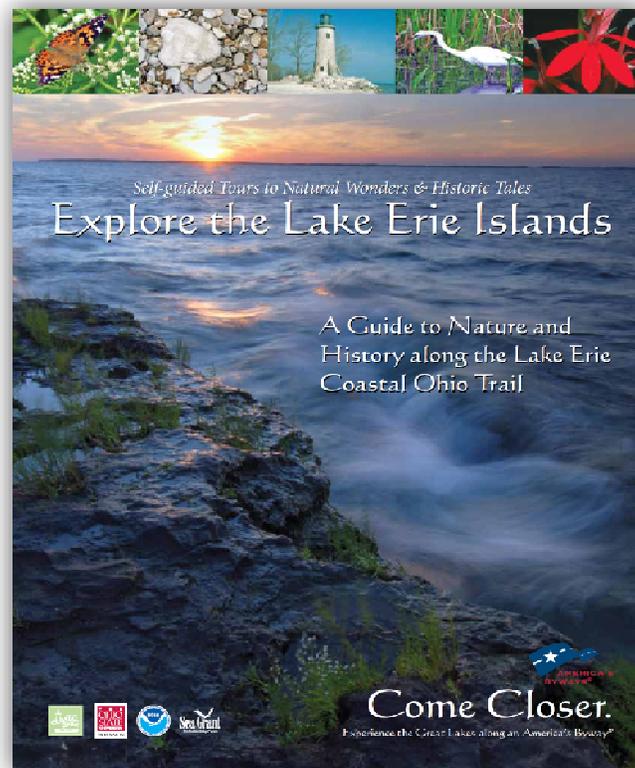




The Lake Erie Islands: Nature-Based Field Guide and Survey

LEPF 03-08

Final Report



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Situation Analysis

The Western Lake Erie Islands and nearshore bedrock reef communities have been identified by The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and others as biologically important. These islands are home to the endangered Lake Erie watersnake, are important stopover sites for colonial water birds and migratory songbirds, and the nearshore habitat is among the most productive spawning sites in Lake Erie. The Nature Conservancy conducted a site conservation planning process in 2002 for the Western Lake Erie Islands with more than 50 agencies, organizations, and local participants assisting in the development of conservation strategies for the islands. Participants recognized that nature-based tourism could be one tool to both enhance awareness of the unique resources on the islands and build leadership for compatible growth strategies. (The Nature Conservancy and Nature Conservancy of Canada, 2003)

Participants identified eight conservation targets on the islands relating to the islands' unique ecological communities and species at risk. These were identified as nearshore bedrock mosaic, offshore reefs and shoals, sand beach and barrier systems, sheltered embayments, alvars, forest mosaic, snake assemblage, and colonial nesting birds.

The process then identified stresses threatening the conservation targets. Ranking highest were incompatible development, invasive species, shoreline modification, marina development, and recreational use. Although incompatible development was identified as a primary stressor, several of the other top stresses listed above are also direct or indirect results of incompatible development, particularly associated with tourism and land use.

Sustainable solutions to environmental problems must be conscious of environmental, economic, and social implications in order to be locally supported, adopted and successful. In this situation, a solution needed to address the environmental issues with an understanding that a course of action had to still support and assist island economies.

Tourism is the mainstay of island economies and supports mainland businesses in both Erie and Ottawa counties though demand of services provided largely by the following industry sectors: Transportation; Recreation and Entertainment; Lodging; Food and Beverage; Retail; and Finance, Insurance and Real Estate. In those counties alone, travelers spend \$1,403,595,378 in local businesses and support 14,768 jobs. Those expenditures generate \$201,296,563 in local and state tax revenues. (Tourism Economics, 2008)

