
PARKS: Great Lakes sites pose diverse resource challenges (10/11/2007)

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As part of its first comprehensive review of the status of parks in the Great Lakes region, the National Parks Conservation Association this week released a report highlighting challenges facing six popular lakeshore destinations that indicate both a wide variety of existing problems and common framework for meeting future challenges.



At the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore park on Lake Superior in Wisconsin there are just two full-time staff environmental members responsible for protecting 21 islands covering 70,000 acres of land and water resources. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.

While the list of issues uncovered by NPCA at the sites includes invasive species, water and ground pollution, crumbling infrastructure and diminished staffing, the potential solutions boil down to increased public awareness and more stable funding.

NPCA's recently hired Midwest regional director Lynn McClure said the Center for the State of the Park's Oct. 9 report on the Great Lakes represents the group's first attempt to delineate "systematic challenges in a region as opposed to a one-site assessment." The parks identified in the report range from the earliest national lakeshore areas to the remnants of an historic copper mining community; some feature expansive sand dunes, while another is characterized by a single large island surrounded by 400 smaller isles.

Collectively, these parks have about 5 million visitors each year and together they face a backlog of at least \$30 million in deferred maintenance projects.

"All of the parks face a lot of threats, too many challenges and not enough money," McClure said.

The six parks reviewed in the report, and some of their greatest challenges, are:

- Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore – Established by Congress in 1966, this 15-mile stretch of south Lake Michigan shoreline is among the most popular parks in the Midwest, with over 2 million annual visitors. Home to four national landmarks, the park is best known as an oasis of biological diversity in an otherwise heavily industrialized region, with more than 1,100 native species of flowering plants and ferns documented within its borders. But the sand dunes for which it is named are threatened by erosion, and air and water quality adversely affected by pollutants such as mercury and nitrogen. Though the park recently benefited from the opening of a new Dorothy Buell Memorial Visitors center in 2006 – the park's only visitor facility – it needs to secure \$1.2 million to complete its planned exhibits. Also, according to NPCA, since 2000 Indiana Dunes has lost 20 staff positions from resource management, maintenance and administration.
- Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore – Located on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, this was the country's first lakeshore park to be designated by Congress in 1966. Unique among units of the National Park System, Pictured Rocks is a total 73,235 acres, with less than half of that federally owned. Surrounding the 33,929-acre NPS property, however, is a 39,306-acre "inland buffer zone" of private and state lands. The park derives its name from 15 miles of multicolored sandstone cliffs, with multiple waterfalls and caves carved into the cliffs that draw nearly a half-million visitors each year. As part of a general management plan approved in 2004, the Park Service is seeking wilderness designation for nearly 12,000 acres of the park. However, it needs more rangers, biologists, landscape ecologists and a historian or curator to reach its full potential, said NPCA.
- Keweenaw National Historic Park – This park celebrates the history of copper mining on the Keweenaw Peninsula in northern Michigan and is actually two sites that are separated by about 12 miles. The Calumet Unit is a 750-acre site of the former Calumet and Hecla Mining Co. that closed down in 1969 after 98 years of operations; the Quincy Unit is 1,200 acres of property from the old Quincy Mining Co., which ran from 1856 to 1945. The heritage park is run in partnership with local and state agencies, nonprofit groups and private organizations and is visited by 350,000 people each year. There is no visitor's center, however, and the cost of deferred maintenance for buildings on the two sites was put at \$12.5 million.
- Apostle Islands National Lakeshore – This park, found along the southern tip of Lake Superior, is made up of a 21-island archipelago and part of the Bayfield Peninsula shoreline in Wisconsin. It includes 42,160 acres of land and 27,232 acres of water, and is considered the birthplace of the Ojibwe Native American Tribe. In 2004, 80

percent of the park was designated as the Gaylord Wilson Wilderness, but it has just two permanent employees. Among attractions for the 189,000 annual visitors are six historic lighthouses, but there is a severe lack of funding for maintenance, reported NPCA, and a \$4.4 million deferred maintenance list.

- Isle Royale National Park – Another archipelago, located at the northwestern part of Lake Superior, Isle Royale features one large island and 400 smaller ones. In total, the park has some 571,790 acres, but less than 25 percent of that is above the water's surface, with nearly all of the land part of a federal wilderness. Isle Royale was authorized as a national park in 1931, but it took seven years for NPS to acquire enough land to establish it. Despite its remoteness – 35 miles south of Thunder Bay, Ontario – the park gets about 17,000 visitors each year. According to NPCA, the park represents 4,500 years of human history, but it has only one part-time staff position devoted to cultural resources. It is best known for continuing research into the interactions of native moose and wolf populations – though both species have been facing serious declines for a number of years (*Land Letter*, March 17, 2005). This past winter's population census showed 385 moose, the lowest number for the animal since biologists starting keeping track 49 years ago, while wolf numbers fell from 30 to 21 over the last year.
- Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore – This 71,290-acre park with 65 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline is not only very popular today – attracting 1.1 million visitors annually – it was traditionally a hunting and fishing spot for Native Americans from the Ottawa, Chippewa (Ojibwe) and Potawatomi nations until they ceded their rights in the 1836 Treaty of Washington. Sleeping Bear has one of the Park Service's largest collections of historic structures "ranging from lighthouses to outhouses," noted NPCA, and a need for about \$19 million in rehabilitation and maintenance projects. Native aquatic species have been crowded out by zebra mussels and lampreys. Water pollution in Lake Michigan, Glen Lake and other lakes within the park is serious enough to keep the area from meeting state clean water standards. The park has had some successes in stabilizing its nesting populations of endangered piping plovers and rehabilitating several former sites of gravel pits. This year, the Park Service proposed a riverbank restoration project along the Platte River in Benzie County; that plan is in public comment phase.



The Rock Harbor Lighthouse is one of 366 historic structures at the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore that need \$19 million for repairs and maintenance. Photo courtesy of NPS.

While the NPCA report emphasizes the financial aspects of maintaining these parks, McClure said that many of the needs could be met with education and public awareness. At the most popular sites, like Indiana Dunes, public awareness and involvement is high, "but awareness at other parks is low, certainly in comparison to big parks like Yellowstone or Yosemite."

McClure sees some benefits coming from NPS's Centennial Challenge. Although the program is geared toward the future of the system and the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the service, the challenge will direct more needed resources to parks beginning in 2008.

[Click here](#) for a copy of the NPCA's report on the six Great Lakes parks.