



Summer 2021

UPEnvironment

"Keep the U.P. Wild":

NEW CAMPAIGN AIMS TO PROTECT FOUR MORE FEDERAL WILDERNESS AREAS

Laina G. Stebbins, reporting for Michigan Advance

Over 60 state and regional organizations (and counting) are teaming up in a wide-ranging coalition to protect four tracts of Upper Peninsula land under federal wilderness designations.

The coalition, called "Keep the U.P. Wild," is seeking the highest level of wilderness protection for the Trap Hills, the Ehlco Area, Norwich Plains, and a 2,000-acre addition to the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness area.

In total, the four areas would create two contiguous wilderness areas of more than 40,000 acres in Ontonagon County and nearly 19,000 acres in Houghton County.

Rock bluff in the Trap Hills along the North Country National Scenic Trail, Ottawa National Forest. **IAN SHACKLEFORD**

Tyler Barron, a policy advocate with the Chicago-based Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC), said the effort to protect the natural areas began in the spring of 2019. Sixty-one organizations are on board currently, about 25 more are in the process of officially joining the coalition, and Barron says he is "confident" that Keep the U.P. Wild will comprise nearly 100 groups by the end of this summer.

Currently, Michigan is home to 16 areas protected by the federal wilderness designation, including parts of Sleeping

Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and Isle Royale National Park, and the Sylvania and McCormick Tracts.

The Trap Hills, located in Ontonagon County, is about 25,000 acres of nearly undisturbed habitats for diverse wildlife populations. Most is government-owned and within the Ottawa National Forest.

The Ehlco Area in Ontonagon County includes about 16,000 acres just south of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. It is also mostly federally owned, and was previously recommended by the Forest Service for wilderness evaluation in 2003.

The Norwich Plains within the Ottawa National Forest comprises about 8,000 acres, and could become more ecologically unique as its forests mature and it continues to recover from timber activity and road construction in the 1980s.

The 16,744-acre Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness in the Ottawa National Forest has been under wilderness designation since 1987. However, roughly 2,000 acres of wild Ottawa National Forest land on the area's southwest border was not originally considered and is without the same protection. Advocates argue the addition would be an essential complement to the already-designated land because of its wildlife and ample recreational opportunities.

"It's our opinion that these are probably the last areas in the state that would still qualify under the Wilderness Act," Barron said. "Because these areas are special, because Michigan has a long history of doing this [and is] certainly no stranger to it, the fact that these areas are sitting here unprotected is really reason enough to try to protect them."

A designation under the 1964 Wilderness Act requires congressional action. After input from the Forest Service about whether the areas meet the strict criteria necessary,

We must protect Michigan's wild places

Horst Schmidt and Doug Welker

We in the Upper Peninsula love our wilderness. We hunt, fish, camp, and hike in it. It's part of who we are. But loving it is not enough. We must protect it.

A coalition of more than 60 business, environmental, outdoor recreation, academic, political, and community organizations from across the U.P. and Michigan is doing just that. The "Keep the U.P. Wild" campaign is seeking federal Wilderness designation for four special places on the Ottawa National Forest. For more information on the campaign—and the local groups advocating for it—go to keeptheupwild.com.

Some tout the whole U.P. as "wilderness," and to some folks it may seem like it is. But there's a difference between wilderness, meaning any wild area, and federally designated, capital-W Wilderness. When it comes to wild places there is no guarantee that without formal protection they will stay that way forever, or even for the next decade or two. Or stay as valuable for its solitude, or as a home to rare plants and animals, or as an ecosystem and landscape that help provide a source of clean water. Federally designated Wilderness focuses on non-motorized recreation, natural resource protection, and opportunities for quiet, solitude, and personal challenge. Achieving those goals involves some restrictions on human activity, but restrictions are sometimes needed for the greater good.

A 2014 study from the International Journal of Wilderness found that Wilderness designation brings the American public \$9.4 billion a year in economic benefits. These benefits—roughly \$85 an acre—are stable and don't decline during economic downturns. Hunting and fishing, which Wilderness allows and encourages, already bring Michigan \$11.2 billion a year and 171,000 jobs.

Clearly, not all of the U.P., or not even most of it, should become designated Wilderness. No private land is eligible. Wilderness is a special designation for the most special federal lands.

The focus of Keep the U.P. Wild is on these four special areas:



Cliffs like this make the Trap Hills some of the U.P.'s most rugged country—perfect for a Wilderness designation. **IAN SHACKLEFORD**

proposals for the designation are passed through Congress more or less like any other legislation before being presented to the president's desk for a final signature.

