

Agency Policy on State Water Trail Designations

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Designated Water Trails Program Background

For Michigan's first residents—both Native and European—blue highways were the preferred mode of transportation. Rivers and lakes defined settlement patterns, trade routes, economic development and identity. Today these same waters, united in a comprehensive water trails system, can promote economic development and healthy communities as they offer residents and visitors the Michigan experience provided by welcoming, exceptional people living amidst extraordinary natural resources.

The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, DNR-Managed Public Land Strategy (Land Strategy), the Comprehensive Trail Plan (Trail Plan), the Parks and Recreation Division Strategic Plan, and the pending Water Strategy all call for the establishment of a statewide system of designated water trails. Water trails present great opportunities to grow local economies, strengthen regional identity, attract out-of-state tourists and knowledge workers, promote healthy lifestyles and showcase Michigan's incredible water resources.

The State Water Trail Designation Program will provide better customer information to make recreational activity choices and to provide a level of expectation for the trail experience. A trail designation system will provide a template of information to potential water trail users and will include:

- The length of the trip and time required to complete it
- The degree of challenge and skills required
- The degree of solitude, safety and natural view sheds
- Predictable or unpredictable paddling factors one might experience
- Access sites and amenities
- Community cultural and natural heritage assets connected to the trail

Clear, consistent communication about trails will contribute to successful recruitment and retention of new paddlers and encourage return visits to regional destinations, bringing this emerging recreation demographic to new cities and regions.

Key Goal/Measurable Objective:

The goal of the State Water Trail designation program is to develop and maintain a geographically dispersed, locally supported, sustainable system of water trails that offer a diversity of experiences, including lengths, scenery, heritage exploration, paddler challenges (or difficulty levels) and amenities that become a catalyst for improved recreational opportunity, healthy lifestyles and local prosperity.

The measurable objective established in the Trail Plan and repeated in the Land Strategy is: *Within five years, designate public water trails that have appropriate signage, amenities, safety measures, and promotion on 30 percent of Michigan's navigable waters, five connected lake systems and 75 percent of Michigan's Great Lakes shoreline and connecting channels.*

Program Needs:

While federal and state agencies, communities, and organizations have made substantial investments in the infrastructure necessary to support a designated water trail system, there are program pieces absent, including:

- Standardized criteria to be considered a state-designated water trail for facilities and amenities such as:
 - Location of primary access sites, access sites and rest areas.
 - Signage
 - Overnight accommodation & camping needs
 - Restrooms and water
 - Emergency contact and safety measures
- An inventory of existing and potential trails that currently meet the criteria.
- A means to officially designate the trails.
- A marketing and promotional campaign for designated trails.
- A process for public input on potential designated trails.
- A means to ensure respect for property owners adjoining a designated trail.
- Funding sources for trail development, operations and maintenance.
- Establishing strong partnerships.

This document provides a comprehensive plan for establishing a water trails program within the DNR, supported by partners in the public and private sectors.

Authority for Establishing a Designated Water Trails Program:

PA 451 of 1994, Section 502: “The Department may provide and develop facilities for outdoor recreation.”

Definitions:

Access Site: Public (federal, state, county or local units of government) or private land where it is legal for the general public to access, launch and land a boat into and from its adjoining waters. Access sites will have at least some legal parking along a public roadway. Access sites are also rest areas and can include amenities.

Barrier Free Access: A facility and its amenities can be approached, entered and used by persons with disabilities.

Designee: The designee is defined as the public or non-profit body that has applied and received state water trail designation on a particular water system.

DNR: Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Lake systems: Lakes that are linked either through connecting waters or a portage.

Launch: The mechanism used to access the water. Whenever possible, the type of launch should match the context of the surrounding environment. Launch types may include a natural surface (shoreline), paved ramp, geo-textile mat, stairs, dock, cantilever dock, floating dock, and designated launch that meet the guidelines to be barrier free.

