed scenic road to the heart of the park in 1965; and later, a proposed fish ladder that would of required dynamiting the falls in the Presque Isle River. These plans were dropped, but it was clear that a "State Park" designation alone could not protect the area's virgin forests, waterfalls, scenic shorelines and geological and ecological resources.

The Help of the Michigan Botanical Club

As the above events unfolded, the Michigan Botanical Club, a group of volunteers who were talented botanists, formed a committee, leading to the 1950 incorporation of the Michigan Natural Areas Council. The purpose of the Council was to identify areas in the state with critically rare plants and natural communities, often areas discovered on botany forays hosted by the club.

During the next twenty years, the Council evaluated and made recommendations about natural areas to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC). In 1971, Executive Order created the Natural Areas Advisory Board and in 1972, the legislature created the State's Natural Areas Program with the passage of the Wilderness and Natural Areas Act. A flurry of activity in the 1970s resulted in several legislative re-dedications of Natural Areas previously dedicated by the NRC, including the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness Area.

In 1979, the Michigan Natural Features Inventory was created through a partnership between the DNR and The Nature Conservancy. For 20 years, natural area efforts in Michigan were focused on dedications, with the Natural Areas coordinator serving primarily as a liaison between the DNR and the Wilderness and Natural Areas Board (WNAB). In the early 1990s, the WNAB was dissolved and the Natural Areas Legislation recodified. In 1994, the Natural Areas Coordinator's position was rewritten to focus not only on dedications but also stewardship and management of natural areas in Michigan.

The Natural Areas Program currently recognizes 80 State Natural Areas, totaling approximately 130,000 acres of DNR administered lands and waters, including areas within State Forests, State Parks and State Game Areas. These areas, together with the many natural areas managed by other public and private organizations and individuals, make up a statewide "system" of natural areas. Currently, there are 45 state-owned areas linked with information on the Michigan DNR Natural Areas webpage: http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-31154_31260-54423--,00.html.

Can you Nominate a New Natural Area?

According to the DNR web site, citizens can nominate state lands they think should be Natural Areas. To nominate a new natural area, specific information found on the DNR web site must be filled out. Dedication of a natural area is an important endeavor and nominated areas need to be carefully reviewed to ensure that they adequately represent natural area values and legal requirements. The materials outlined in the natural areas nomination checklist will ensure that a natural area nomination contains sufficient information for an adequate review. The materials can be found here: http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-31154_31260-155132--,00.html.