A direct recommendation evolving from the conservation strategies discussed with island stakeholders was to work toward creating the tools, support, and knowledge necessary for differentiating tourism markets by building the success of nature-based tourism. Nature-based tourism is one of the fastest growing tourism markets. (Balmford, 2009) Visitor demands for activities are shifting to those nature-oriented, non-consumptive, participatory, and educational. (Travel Industry Association of America and National Geographic Traveler, 2003) Outdoor recreation activities and preferences of Ohio residents are consistent with national findings. (Ohio Department of Natural Resources, 2008)



Project Methodology

The Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy chose to partner with Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc. and the Ohio Sea Grant College Program on this project. Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc. manages the Lake Erie Coastal Ohio Trail, a federally-designated national scenic byway spanning the Lake Erie shoreline, and prioritizes sustainable tourism development. This organization's goals include both enhancing the economic impact of tourism spending in coastal communities and advocating for the preservation of the intrinsic features that make these coastal communities economically viable and attractive for residents, businesses, and visitors. In 2005, Lake Erie Coastal Ohio entered into a long-term partnership with the Ohio Sea Grant College Program based at The Ohio State University, enabling this organization to more effectively obtain its goals through access to university resources and experts, while fulfilling the Ohio Sea Grant College Program's strategic initiatives to become more fully engaged in research, education, and outreach regarding sustainable coastal tourism.

The Lake Erie Coastal Ohio Trail had previously conducted a resource inventory on the islands to identify publicly accessible and less fragile environments conducive to increased access. (Fermata, Inc., 2002) In its Lake Erie Coastal Ohio Trail Corridor Management Plan, the national scenic byway identified the glacial islands as one of seven unique landscapes along the shoreline that offer opportunities for creating unique stories and visitor experiences. (Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc., 2005) Working with the National Park Service, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, county metropark agencies, and others, Lake Erie Coastal Ohio developed interpretive themes and messages for motivating visitors to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in regard to resource protection. (Ohio Sea Grant College Program and Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc., 2003 - revised and updated 2008)

Lack of information about the natural and historical resources of the Lake Erie Islands was a concern, a concern that is also reflected within the 2008 Ohio Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. Within this plan and study, Ohio residents identified "lack of information about sites: as one of the top three barriers to participating. It was the decision of the planning committee to develop a guidebook to the Lake Erie Islands, focused on nature and history.

A core team of committee members convened in late-2004 and throughout 2005 to determine content, process of gathering input, and overall guidebook composition. Additional content experts were identified and contacted for their interest to serve on a review team. Representatives identified as experts included those from the following organizations:

- Put-in-Bay Chamber of Commerce
- Cleveland Museum of Natural History
- Lake Erie Islands Chapter Black Swamp Conservancy
- Kelleys Island Audubon Club
- ODNR State Parks
- Lake Erie Islands Historical Society
- Ohio Main Street Program
- Great Lakes Program of The Nature Conservancy



- Omni Green
- Point Pelee National Park
- OSU Geological Sciences
- Kelleys Island Audubon Club
- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
- Northern Illinois University
- Pelee Island Heritage Centre
- University of Toledo
- Lake Erie Shores and Islands
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Miller Boat Line
- Nature Conservancy of Canada

A well-known nature writer, Art Weber, began work on developing copy in 2006. Upon his completion, text was sent to the review committee for approval. In 2007, graphic design began to be developed, as well as mapping. The project was completed in draft format in 2008 and underwent a second review process until publication in early summer 2009.

Content of the guidebook reflects the interests of the resource-based traveler. Vivid photographs were vital, and they feature many of the unique landscapes and species of the islands. The guidebook can be viewed as divided into three sections: overviews of the islands' natural and cultural history, detailed sections about each island and its unique attractions where visitors can experience history and nature, and checklists.

As we began to develop the section of the guidebook that highlights specific islands, we also created sidebars for the flora and fauna one might expect to see each season. This section also includes basic traveler information, such as ferryboat and transportation information, as well as contact information for more information.