Primary Access Site or Trailhead: A designated, legal access site that is promoted for use by the water trail and serves as a trailhead. The primary access site will have an appropriate launch and landing facility for the context of the site, off street parking for vehicles, water trail and local wayfinding signage and amenities such as restrooms, water, picnic areas and boat racks. A primary access site is also an access site and a rest area.

Portage: The practice of carrying water craft or cargo over land, either around an obstacle in a river, or between two bodies of water.

Rest areas: Places where it is permissible to land a watercraft, but not a place to access the water from a road. Rest areas may have campsites and amenities.

Trailhead: See Primary Access Site

A Water trail can be:

- **Water Trail** - recreational routes on waterways with a network of public access sites.
- **State Designated Water Trails** - are water trails that have applied for designation, have been granted that status by the Director of the DNR, and are supported by broad-based community partnerships and a statewide marketing program, which provide conservation, heritage and recreation opportunities.
- **Pure Michigan Water Trails** - are exceptional Michigan water trails designated under public law, and developed under a separate section of rules (Section 72112 of 2014 PA 210, MCL 324.72112, and Executive Reorganization Order Nos. 1991-22, 2009-31, and 2011-01, MCL 299.13, 324.99919, and 324.99921)
- **National Water Trails** - are a subset of the national recreation trail program and meet the national water trail designation criteria found at the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program at the National Park Service.

Designated Water Trail Criteria

The DNR, in designating a water trail, will seek to ensure the following:

1. A quality trail experience
2. Clear information for users
3. Broad community support
4. A sustainable business, maintenance & marketing plan

1. **A Quality Trail Experience Description**

- A. The trail is a waterway that is open to recreational use.
- B. The trail has publicly available access sites and rest areas in reasonable distances depending on the designated type of experience of the trail.
 - a. All access sites and rest areas shown for the trail have been approved by the landowner to be a part of the water trail. The goal is to reduce potential conflicts and maintain public support for accessible water trails.
- C. The trail has reasonable amenities depending on the designated type of trail experience. Amenities may include restrooms, picnic areas, overnight lodging, camping, parking and drinking water.
 - a. Restroom facilities are available on all trail types but can range from modern facilities to rustic. The spacing between restroom locations will vary by trail designation type.
 - b. Provide barrier free access and amenities throughout the trail.
- D. Wherever possible, programmed experiences are available to allow for increased enjoyment of the trails, understanding of the natural and cultural resources related to the trails, boating skills, outdoor ethics and efforts to improve the quality of the waterway and its water. There is an interpretive plan for the trail (or active effort to develop) that identifies its cultural and natural heritage, and ways those will be shared with the public (e.g. Festivals, local exhibits, signage, mobile apps, print or web).
- E. Water trails, where possible, have connections to other recreational opportunities. Examples include camping, fishing, bicycling and hiking trails, cultural and historic experiences, etc.

2. **Provide Clear Information for Users**

- A. A map, guide and web-based information is available that contains sufficient detail to allow the public confidence to plan and use the trails including:
 - a. Access site locations, including photos
 - b. Trail routes and trail lengths (in miles and time)
 - c. Degree of challenge and hazard expectation
 - d. Natural and cultural heritage features
 - e. Length and difficulty of portages
- B. Consistent designated water trail signage is used along the trail. Signs may include direction to nearby amenities and cultural resources. Interpretive signs about cultural and natural resources are encouraged.
- C. Information promotes safety and encourages “leave no trace” principles.
 - a. Standard signs to warn of man-made hazards such as dams or electrical lines are used on all trails.
 - b. Primary access sites are marked with reflective signage visible from water and will include wayfinding signage and emergency information.
 - c. Emergency contacts are listed on electronic and printed publications.

3. **Demonstrate Broad Community Support**

- A. The trail is supported, managed and maintained by one or more organizations and supported by local communities adjoining the trail, who have entered into a written agreement with each other. The organizations shall be broadly representative of the community, including recreation, educational, conservation, heritage, business, public safety, health, and governments.
- B. Support by the local communities adjacent to the water trail is demonstrated by governing body resolution.

