

Beaches: OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAKE HURON



The southern Lake Huron coast is a fantastic setting for outdoor exploration. Promoting the region’s natural assets can help build vibrant communities and support local economies. This series of fact sheets profiles different outdoor activities that could appeal to residents and visitors of Michigan’s Thumb. We hope this information will help guide regional planning, business development and marketing throughout the region. **Here we provide an overview of beaches — including details on what beaches offer, who participates and how we can protect the beaches of southern Lake Huron.**

LAKE HURON BEACHES

The shores of southern Lake Huron between Saginaw Bay and Lake St. Clair offer beach goers miles of shoreline for swimming, fishing, boating, and watching wildlife or passing ships. Tuscola, Huron, Sanilac and St. Clair counties have 163 miles of shoreline along Lake Huron. The coast defines the Thumb and is likely the area’s biggest attraction for visitors. People refer to the Thumb as the “Close Up North” because it is an easy drive for the 5 million people who live in the cities and metros of Lansing and Detroit. For many in those areas, southern Lake Huron offers the closest high-quality swimming beaches.

Along the southern Lake Huron shoreline visitors find many local, county and state parks interspersed with cottages and permanent homes, quaint downtown areas and historic lighthouse points. Residents may find access to Lake Huron through their back yards or the public beaches that offer parking and maintained beachfront. Huron County alone offers three free, day-use parks with picnic areas and public beaches. The M-25 route offers easy access to the Thumb’s many public beaches.

How Popular are Beaches?

For many people, beaches are the ultimate vacation destination. Michigan has 3,288 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, making it a prime location for beach enthusiasts. According to a survey of U.S. travelers, 63 percent said they’d like to visit a beach on vacation in 2012.

Beaches and waterfront areas are important attractions for visitors to Michigan’s Thumb. In 2010, 1.4 million leisure tourists visited the area and spent \$116 million. According to 2008-10 data analyzed by Travel Michigan, 54 percent of both day-trip and overnight visitors to three coastal counties in the Thumb say that the beaches and/or waterfront areas are the main reason for their trip. This is high compared to many parts of Michigan; In general, 12 percent of visitors in Michigan (local and out-of-state) say that the main purpose of their visit is to go to the beach.

Who Visits the Thumb?

Travel Michigan reported the following tourist statistics for Tuscola, Huron and Sanilac counties between 2008 and 2010.

- **Type of Trip:** 38% of trips were day trips and 62% were overnight trips.
- **Group Composition:** 81% groups were adults only; 19% included kids.
- **Purpose of Trip:** 54% for waterfront; 14% for sightseeing; 8% for boating or sailing.
- **Accommodations:** 77% stayed with friends or family; 9% stayed in hotel; 9% camped.
- **Length of Trip:** Hotel - 1.5 nights; rental property - 5.9 nights; and friends or family - 2.4 nights.

Beach Activities

The great attraction of beaches is that they offer something for everyone to enjoy. The most popular outdoor recreation activities

for Michigan residents are listed in Table 1. A beach is a great place to do any of these activities.

Other popular beach activities include: beach combing, building sandcastles, making campfires, weather watching, or catching butterflies, bugs and minnows.

Activity	Participants	Ranked as important
Walking Outdoors	86%	44%
Relaxing Outdoors	78%	26%
Swimming in Lakes, Rivers, or Ponds	55%	17%
Fishing	51%	24%
Picnicking	53%	8%
Camping	39%	18%

Table 1. Percent of Michigan residents that participate in the activity, and percent of Michigan residents that ranked it their 1st, 2nd or 3rd most important outdoor recreation activity. Source: MDNR 2007.



Before or after a visit to the beach, visitors will likely stop by an ice cream shop, convenience store or restaurant. Nearby businesses and amusements, such as souvenir shops, arcades or putt-putt golf courses, are likely to benefit from a healthy and popular beach destination.

