

Parks: Opportunities for the Southern Lake Huron Coast



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 tourists 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 coastal county and state parks – including details on what the parks offer, who uses the parks and how we can further develop the park systems.**

THUMB AREA PARKS

Michigan's Thumb offers a quiet, agricultural landscape with unique coastal communities that attract tourists, seasonal residents and retirees. The region's state, county and local parks and state wildlife and game areas conserve natural areas and act as the primary outlets for outdoor recreation in this area. Coastal parks are particularly valuable because they provide public access to Lake Huron in a region where private homes dominate the shoreline. Visiting beaches, kayaking, fishing and wildlife viewing are popular park activities. Camping, RV facilities and cabin rentals provide overnight accommodations, which are often in short supply during busy summer weekends in the Thumb.

Visitors to Thumb Parks

- 1% of day-visitors to Huron, Sanilac, St. Clair and Tuscola counties come primarily to enjoy national, state, and county parks. Many more come for activities that could involve a park, such as boating, fishing, hiking, biking and going to beaches and the waterfront.
- 5% of overnight visitors to the counties visit the region's parks.
- The majority of visitors come from within the county, nearby counties in Michigan, or nearby areas of Canada.

Current Trends in Michigan Parks

- Tourism development is increasingly seen as a remedy for Michigan's economy. For example, parks can improve quality of life for residents and diversify local economies.
- Residents are vacationing and recreating closer to home.
- Non-motorized boats such as kayaks and canoes are gaining popularity, in part, due to high gas prices.

- Water trails are expanding and being promoted.
- Hosting events at county parks has become a great way for parks to attract visitors and generate extra revenue.
- Many parks are getting busier and extra parking facilities will be needed.
- Rental cabins and other structures (e.g., yurts, tee pees) in parks are increasingly popular.
- Camping continues to be popular and campgrounds stay busy during mild spring and fall months.

Opportunities for Thumb Parks

- Kayaking and canoeing is on the rise. Parks can add access points, boat rentals, overnight accommodations and educational information along water trails.
- Local, county and state parks can increase collaboration in tight budget times to share ideas, labor, skills and resources, and potentially merge budgets. A network of regional park professionals can foster collaboration.

- State and federal funding can increase park land or improve parks.
- Parks can analyze shared goals and activities and help regional and state governments understand their assets and needs.
- Expanded programming efforts such as special events, youth camps and generational programming (e.g., grandparents with grandchildren) can attract people and generate revenue.
- Park staff can help communicate the value of parks and green spaces to local residents to gain support for park upkeep and special initiatives.
- Hotel rooms are limited in the Thumb. Parks can expand and promote cabin rentals to people visiting the region for festivals.



County Park Inventory

Each county in the Thumb Area has prepared a master plan to analyze current park system resources, guide local decisions and future planning, meet MDNR requirements and apply for grant money.

COUNTY PARK MASTER PLANS AND INVENTORY

County	Master Plan Time Period	Future Plan	Coastal Parks	Non-Coastal Parks	Campgrounds	Campsites
Huron	2011-2016	--	9	0	6	612
Sanilac	2011-2015	--	3	1	2	337
St. Clair	2007-2012	2012-2016	1	3	0	0
Tuscola	2007-2012	--	1	0	1	32

COUNTY PARKS

Goals and Benefits

County parks in the Thumb region, specifically in Huron, Sanilac, St. Clair and Tuscola counties, have three main objectives: acquire land, develop the land for recreational use, and manage park land for people and wildlife. Their goal is to preserve and protect county lands, while providing a place for residents and visitors to gather and enjoy the area's pristine natural resources.

County parks provide many benefits for the community including: encouraging community participation; providing opportunities for members of the community to gather for events like receptions and reunions; attracting tourists; and preserving land and natural areas for present and future generations.

Challenges and New Developments

County parks in the Thumb have some common concerns, such as the area's aging and decreasing population base, but they have found some unique strategies. Below is a summary of new developments, priorities and challenges identified during interviews with park directors and commissioners and a review of county park master plans.

Huron County Parks

- Parks are capitalizing on the Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail by adding boating access points and places to drop off or pick-up rental kayaks through Port Austin Kayaks.
- Parks want to update website and use other available media.
- County parks feel competition from state parks.
- People see county park campsites as smaller and more expensive than state park sites.
- Park staff members are concerned about invasive species, water and shoreline quality and muck.
- Park staff members survey park users, asking open-ended questions to gather suggestions and feedback.