4. **Demonstrate a Sustainable Business, Maintenance & Marketing Plan**

- A. Plan shows how trail will meet a quality trail experience and user information expectations in conjunction with public/ private partnerships (i.e. local liveries).
- B. Plan will include a thorough inventory and assessment of environmental concerns along the waterway, natural and cultural assets within one mile of the waterway, existing amenities, access sites and rest areas, and public or private concerns.
- C. Plan identifies gaps in the desired trail and suggests strategies to address the gaps.
- D. The plan is designed so that increased use of the trail will not degrade the local experience, cultural resources or the environment and it will identify designs that were applied to ensure sustainability of the trail.
- E. The trail is in compliance with applicable land use plans and environmental laws.
- F. The trail has in place a trail partnerships/collaboration/agreement with partners that have a demonstrated ability to support routine and long-term maintenance investment on the water trail.
 - a. The agreement includes a plan to meet the maintenance standards for the trail as adopted by the DNR.
 - b. Controls are in place to discourage vandalism.
 - c. Maintenance is conducted to the standards adopted by the DNR.
 - d. Periodic audits are scheduled to ensure standards are being met.
- G. Trail information is promoted locally and as part of the State's marketing program.
- H. Local marketing plan has been developed to promote the specific trails, types of water trail designations, location tools, etc.

Michigan's State Water Trail Designation Types

There are three types of state designated trails: Beginner Trails, Intermediate Trails and Advanced Trails. There are three subtypes of Advanced Trails; Challenge Trails, Wilderness Trails, and Great Lakes Trails.

1. Beginner Trails

A. Typical Development Goals

- a. Exposing the greatest number of new users to paddling and water trails.
- b. Appropriate for large groups, children and new paddlers.
- c. Trips can be tailored for short excursions or longer paddles, but should provide options for those with less experience.
- d. Emphasis on communicating river access, hazards, and ease of use, and building skills and confidence of new paddlers.
- e. Woody debris is important for stream ecosystem health and for the food chain, and care should be taken in considering removal/repositioning for water trail purposes. Users shall be aware that they will need to avoid these hazards, and should be aware that they may be present.
- f. Educational opportunities should be included, not only for paddling skills, but also environmental, conservation, and historical interpretation to enhance paddling experience.

B. User Expectations

- a. A predictable experience, with exposure to few hazards that is appropriate for new or beginner paddling skills.
- b. A readily enjoyable setting that will appeal to new paddlers.
- c. Hazards, access sites, rest area information, and wayfinding will be well-communicated by signage.
- d. Shorter length trips will be facilitated by having physically accessible and frequent access sites.
- e. Amenities are adequately spaced including rest areas, restrooms, drinking water and other amenities.

C. Paddling Skills Needed

- a. New to basic paddling skills.

D. Access or Rest Area Spacing

- a. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, and less than 2 hours of float time or X miles.

E. Lake, river and stream characteristics

- a. Slow or moderate flow streams in normal conditions (meaning no bank-full discharge or flood stage conditions).
- b. Small inland lakes will have little or no current, and normally possess limited wave action.
- c. Under normal conditions will have few obstacles and hazards, such as large woody debris (strainers) and low-head dams.
- d. Portage around obstacles is non-existent or minimal.

2. Intermediate Trails

A. Typical Development Goals

- a. Provide day-trip opportunities, and have potential for overnight, group and family experiences.
- b. Provide longer and slightly more difficult experience than that of a beginner trail.
- c. Access sites and amenities may be less developed compared to beginner trails.

B. User Expectations

- a. A slightly less predictable experience than a Beginner Trail which will require some boat control and intended for paddlers with some experience and stamina.
- b. May have varied settings and natural vistas.
- c. Dam hazards, launch (and take out) information and wayfinding will be communicated by signage as needed.
- d. Trip length could increase and rest areas may be less frequent when compared to a Beginner Trail.
- e. Amenities may be more rustic than on a beginner trail.
- f. Portages will be signed.