Beaches also serve as launching pads for a variety of activities on the lake, including kayaking, jet skiing, snorkeling and fishing. The Thumb Heritage Water Trail uses beaches as access points and rest stops along the trail. Soon there will be a series of defined water trails all along the eastern boundary of Michigan, from Detroit to Mackinaw City. In July, Caseville organizes a triathlon with a lake swim and a bike route along the waterfront. Communities can use special events and trails to leverage their beaches and attract recreation enthusiasts.

Beach Destinations in the Thumb

The Thumb includes 49 public beach access points on Lake Huron, including three state parks and many local and county parks with and without camping (see map). Although the state parks now offer free day-use access to those with a Recreation Passport, the number of passes sold in the past to residents and non-residents provides worthwhile information on park usage (Table 2). The parks are used extensively by county residents for both camping and day use.

■ **Albert E. Sleeper State Park** (Huron County) has 723 acres of forest, wetlands, sandy beach and dunes located on the Saginaw Bay of Lake Huron. Visitors can

watch both sunrises and sunsets on the bay, relax in the shade and seclusion of the campground or roam the trails of the ancient dune forests.

- **Port Crescent State Park** (Huron County) has three miles of sandy shoreline on Lake Huron’s Saginaw Bay. A wooden boardwalk parallels the day-use shoreline, offering scenic vistas of Saginaw Bay. The park also offers fishing, kayaking, canoeing, hiking, cross-country skiing, birding and hunting.
- **Lakeport State Park** (St. Clair County) is located on Lake Huron with two distinct park units separated by the Village of Lakeport. A total of 250 sites are divided between the two campgrounds.

PROTECTING LAKE HURON BEACHES

The beaches and waterfront are one of the Thumb’s best assets, but they require careful monitoring and protection. The region is known as the Blue Water Area because of its clean and inviting water. However, to ensure that the water is as safe as it looks, state and county governments monitor 30 of the Thumb’s 49 public beaches every week during the summer. Water quality monitoring allows the public to have confidence that a beach is safe for swimming. In addition, the information helps officials focus on potential causes of poor water quality and track changes over time.

County health professionals regularly test beach waters for *Escherichia coli* (or *E. coli*), a type of bacteria that is naturally found

in the guts of humans, livestock, birds and other animals. Although *E. coli* itself is rarely dangerous, it can indicate the presence of other microorganisms that could cause human illness. If *E. coli* levels are found to be above a certain threshold, the swimming area of a beach will be closed temporarily, which can dampen tourism. Table 3 lists the public beaches that are monitored in the Thumb and the number of days a beach was closed during two time periods.