Sanilac County Parks

- Sanilac County Parks have focused on improving infrastructure and encouraging longer stays.
- The county acquired 94 acres of parkland through an MDNR grant.
- Forester Park has improved handicap accessibility and added septic hook-ups to 66 of 190 sites, and they are looking to add more septic sites, T.V. and internet services, and a small laundry facility.
- There is now potable water at Delaware Park.
- Lexington Park became day-use only.
- Park gathers suggestions from visitors and listens to requests.
- County park camping rates are lowest in the area.
- It has been challenging to find enough revenue to cover costs.
- County parks compete with other parks and leisure activities.
- Park staff are concerned about invasive species and water quality affecting the park, although there have been very few beach closures.

RECREATION PROFILE: Parks



St. Clair County Parks

- In St. Clair County, the park system has focused on land acquisition, adding almost 500 acres of parkland along two rivers and Lake Huron.
- Visitors have increased at Fort Gratiot and Goodells County Park in part due to the addition of rental facilities, a Splash Pad at Goodells and new waterfront property at Fort Gratiot.
- Parks in St. Clair County helped expand the Blueways and Greenways of St. Clair,

which focus on connecting communities through land and water trails.

- There has been a slight increase in crime, but law enforcement and public awareness is overall good.
- Part of the goal to make local attractions a destination rather than a stop on the way.
- Facility rental prices have increased.
- Some environmental concerns exist, but with limited impact for parks.
- Park managers want more user feedback to make changes and improvements.

Tuscola County Parks

- Master plan includes creating and implementing a marketing campaign.
- Maintaining a balanced budget and finding additional revenue sources has been challenging.
- Park staff are concerned about groundwater contamination, radon gas and naturally high levels of arsenic in well water potentially impacting parks.
- County staff have sent out letters about future recreation development.

Funding County Parks

Thumb county parks are funded through different mechanisms. County and local parks have also received a number of grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund to acquire land for resource protection and outdoor recreation. For example, St. Clair County received \$2 million in 2003 to buy shoreline property along Lake Huron. The Trust Fund is based on royalties on the sale and lease of state-owned mineral rights.

COUNTY PARK BUDGET

County	Budget (Year)	Primary Source of Funding	Park Development	Land Acquisition
Huron	\$1,164,240 (2010)	Camping, rental fees, donations. No general fund money for operations	\$612,500	\$96,500
Sanilac	\$550,577 (2012)	0.2% millage tax, camping, pavilion rentals, wood sales	\$117,240	\$973,500
St. Clair	\$3,081,700 (2012)	0.5% millage tax, facility rentals, entrance fees during special events	\$1,267,800	\$5,249,565
Tuscola	\$16,750 (2007)	Camping, park user fees, county general fund	\$914,500	\$30,000

STATE PARKS OVERVIEW

The Thumb Area of Michigan boasts four state parks available for day and overnight visitors:

THUMB REGION STATE PARKS

Park	Location	Activities	Facilities
Sleeper State Park	Huron County	Cross country skiing, hunting, interpretive programs, swimming, hiking, metal detecting, mountain biking, kayaking, camping, picnicking	Beach, electrical services, restrooms, picnic areas and shelter, playground, beach house, cabins, outdoor center, sanitation station, WiFi
Port Crescent State Park	Huron County	Cross country skiing, fishing, hunting, swimming, hiking, interpretive programs, wildlife watching, kayaking, camping, picnicking	Beach, electrical services, restrooms, picnic area and shelter, playground, beach house, cabins, observation platform
Lakeport State Park	St. Clair County	Metal detecting, interpretive programs, swimming, camping, picnicking	Beach, concessions, group-use area, restrooms, picnic area and shelter, sanitation station, cabins, lodges, electrical service, playground
Sanilac Petroglyphs Historic State Park	Sanilac County	Cross country skiing, hiking, interpretive programs	Native American rock carvings

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ACTIVITY IN THE THUMB

Although there are no national or federal parklands in the Thumb Area, the State of Michigan has five national parks that attracted 1.9 million visitors in 2011. Some Thumb parks received grants from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, administered through the National Park Service. In addition, Thumb landmarks were added to the National Register of Historical Places, bringing national attention to the region.

NATIONAL PARK GRANTS RECEIVED

Park	Amount	Grant	Year	Partner
Gallup Park	\$61,896	Land and Water Conservation Fund	2009	Village of Port Austin
Fort Gratiot Lighthouse	\$394,115	Save America's Treasures	2006	City of Port Huron, (Contributed \$445,885)
Waterfront Park	\$17,853	Land and Water Conservation Fund	2002	Village of Port Austin

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES STATUS

Historic Site	County	Year Listed
Navigation Structures at Harbor Beach Harbor	Huron	1997
Port Sanilac Light Station	Sanilac	1984
Harbor Beach Lighthouse	Huron	1983
Bayport Historic Commercial Fishing District	Huron	1977
Fort Gratiot Lighthouse	St. Clair	1976
Pointe Aux Barques Lighthouse	Huron	1973
Grindstone City Historic District	Huron	1971

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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.

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