C. Paddling skills needed

- a. Basic boat control.
- b. Forward and reverse strokes.
- c. Basic self-recovery skills, such as tip-over.
- d. Basic map reading or GPS skills.

D. Access or Rest Area Spacing

- a. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, and equal 2-4 hours of float time or X miles.

E. Lake, River and Stream Characteristics

- a. Varies from narrow and sinuous to wider channel stretches
- b. Some sandbars, rocks, riffles, strainers or mild rapids under normal conditions.
- c. May require some portages.
- d. Lakes may have expectation of moderate waves when windy, or moderate current.

3. Advanced Trail Types:

3.1 Challenge Trails

A. Typical Development Goals

- a. Day trips and multiple day trips are possible.
- b. Rustic launches may be more difficult for some users, including steep slopes.
- c. Long portages may be present and may be signed.

• User Expectations

- a. A Challenge Trail will be a more difficult experience than an Intermediate Trail and is more suited to advanced paddlers and skills.
- b. Paddler expects to manage risk and should possess self-rescue skills.
- c. Good to excellent boat control is necessary.
- d. Expect varied settings and conditions.
- e. Navigational aids may be infrequent on the river or large water bodies.
- f. Launches, access sites and/or rest areas may be far apart and rustic.
- g. Dam hazards are communicated by signage as needed.

• Paddling skills needed

- a. Good boat control.
- b. Advanced tip over recovery skills.
- c. Good endurance.
- d. Navigational skills.
- Access Spacing
 - a. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, and could exceed four hours of travel time or X miles.
- Lake, river and stream characteristics
 - a. May include faster water, rapids, large lakes, and expansive wetland areas.
 - b. Lake segments may include long open-water crossings and may encounter motorized vessels. There is a potential for high waves, coupled with steep or rocky shorelines.
 - c. May require map reading skills.
 - d. Streams may include moderate to high number of hazards, including rapids, logjams, strainers, dams and/or other obstacles.

3.2 Wilderness Trails

- A. Typical development goals
 - a. Day trips and multiple day trips are possible.
 - b. Resource protection, conservation of habitat and experiential wilderness recreation are key goals.
 - c. Rustic launches, campsites and amenities with low-impact practices for infrastructure development.
 - d. Long portages may be present, and launches may have steep slopes.
- B. User Expectations
 - a. Some degree of solitude and expectations of scenic vistas with little evidence of built infrastructure (bridges, power lines, homes, etc.). Higher potential for viewing wildlife is present.
 - b. Good to excellent boat control is necessary.
 - c. Paddlers will need skill and endurance to complete lengths between access sites and rest areas.
 - d. Fewer launches and longer trips may be evident on the trail.
 - e. Launches can be rustic, undeveloped and have little signage to keep with the character of a “wilderness water trail.”
 - f. Paddler expects to manage risk and should possess self-rescue skills.
 - g. Dam hazards are communicated by signage as needed.
 - h. Navigational aids may be infrequent or not existent.
 - i. Cell phone coverage may be limited or non-existent.
- C. Paddling skills needed
 - a. Good boat control.
 - b. Advanced tip over recovery skills.
 - c. Good endurance.
 - d. Navigational skills.
- D. Access Spacing

- a. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, and could exceed four hours of travel time or X miles.
- E. Lake, river and stream characteristics
 - a. Setting is remote. Any water condition may be possible including faster water, rapids, large lakes and expansive wetland areas.
 - b. Multiple portages may be required and some may be long.
 - c. May possess challenge elements with unmarked hazards.
 - d. Lake segments may include long open-water crossings and may encounter motorized vessels. There is a potential for high waves, coupled with steep or rocky shorelines.
 - e. Streams may include moderate to high number of hazards, including rapids, logjams, strainers, dams and/or other obstacles.