Barron said there are still conversations “happening behind the scenes” with lawmakers, but the coalition most fervently hopes to secure first the support of U.S. Sens. Debbie Stabenow (D-Lansing) and Gary Peters (D-Bloomfield Twp.).

Stabenow chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee, which Keep the U.P. Wild is focusing on most right now to make its case.

“We think that there's a number of really strong cases to be made, both on the environmental side [and] on the economic side. Wilderness always brings in a big boost to the economy, and so we think that there's a lot of different angles to play here, and that it should really satisfy a lot of wants and needs from all different types of people,” Barron said.

- Ontonagon County's **Trap Hills** is perhaps the most spectacular place in Michigan without permanent protection. It features great hiking trails, a number of waterfalls and undeveloped clear streams, many rare plants and animals, some old-growth forest, spectacular views, a lot of very wild country, and the highest sheer cliff in Michigan.
- South of the Trap Hills is a smaller, adjacent area known as the **Norwich Plains**, which would complement the Trap Hills because of its nature and location.
- Northwest of the Trap Hills is the **Ehlco Tract**, which the Forest Service has determined should be looked at for Wilderness designation. It's a large, almost-roadless tract, contains mostly maturing forest, and features a number of gorgeous streams. It's also immediately south of the Porkies, which is already managed, to a great extent, as wilderness, so the two would greatly complement each other, both ecologically and recreationally.
- Adjacent to Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness, in southern Houghton County, is an area we propose adding to that Wilderness. The **Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Addition** covers about 2,000 acres, and is about 50% wetlands. It's tough to traverse, and is best suited for challenging hiking and hunting. Moose and moose sign are occasionally spotted there.

Wilderness designation tends to increase visitor usage because Wilderness is considered special by many. For example, seven of the eight highest-attendance years for Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore came after the creation of Sleeping Bear Dunes Wilderness in 2014. Wilderness designation lets communities promote the specialness of their area. Logging and mining are not permitted in Wilderness. However, none of the four proposed Wildernesses is dominated by forests of high economic value and the valuable copper deposits once found there are gone. Eventually, the forests in these Wildernesses will be most valued for their ecological and scenic attributes.

As our population and associated development increase, so will the pressure to extract the natural resources on our public lands. But so will the need to escape the stresses of an increasingly urbanized world. Action now will help ensure that those havens will remain available for generations to come.

Horst Schmidt of Tamarack City is president of the Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition. Doug Welker of Alston is a former educator and Ottawa National Forest Wilderness ranger. This article first appeared as an op-ed in the Marquette Mining Journal, June 26, 2021.

The 61 groups that currently make up the coalition include the ELPC, Michigan Environmental Council (MEC), Clean Water Action, the Ecology Center, Groundwork Center, International Dark-Skies Association, Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Audubon, Religious Coalition for the Great Lakes, Wilderness Society and more.

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The Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness—home to iconic wildlife such as moose, wolves, and bears—would be expanded by 2,000 acres under the Keep the U.P. Wild proposal. **IAN SHACKLEFORD**



WILD RICE BEDS IN MICHIGAN

Bill Ziegler

Wild rice has been extremely important to Native Americans for centuries. The Ojibwe word for wild rice is manoomin. Tribes in the Upper Great Lakes states relied on wild rice as a staple of their diet. Roger LaBine, a Lac Vieux Desert tribal water quality specialist and wild rice expert, explained that the current Indian reservations of the federally recognized tribes are at locations near where significant wild rice beds grew in the past. One tribe that was reported to have ideal food resources was the

Menominee Tribe from the mouth of the Menominee River (Wisconsin/Michigan border) who had extensive wild rice beds on the Lower Menominee River and in the bay of Green Bay. In addition to ample wild rice, the Menominee Tribe also had predictable large fish spawning runs into the river in spring and fall, some crops, maple sugar camps, and wild game. The Menominee name for their tribe is the “Wild Rice People.”

Northern wild rice grows in the boreal forest provinces of Canada, and in the US states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Currently wild rice is more prevalent in the US in Minnesota, although historically significant wild rice beds were found in northern Michigan and Wisconsin. Wild rice beds were commonly found in bays of the Great Lakes, and in some inland lakes with proper habitat for wild rice, especially at the inlets and outlets



Wild rice growing in Michigan water. Many Michiganders likely do not realize wild rice is still found in some locations in the state. Large wild rice beds were a crucial part of Michigan area Indian tribes (such as at the mouth of the Menominee River, Lac Vieux Desert, Saginaw Bay, etc.) as a staple of their diet. Many beds were lost during development of the state's waters.