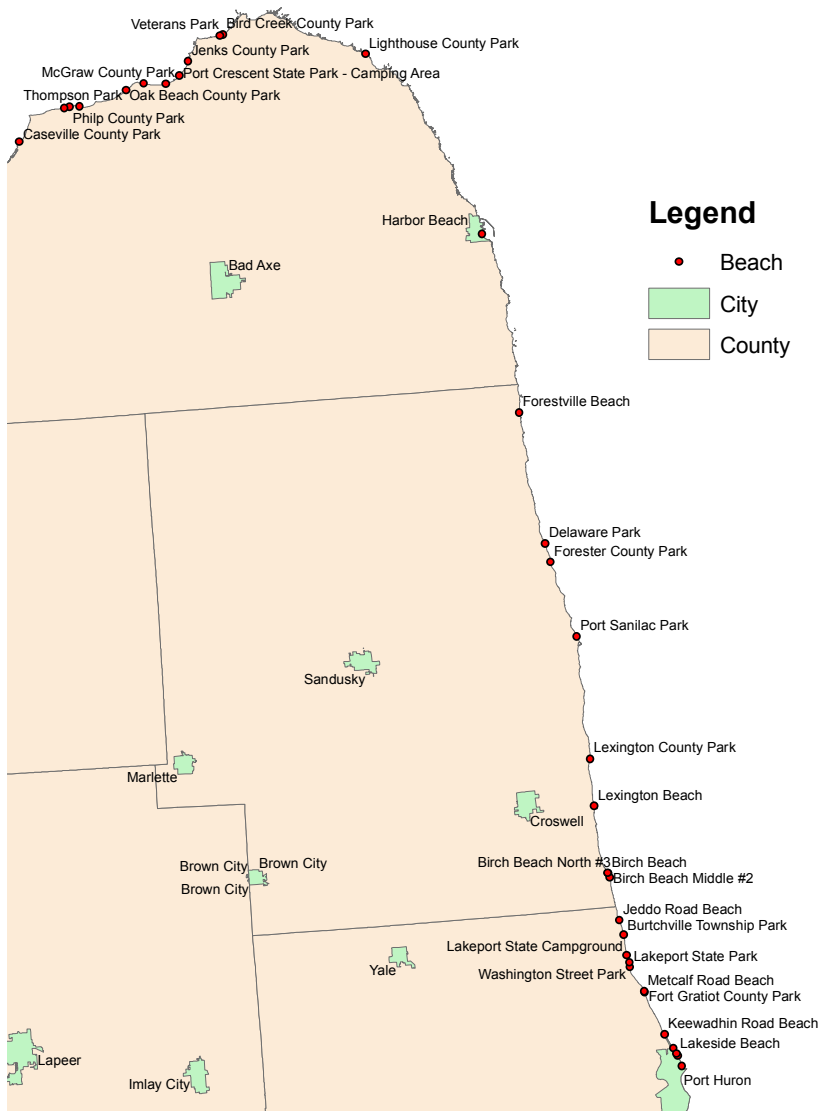
E. coli can reach Great Lakes beaches from a variety of sources, including illicit sewage connections, septic tanks or water treatment facilities, runoff from a pig or cattle farm, or waste from pets, geese, raccoons and other animals. Outdated sewage and storm water systems can cause wastewater runoff to collect in storm sewers, which feed into streams or the lake. Weather, water currents and the shape of a beach also affect water quality.

In Huron County, for example, Lighthouse Beach was closed for three weeks in July of 2011; however, it is not a regular beach-swimming destination to begin with. Canada geese and some residential and agricultural run-off likely contributed to the high bacteria levels. The shape of the beach retains water in certain spots. When the weather is rough, waves stir up sediment, which results in higher *E. coli* levels. Bird Creek Beach and Port Crescent State Park beach were safe and open all summer except two days in 2010. In St. Clair County, every beach was closed for at least one day in 2010 due to high bacteria levels.

PARK NAME	CAMPERS	DAY USE	RESIDENT PERMITS SOLD		NON-RESIDENT PERMITS SOLD	
			ANNUAL	DAILY	ANNUAL	DAILY
Lakeport	110,018	29,609	3,483	3,965	231	539
Port Crescent	63,537	76,064	2,211	4,755	79	255
Sleeper	68,020	101,002	2,378	5,932	41	139

Table 2. Visitation Rates in 2008-2009 to three coastal State Parks. Source: MDNR – Parks and Recreation Bureau, Park attendance summary by district.

PUBLIC BEACHES OF SOUTHERN LAKE HURON



Map of the state, county and local parks that include a public beach. In addition to the 33 sites on the map, the public can also access the coast in places where a road ends at the waters edge. However, road-end beaches are less likely to have water quality monitoring, lifeguards or parking, and shoreline property owners may discourage people from hanging out close to their homes.

MONITORED BEACHES IN THE THUMB

	DAYS CLOSED IN 2010	DAYS CLOSED 2001-2009
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HURON COUNTY		
Bird Creek County Park (free)	2	6
Caseville County Park (includes camping)	0	3
Harbor Beach City Park	0	5
Jenks Co. Park	0	0
Lighthouse Co. Park (includes camping)	5	2
McGraw County Park (free)	1	1
Oak Beach County Park (free)	0	4
Philp County Park	0	0
Port Crescent State Park – Camp Area	0	4
Port Crescent State Park – Day Use Area	2	2
Sleeper State Park	0	0
Thompson Park	0	5
Veterans Park	1	3
SANILAC COUNTY		
Birch Beach (3 sites)	NA	0
Delaware County Park (includes camping)	NA	0
Forester County Park (includes camping)	3	0
Forestville Beach	0	0
Lexington County Park (includes camping)	0	0
Lexington County Park	0	0
Port Sanilac Park	0	3
ST. CLAIR COUNTY		
Burtchville Township Park	1	1
Conger-Lighthouse Beach	2	1
Fort Gratiot County Park (includes camping)	3	1
Holland Road Beach	2	2
Jeddo Road Beach	1	8
Keewadhin Road Beach	1	14
Kraft Road Beach	1	6
Lakeport State Campground	2	1
Lakeport State Park	3	0
Lakeside Beach	2	0
Lake Metcalf	2	0
Washington Street Park	2	12