3.3 Great Lakes Trails

- A. Typical Development Goals
 - a. Day trips and multiple day trips are possible.
 - b. Mixture of modern and rustic access sites, some may be more difficult including steep slopes.
- B. User Expectations
 - a. A Great Lakes Trail will be a more difficult experience than an Intermediate Trail and is more suited to advanced paddlers.
 - b. Paddler expects to manage risk and should possess self-rescue skills in open water.
 - c. Expect varied settings and conditions.
 - d. Navigational aids will be infrequent.
 - e. Access sites and/or rest areas may be far apart.
- C. Paddling skills needed
 - a. Excellent boat control.
 - b. Good endurance.
 - c. Advanced tip over, recovery and self-rescue.
 - d. Navigational skills and the ability and to understand and obtain weather and marine forecasts.
 - e. The need to create a trip or float plan and provide that information to someone who can contact authorities if you are overdue or if there is an emergency.
- D. Access Spacing
 - a. Access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, and could exceed four hours of travel time or X miles.
- E. Great Lakes characteristics
 - a. On the Great Lakes high winds and high waves can occur and the paddler should be prepared for cold temperatures, fog or other weather conditions.
 - b. Great Lakes paddle segments can include long open-water crossings and may encounter large and small motorized vessels.
 - c. Access sites may be limited with steep or rocky shorelines.

Water Trails External Designation Process

An organization(s) that desires to develop and manage a designated water trail will submit to the department an application that demonstrates its ability to provide the following:

1. Describe the quality trail experience

- A. Provide a written summary of the trail including trail designation type being considered (i.e. Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, etc.) as well as trail length and description of the experience.
- B. Maps of river, river segments or water body, which include all designated amenities and known static hazards (dams, rest areas, launches, signage, access sites etc.).
- C. Name, photos and lists of access sites, launches, rest areas and signage. Launches, access sites and rest areas need to have adequate spacing as indicated in Designation Types section.
- D. Plan for providing educational opportunities and programming on natural and cultural heritage, conservation and health.
- E. Documentation of land-owner approval of public and privately owned access sites and rest areas.
- F. Barrier free accommodations are provided and described.

2. Provide clear information for users

- A. Standardized safety and wayfinding signage in place on the river or a written commitment to install it within one year of designation.
- B. Provide adequate information (stewardship, safety, rules, etc.) in various formats, including electronic or printed (maps, websites, pamphlets, etc.).

3. Demonstrate broad community support

- A. Minutes of public meeting(s) held in the largest population center near or adjoining the river to obtain input and explain the value of the trail.
- B. Resolutions of support from the government entities adjoining the trail.
- C. List of partners involved with the trail, including indication of participation by education, heritage, conservation, tourism, business, or health sectors.

4. Demonstrate a sustainable business plan that includes maintenance, marketing and emergencies

- A. Provide written documentation of a sustainable business plan that includes goals for development, management, promotion, operation and maintenance plans.
- B. Inventory of cultural and natural heritage assets, conservation concerns and explanation of how they are incorporated into the trail.
- C. Plan for providing educational opportunities and programming on natural and cultural heritage, conservation and health.
- D. Provide documentation on existing trail partnerships/collaborations/agreements.

- E. A proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the organizations committed to developing, operating and maintaining the trail.
- F. Provide the budget and proposed sources of funding for managing and maintaining the trail.
- G. Emergency planning and communication plan that will inform first responders, engage in their feedback and provide agencies with maps, launch sites, etc.
- H. Demonstrate a viable marketing plan, including budget and source of funding.