TODD MARSEE / MICHIGAN SEA GRANT



(clockwise from upper left) Roger Labine, Lac Vieux Desert tribal wild rice specialist, showing how to make a push pole base so as to not damage wild rice plants as harvesters push the canoe through the wild rice beds. Labine is a natural teacher and teaches classes on wild rice and its harvest by tribal members. | Tribal members drying the wild rice gathered near Lac Vieux Desert. | Roger Labine winnowing the ripe and dried wild rice.

TODD MARSEE / MICHIGAN SEA GRANT



of those lakes. LaBine said some notable wild rice beds were found in Saginaw Bay, Houghton Lake, and the Shiawassee area of lower Michigan. Many Michiganders probably don't realize we still have some wild rice beds in Michigan. Wild rice beds can still be found in some areas of northern Michigan and Wisconsin, although it is just a very limited area compared to the rice beds of the past.

LaBine said wild rice beds can still be found at Tawas Lake in Iosco County, Lac Vieux Desert in Gogebic County, and in Drummond Island waters and the St. Mary's River area of the east end of the UP in Mackinac and Chippewa Counties. Wild rice has been found in some shallow lakes in the UP

in recent years. Wild rice can also be found in northern Wisconsin with some extensive beds still remaining at the mouths of the rivers as they enter Chequamegon Bay on the Bad River Indian Reservation.

Wild rice beds were lost as Michigan was developed. Dewatering shallow wetland areas, land filling, and dams all had major impact on historical wild rice beds. The extensive wild rice beds at the mouth of the Menominee River were all lost, due primarily to dredging and filling. Historically the river mouth was shallow and the channel was not well defined for navigation. Wood waste and fill from over 30 sawmills constructed at the mouth during the late 1800s

resulted in the loss of the beds as channelized river shore wetlands were filled in.

Tribal and wildlife groups like Ducks Unlimited (DU) have made efforts to re-establish wild rice beds in Michigan and the other Great Lakes states. The Keweenaw Bay Indian Community and Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Ojibwa have made a number of efforts to re-establish beds in inland waters suitable to wild rice, with mixed results. Ducks Unlimited has also made a significant effort in the Wisconsin waters of Green Bay. The bay was reportedly named for all the extensive wild rice beds that made it look green at its south end in Wisconsin. DU personnel involved with this restoration project refer to wild rice as “finicky.” DU has been making this effort because wild rice is an excellent food for puddle ducks like mallards.

The guidebook *Wetland Plants and Plant Communities of Minnesota and Wisconsin* describes wild rice as a non-persistent annual emergent grass found in deep and shallow marshes. LaBine notes that wild rice is like a canary in a coal mine. It disappears when habitat and water quality is degraded. Wild rice “grows best” in clear, shallow water with a slight current over a silty or mucky bottom in water two feet deep or less. I have a forester friend who lives on one of the headwater lakes of the Mississippi River and follows wild rice development every year near his lake shore and in the outlet, which is the Mississippi River. At present the wild rice there is inconsistent in its development from year to year. LaBine notes that tribal lore and his experience indicates a good seed bed of wild rice can last for about seven years. If the wild rice beds do not develop one year the conditions may be more suitable the next.

LaBine said new exotic aquatic plants can outcompete wild rice. There are a number of aquatic invasive plants that can outcompete wild rice. They include Eurasian watermilfoil, curly leaf pond weed, and phragmites—although native aquatic plants can also outcompete wild rice. Wild rice is most successful when it has no competition from other aquatic plants. Other factors that can degrade wild rice are carp that “root” around the beds, increasing turbidity and dislodging plants.

I was unclear on the difference between domestic wild rice (paddy rice) and the real thing. LaBine explained most paddy rice is grown in California now by conventional rice growers. The process is far from being organic farming with GMO seeds, chemicals, pesticides, and considerable mechanization used. Most people who know wild rice say



Members of the Keweenaw Bay Tribe participating in a wild rice seeding in a flowage in the Upper Peninsula. Several Michigan tribes and Ducks Unlimited are attempting to re-seed wild rice beds in some UP waters and the bay of Green Bay. TODD MARSEE / MICHIGAN SEA GRANT

it is far better than paddy rice, and that all the kernels of wild rice open up when cooked versus paddy rice, where all kernels are mechanically picked at one time. LaBine said it would be equivalent to going to a strawberry farm and shaking off all the berries, even the green ones, as they are harvested. When wild rice is harvested properly only the ripe kernels are gathered with much more “gentle” harvest methods. Popular opinion holds that true wild rice is more tender and tastier in cooked dishes that require wild rice. Another giveaway to the consumer is price. True wild rice harvested and processed properly is not cheap. Traveling around the UP, Wisconsin, and Minnesota you may see similar-looking signs advertising wild rice along roads and in gas stations. If the sign says 3 lbs. for less than \$14, it is paddy rice. One pound of true wild rice will often sell for about the price of three pounds of paddy rice.

