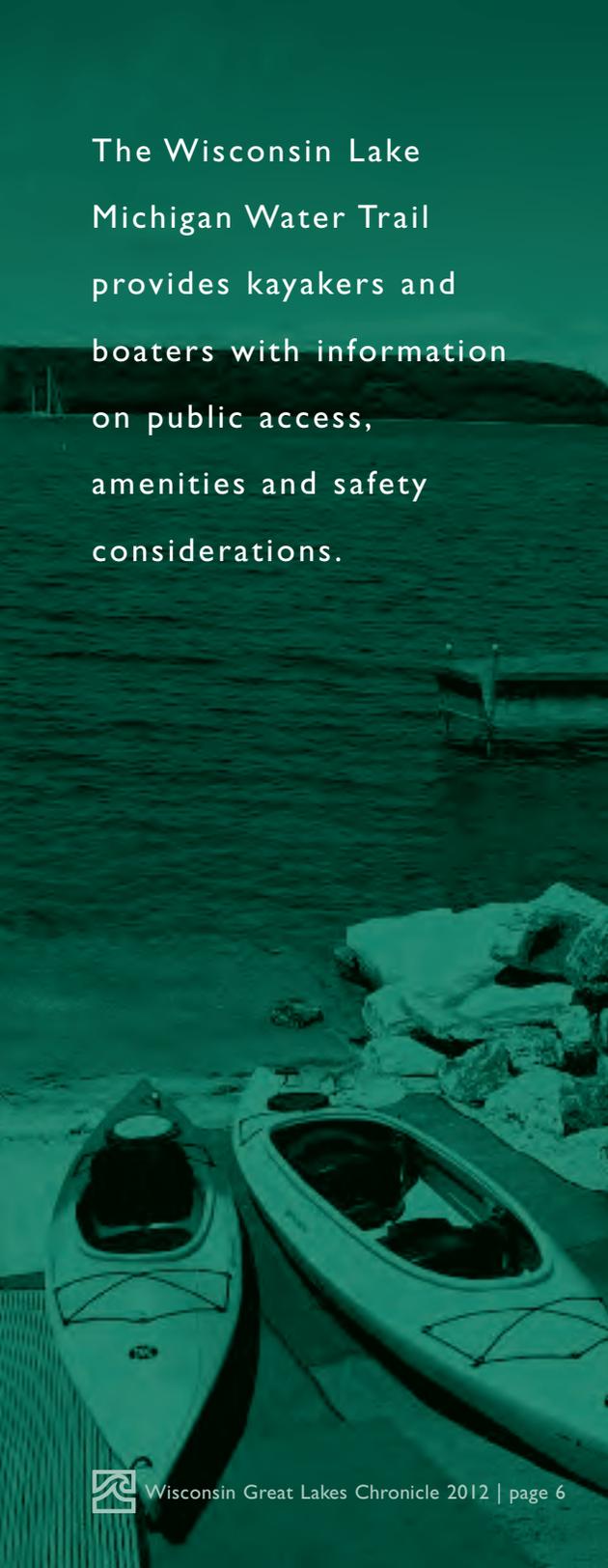


# Wisconsin Great Lakes Chronicle 2012





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## WISCONSIN LAKE MICHIGAN WATER TRAIL

*Angela Pierce*

The Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail is a 520-mile network of public access locations used by boaters along Lake Michigan. Water trails are routes along rivers and coastlines that provide recreational users—such as kayakers, sailors, recreational boaters and anglers—with information on access points, safety considerations, activities and points of interest.

Development of the Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail is the result of a multiyear effort between the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission and the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. The public and the kayaking and boating communities provided valuable feedback throughout the process.

The Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail provides kayakers and boaters with information on public access locations, amenities and safety issues, and identifies gaps where additional public access is needed. The project area covers the entire western Lake Michigan shoreline from the Michigan-Wisconsin border at Marinette to the Illinois-Wisconsin border at Pleasant Prairie. With nearly two million residents and over one-third of Wisconsin's population living within a thirty-minute drive of the Lake Michigan shoreline, this trail has positive impacts for public recreation, public health, environmental stewardship, economic development and tourism.

The development of the Lake Michigan Water Trail was primarily oriented around increasing and improving public access to the shoreline and waters of Lake Michigan. This collaborative project involved acquiring Global Positioning System (GPS) location coordinates, inventorying available amenities and photo-documenting each access location along the lakeshore. Some of the data collected at each site includes access type, fees and the availability of parking, electricity, camping, shelter and restrooms.

Over 360 sites in eleven Wisconsin counties were evaluated for potential non-motorized water access that could be branded as the Lake Michigan Water Trail. After review by project partners, kayaking and boating partners and the public during open houses and a public comment period, 191 water trail points were selected to provide a good distribution of sites that provide safe and easy access and good amenities.

Sites were categorized by access types—carry-in access, developed access, alternate access or emergency access—based on the method by which the water can be accessed, the ease of accessing the water and the level of potential user conflict at the site.

**Carry-in access** is a public site with accessible shoreline that provides easy kayak access to the water and has little user conflict from adjacent landowners. **Developed access** is a public site that provides water access via a public boat ramp or dock.

**Alternate access** is a non-ideal carry-in access site that may be only a road that ends at the water. Alternate access sites may have a steep slope to the water, require wading or paddling through marsh or present some potential for user conflict from adjacent landowners.

**Emergency access** is a site to be accessed during extreme situations when the need to get off the water is immediate. Emergency access sites are not recommended for non-emergency use because the sites are primarily road ends where the potential for user conflict is high, little to no parking is available or an agreement has been made with the site owner to allow emergency-only egress.

Public access gaps where further access or improvements are needed were evaluated for future targeted efforts to improve the connectivity

of the water trail network by increasing public land holdings along the shoreline. The gaps in access were identified along stretches where a distance from one access point to another is greater than five miles, or where camping sites are more than ten miles apart.

These gap areas created “enhancement zones” along the water trail where future efforts will be aimed at closing the gaps and improving site amenities. Enhancement zones along the Lake Michigan Water Trail are eligible for Stewardship grants and communities are encouraged to work with the Department of Natural Resources to improve or expand access along the Trail.

On April 25, 2012, the Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail was recognized by the Natural Resources Board as an official state trail. The Lake

Michigan Trail is the second longest trail in Wisconsin after only the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. With overwhelming Board, agency and public support, the Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail became the first official State water trail designated by the Natural Resources Board.

Future efforts planned for the Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail include development of a branding strategy and marketing materials, signage, a website where GPS coordinates can be downloaded, integration with the Wisconsin Coastal Atlas and mobile applications. Future efforts will focus on achieving designation as a National Recreation Trail. This designation would add Wisconsin to the Lake Michigan Water Trail National Recreation Trail that will eventually circle Lake Michigan in all four states. Such recognition will require letters of support from each community along the water trail.

A final report for the Wisconsin Lake Michigan Water Trail can be downloaded at <http://www.baylakerpc.org/natural-resources/lake-michigan-water-trail-planning>.

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