Table 3. Number of days southern Lake Huron beaches were closed in 2010 and 2001-2009. Source: Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. www.deq.state.mi.us/beach

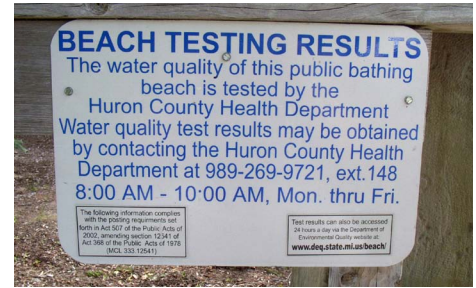
Other Beach Concerns

- **Currents:** The Great Lakes produce currents that can be dangerous to swimmers. The key to survival is learning what to do if one is caught in a current — swim perpendicular to the current to escape. Unlike Lake Michigan, there have been relatively few rescues or deaths due to dangerous currents in the Thumb.
- **Mussels:** Zebra and quagga mussels that wash up on the beaches can be sharp for bare feet. However, mussels seem to be on the decline in Lake Huron, especially in shallow waters.
- **Phragmites:** In some areas, the tall wetland grass *Phragmites australis* is taking over wetlands and beaches, blocking both access and views of the water. The plant is very difficult to eradicate and requires special permits.
- **Muck:** In Saginaw Bay, green algae grows along the bottom of the bay and often washes onto shores when it gets disturbed. Algae and other matter that wash up on the beach can form small hills of “muck” that begin rotting. This muck can harbor bacteria and other pathogenic organisms that can be harmful to people and animals. Children should avoid the muck. If adults rake muck to remove it from the beach, they should wear gloves and wash hands and equipment with hot soapy water after any contact. Scientists have shown that algae and muck are a long-standing and natural part of Saginaw Bay; yet, it is not clear how to best reduce the overgrowth of algae being seen now.

ENHANCING LAKE HURON BEACHES

People are drawn to a variety of beach experiences — from bustling tourist beaches lined with shops, to those that are isolated and undeveloped. In general, soft, clean sand, fresh air, clear water and sunny, warm weather enhance any beach. However, there are a few things that can improve a public swimming beach, making it more enticing for visitors, including:

- **Information:** Signs posted on water monitoring, appropriate beach activities, and whether the beach is public or private.
- **Access:** Easy-to-access with parking facilities and infrastructure like bathrooms, changing rooms and pavilions.
- **Safety:** Lifeguards, signs about dangerous currents or other hazards, and systems for alerting beach visitors about bad weather or unsafe conditions.
- **Maintenance:** Regular trash collection, periodic clean-ups and grooming or raking if needed.
- **Visitor Guides:** Maps or signs to help direct visitors to nearby hotels, campgrounds, restaurants or recreation sites and information about the cultural or natural history of the area.
- **Water Quality:** Monitoring and carefully maintaining septic tanks, municipal sewer systems, confined animal facilities and drainage corridors to protect beach health.



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The Southern Lake Huron Assessment is evaluating potential opportunities for the coastal region of Michigan’s Thumb. The project and this research summary were sponsored by Michigan Sea Grant College Program, M/PD-44, under: NA10OAR4170071 from National Sea Grant, NOAA, U.S. Department of Commerce, with funds from the State of Michigan.

This profile was researched and written by Tracy Rymph and Christine Vogt from MSU, with assistance from Lauren Knollenberg, Theresa Groth and Dan McCole.