Application Review and Designation Process

- 1. Review.
 - A. The DNR will review the application and do any further research such as inspect the water body, to determine if it meets the criteria for designation.
 - B. If it meets criteria, DNR representatives will bring the application to the Michigan Trails Advisory Council (MTAC) who will review the application and advise the applicant on any gaps that need to be filled before formal designation can be obtained.
 - C. If criteria are not met, the DNR will provide feedback.
 - D. If the trail meets the required criteria, the DNR will prepare a draft memo for consideration by the Director and the Natural Resources Commission (NRC).
- 2. Designation of trails meeting the criteria.
 - a. Director's memo shall be placed on the agenda of the Natural Resources Commission for at least one month prior to a decision by the Director.
 - b. With advice of the NRC, the Director shall recommend the water body for designation as a State Designated Water Trail.
 - c. Designation will consist of a letter from the Director of the DNR and a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the DNR and the applicant. The MOA shall be written for a period of time no shorter than 10 years.
 - d. DNR incorporates the trail into its maps and marketing materials.
 - e. State Designated Water Trail branding/signage are placed in appropriate locations.

Auditing a State Designated Water Trail

The designee will perform an audit on the trail annually and as weather conditions warrant to determine if the trail continues to meet the criteria (see Designated Water Trail Criteria section) for being a state designated water trail, including the maintenance standards established for water trails.

If the trail does not meet the criteria and standards for being a designated water trail, the DNR will work with the designee on the MOA to assist them in meeting the criteria and standards.

The designee must promptly address identified shortfalls in operations and maintenance and safety to meet the criteria and standards.

If the designee fails to address known operations and maintenance issues per the state designated water trail criteria, then the DNR will prepare a Director's order to remove the designation status of the water trail.

If the Director signs the order, the designated water trail shall be removed from all marketing information and all designated water trail identifiers along the trail shall be removed.

Water Trails Internal DNR Designation Process

The DNR will use the following process to evaluate rivers, lakes and other water bodies that it considers proposing as state designated water trails:

1. The regional trail coordinator will meet with the primary land administering division's program manager and regional planner to identify a strategy/need, DNR core work team and stakeholders. The core team should include marketing (DNR Marketing and Outreach Division and local Convention and Visitors Bureau), heritage (Michigan Historical Center or local organization), and regional prosperity initiative, local education and local recreation representatives.
2. First core team meeting(s):
 - A. DNR staff will prepare the agenda for the first "core team" meeting, which will include determining commitments, identifying other staff or local representatives who should be included in the core team, information needs, and next steps.
 - B. The core team will also determine gaps based on the Designated Water Trail Criteria and define the water trail, describe the significance of the water trail, identify potential stakeholders, and prepare the agenda for one or more stakeholder meetings.
3. First stakeholders meeting(s)
 - A. Identify additional stakeholders and perform public outreach.
 - B. Obtain feedback on dedicating the river or lake as a water trail, including identifying opposition/support and potential challenges.
 - C. Review criteria and identify opportunities to create a quality trail experience, clear information for users, broad community support, a sustainable business plan, and a viable marketing plan.
4. Subsequent meetings – may include planning, mapping, signage, funding support, an inventory of natural and cultural heritage assets, linkages to other recreational facilities, businesses, and concurrence from local units of government adjoining trails.
5. Public meetings – held in the largest population centers near or adjoining the river to take comments on the designation of the river and seek inventory input.
6. Department seeks formal resolutions of support from local communities adjoining the lake/river for designating the water trail.
7. A sustainable business plan including development, management, promotion and maintenance will be completed by the core team designating a lead agency. An

inventory of the cultural and natural heritage assets and conservation concerns and explanation of how they are incorporated in the trail design.

8. Existing trail partnerships/collaborations/agreements will be identified including a lead agency for trail promotion.
9. The team will have a viable marketing plan including a budget and source of funding for managing and maintaining the trail.
10. Memo to DNR Director is submitted, requesting approval of a state designated water trail. Memo is noticed on the Natural Resources Commission calendar one month prior to a decision of the Director.
11. Following the designation
 - A. The lead agency produces maps and marketing materials.
 - B. The lead agency places appropriate signage on the trail.
 - C. Conducts routine audits to maintain criteria and standards.

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