



Pictured Rocks NL, Lake Superior © iStockphoto

The Great Lakes

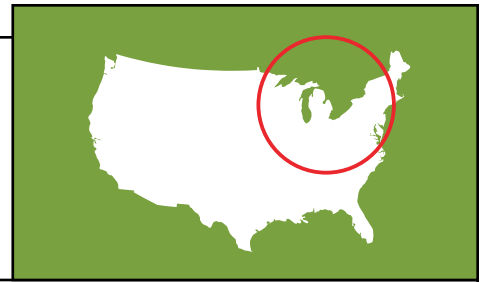
America's Freshwater Treasure

Standing on the shores of one of America's Great Lakes, you just might be fooled into thinking it's an ocean. In fact, Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario are the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world and contain one fifth of the world's freshwater supply and 84 percent of America's supply.

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Some of the crown jewels of these shores are preserved in nine National Park units. They include Isle Royale National Park, Grand Portage National Monument, Keweenaw National Historical Park, Perry's Victory & International Peace Memorial, Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and four National Lakeshores: Sleeping Bear Dunes, Indiana Dunes, Apostle Islands, and Pictured Rocks.

Within these national park sites, there is a universe of wonders. Moose and wolves patrol Isle Royale, a remote wilderness draped with forests and enclosed by cliffs. On the other end of the spectrum, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore is only 35 miles from Chicago, yet within its dunes, a visitor can find solitude and more than 1,100 species of plants and ferns—among the highest concentration in any park unit. The parks preserve the historic identity of these great bodies of water and provide millions of people with their first meaningful connections to the Great Lakes.



A Host of Threats

For more than a century, the Great Lakes region was a center of mining, logging, manufacturing, and shipping. That history brings long-lasting challenges. Before we knew how devastating chemical dumping could be, factories spilled unknown toxic pollutants in the water. Now, those toxins lie in sediment at the bottom of these five lakes.

Perhaps the most worrisome threat to the health of the Great Lakes—and the parks that depend on their interconnected waters—is invasive species. Zebra and quagga mussels, which arrived from the Baltic through ballast water, have infiltrated the lakes, changed the ecosystem, and caused native fish populations to plummet. Meanwhile, invasive plants have also arrived. For example, non-native cattails have usurped much of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore's Great Marsh, the largest interdunal wetland in the Lake Michigan watershed.

Climate change is also a formidable and shape-shifting threat. Some of these lakes, particularly Superior, are very deep and very cold. Even a small rise in the temperature of the water throws off the ecosystem, affecting plants, fish, and the birds that feed on them.

The long history of settlement on these lakes has also had ill effects. Outdated sewers in old cities like Detroit and Cleveland overflow during storms and wash untreated sewage into the lakes. In large cities like Chicago, rainwater skims over miles of pavement and washes debris, chemicals, and other pollutants directly into Lake Michigan.



Innovative Solutions

To protect the Great Lakes national parks, we must preserve their water resources and greater ecosystems. This is no small task, and it requires creative and far-reaching solutions. That's why, in 2005, NPCA took a bold and ambitious step. With the National Wildlife Federation, we co-founded the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, an alliance of more than 115 conservation organizations that care about the health of the Great Lakes. We knew that together we could have a stronger voice for conservation—a voice our political leaders couldn't ignore.

We were right. In 2009, President Obama signed the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), which has funneled more than \$1 billion for restoration projects in the region. Already, more than 300 projects are underway, including many in the Great Lakes national parks. The results are tangible and inspiring: In some places, anglers and swimmers are returning to waters once too polluted to visit.

Securing major policy victories through big nonpartisan coalitions is complicated

but effective work. And it still needs to be done: each year, Congress decides how much money to appropriate to this vital restoration initiative.

To protect such a broad landscape, NPCA works on a local level—in the Great Lakes national parks restoring wetlands with student volunteers and educating key decision-makers about the importance of the GLRI in funding these projects.

Loons

Who hasn't been captivated by the spooky cry of a loon on a foggy lake? These iconic birds, marked by black-and-white plumage, sit at the top of the Great Lakes' food chain. For several years, loons were among the thousands of dead birds found on the beaches of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore as a result of contracting Type E botulism from contaminated fish. Since then, Park Service researchers have been working to find the root cause and protect Great Lakes loons.



Loon © iStockphoto



Sleeping Bear Dune © Oseland/Dreamstime

Why Act Now

The waters of the Great Lakes are closely connected, and the longer we ignore problems such as invasive species, the sooner they will spread and intensify. Asian carp, for example, are a potentially catastrophic invasive species that have nearly reached Chicago and infiltrated the Great Lakes. There is no time to waste.

“The longer we wait, the problems only get worse and more costly to solve,” says Chad Lord, water program director for NPCA. Conservation doesn’t just benefit wildlife, but humans, too. About 30 million people depend on the Great Lakes for drinking water. And the parks

themselves, in addition to the intangible benefits of open space, bring astounding economic benefits. Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore alone brought in \$63 million in local spending in 2010. 🐾

How Your Gift Will Make a Difference

Gifts from donors have helped NPCA accomplish great things, such as the historic passage of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). But there is still a lot of work to be done. Here are just a few of the critical projects we can accomplish with the help of donor gifts:

- Each year, Congress decides how much of the GLRI to fund. The health of the Great Lakes ecosystems—and the national parks within them—depends on this funding. We work with our partners and supporters to educate members of Congress so they will support this critical funding.
- We take hundreds of university students to our Great Lakes national parks, where they help restore wetlands. We also bring them to Washington, D.C., to better understand the connection between science and policy, ensuring that there is a strong new generation to advocate for our national parks.
- We protect the parks of the Great Lakes from encroaching development and defend the beaches from erosion. We work with partners to secure land adjacent to the parks to protect native plants and wildlife. And our Great Lakes park reports have been instrumental in proving that the national parks are local economic generators and critical to surrounding communities.



Student Workshop, Indiana Dunes NL © NPCA

Moose © Binev/Dreamstime