Tribal methods of harvest are typically simple and very low impact. A canoe is pushed with a push pole through rice beds when most of the rice is ripe, usually during late August and early September. LaBine said tribal code requires a forked stick to be used versus a mechanical end of the pole that might damage the rice plants. The second person in the front of the canoe uses two short sticks; tribal code requires they be not greater than 39 inches long. One stick is used to bend the rice tops over the canoe and the second stick is used to gently brush off the mature kernels into the canoe bottom. The plants are not beaten with the sticks to dislodge the rice. Inevitably some rice falls back into the water which aids reseeding the wild rice beds. After the rice is gathered it is then dried and then winnowed to eliminate chaff. As previously stated, wild rice is extremely important to the tribes of the Great Lakes area. “Losing rice would be like losing our language,” states LaBine.

As noted earlier, considerable wild rice beds have been

lost over the years in Michigan and the other Great Lakes states due to dredge and fill development. Wild rice is an important part of Michigan heritage, and as wildlife and fish habitat (nursery area). A concerted effort to re-establish wild rice is ongoing by the Michigan Wild Rice Initiative. LaBine encourages anyone, Native American or non-Indian, who is interested in helping the effort to maintain current Michigan wild rice beds and reestablish others

to contact the Wild Rice Initiative. Along with Michigan tribes, other partners include the Michigan Sea Grant, US Natural Resources Conservation Service, Michigan EGLE (Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, formerly the Department of Environmental Quality) and Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Bill Ziegler is a frequent contributor to *UP Environment*.

UPEC ELECTS NEW OFFICERS FOR 2022

In July the UPEC Board elected new officers for 2022. Three of the four current officers will be returning in their roles: Horst Schmidt as President, Evan Zimmermann as Vice President, and Steve Garske as Secretary. Kathleen Heideman will succeed long-time UPEC Treasurer Jon Saari in that position. We asked each to share a short thought about what they hope to contribute in service to UPEC.

• *Horst*: “Thanks to my fellow board members for re-electing me as their president. The last five years have been tumultuous for environmental activists, attempting to keep mining companies from again polluting the U.P. In the meantime climate change is intruding more into our daily lives each year. We, along with our colleagues in other environmental organizations, are collaborating to dismantle Enbridge’s Line 5 before it ruptures in the Straits of Mackinac. The start of the pandemic has energized UPEC by changing how we communicate and looking for more effective ways to reach our public. Exciting and challenging times during the next two years as I look forward to serving and leading UPEC!”

• *Evan*: “I’d like to thank the UPEC board for re-electing me as Vice President and the UPEC membership for supporting our mission. Together we’ve been able to keep our attention on some of the most important issues affecting the U.P. and the world. As we move forward, my goal is to continue to

hold public conversations with people maintaining the U.P. wilderness, spread scientifically grounded information, and expand our membership and outreach to the new generation that’s more aware than ever of the importance of maintaining our environment. UPEC will continue to grow as a place for people with diverse skills to collaborate and amplify our ability to make the U.P. a place to connect with every living thing that makes this our home.”

• *Steve*: “Thanks to the Board for re-electing me as UPEC Secretary. Along with the nuts-and-bolts job of preparing the meeting minutes, I hope to contribute more meaningfully to UPEC’s Mining Action Group, and to doing all we can to keep the U.P. the place we know and love.”

• *Kathleen*: “I’m deeply grateful for Jon Saari’s many years of service as UPEC’s Treasurer. As the incoming Treasurer, I will work with Jon to ensure that UPEC’s assets are wisely invested and aligned with our environmental values, in order to sustain our grant-making in the Environmental Education and Community Conservation programs. Growing up on a family farm, I saw first-hand the tremendous vigilance required to “keep the checkbook balanced” (taxes and book-keeping duties were handled by my mom, which required a lot of notebooks and file folders)—while my father would wink and advise, “Watch your pennies and the dollars will take care of themselves.”

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Tribal members using traditional methods to gather wild rice that has ripened. See story starting on p. 4.

Support UPEC by becoming a member or renewing your membership today! Just fill out the form below. All memberships run with the calendar year. Not sure if your membership is current? Email us at upec@upenvironment.org. (All memberships expire on January 1.)

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