Checklists include those for flora, birds, amphibians and reptiles, butterflies and dragonflies. These checklists reflect those species likely to be seen. In only a few situations did we include rarities. Finally, the last page of the guide is a checklist for sustainable visitation by visitors. Advice on how to visit the islands without harm are included, such as using bird calls sparingly, expressing gratitude to individuals and businesses who go out of their way to accommodate nature travelers, and being cautious while driving golf carts or other vehicles on island roads in order to avoid crossing amphibians and reptiles.

A survey was developed to examine the needs and expectations of nature travelers in order to further identify additional businesses and information needs of this market. These will be randomly inserted in at least 200 guidebooks distributed on the islands, and they will also be available at key nature-based sites on the islands.



Project Issues and Opportunities

Several roadblocks throughout the project's progression created issues and opportunities. Upon its affiliation with the Ohio Sea Grant College Program, Lake Erie Coastal Ohio was able to negotiate design services through Ohio Sea Grant, enabling the project to obtain a high quality at a fraction of the proposed cost.

Staff changes at the Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy also interrupted progress. Lake Erie Coastal Ohio and Ohio Sea Grant took the lead to enable the project to move forward.

The process of developing the guide produced results as well. Since 2003, three additional public access properties were added to the guidebook. Most of these properties were acquired with support provided by Lake Erie Coastal Ohio/Ohio Sea Grant for the economic potential and importance of augmenting the experience of island travelers with nature-based opportunities.

Working with such a vast network of experts and reviewers proved somewhat overwhelming, particularly when a great deal of the work to create this project was coordinated by one individual with no support staff. Very few reviewers gave the proofing the attention it deserved in the initial word processing document. It wasn't until the project began to be put into finished form that comments were expressed. Better communication at the front-end regarding the extreme importance of reviewing materials in the initial draft may have helped, as well as changing the review process so that they only received the word-processed version and were told that this was their only opportunity for comments.

We also discovered that views differ among experts in some situations. Often, what one person revised; another expert switched back to the original. This created further delays and confusion.

Finally, we established a very small team of experts who were engaged in the project and knowledgeable about specific fields to serve as the final reviewers. This worked extremely well, and these experts provided valuable comments, revisions, photograph selections, and more.

In addition to providing visitor information about the natural and historical features of the Lake Erie Islands, we discovered an opportunity to also address conservation and preservation issues. Information about the conservation of the Lake Erie watersnake, the importance of freshwater and the Great Lakes Compact, and a more detailed description about the natural function of wetlands not only provided much-needed information, but also provides a rich explanation about the uniqueness of the islands.

Project Implementation and Follow-up Activities

Now that the 50,000 publications are completed, they provide valuable resources for those individuals hoping to increase the awareness of the economic importance of island resources. Copies of the guide are being sent to key local, state and federal elected officials, along with a letter from Dr. Jeff Reutter of the Ohio Sea Grant College Program explaining why this project is important.



Key team members on each island will receive copies of the publication to distribute locally, and visitors bureaus in both Erie and Ottawa counties have copies for distribution. The Ohio Sea Grant College Program is mailing the publication to those requesting hard copies. Electronic versions of the guide will be available on the Ohio Sea Grant website, and click-through buttons have been designed for local visitors bureaus and island chambers to use if they would also like to provide electronic copies. The Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy will also be distributing the guidebook, and we are hoping they will provide electronic distribution as well through a future e-newsletter.

We will be contacting key team members on each island to set up future meetings regarding their island-specific needs to enhancing the nature-based tourism activities. A separate project further augments future work along these lines. Working through the OSU Extension Tourism Team, Melinda Huntley has developed a series of fact sheets on creating a nature-based tourism market in local communities. She has also developed a 30-minute video that will be posted on the new Ohio Tourism Toolbox and distributed as CDs to those interested in learning more about nature-based tourism. These new tools, along with the Lake Erie guidebook, will provide valuable resources for educating island business owners and decision makers about the potential of this market.

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