

Center for State of the Parks



ISLE ROYALE NATIONAL PARK

SNAPSHOT

In the northwestern part of Lake Superior is Isle Royale National Park, a remote island archipelago about 60 miles north of Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula and 35 miles south of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The park consists of one main island, which is about 45 miles long and nine miles wide, surrounded by about 400 smaller islands. Current park acreage is 571,790, though just 133,782 acres are terrestrial—the park includes submerged lands and aquatic resources that extend 4.5 miles out into Lake Superior. Nearly all of the park's terrestrial acreage (99 percent) is federally designated wilderness. The park is also an International Biosphere Reserve, a designation given by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization to protected areas that "demonstrate a balanced relationship between humans and the biosphere." In 2006, the park hosted more than 17,000 visitors.

HISTORY

Human use of Isle Royale includes several thousands of years of copper mining that began about 4,000 years ago and continued until the late 19th century. Isle Royale copper was traded widely by prehistoric peoples, and items made from it have been found throughout much of North America. Copper mining continued into historic



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times; Ojibwa people were mining Isle Royale copper when Europeans first passed through the region in the early 17th century. The Ojibwa called the island Minong (which could mean "a good place"), but its mineral riches prompted the French to give it the new name Isle Royale.

The Ojibwa retained ownership of Isle Royale until 1842, when it was ceded to Euro-American interests.

Mining continued until it was no longer profitable; the last mine closed in 1893. In addition to copper, settlers made use of Isle Royale's other abundant natural resources. In the early 18th century, fur companies began trapping furbearing mammals on the island, but fish eventually became the most important commercial product. Although corporate commercial fishing ended in 1841, family-run commercial fishing continued until 1994. Isle Royale was also logged, though the island had few large trees.

Recreational use moved to the forefront at Isle Royale in the mid-20th century. Pleasant summer weather and extraordinary scenery made the island an attractive place for resorts and private cottages.

The idea for a national park on Lake Superior began to gain momentum around 1920 after Albert Stoll, a writer for the *Detroit News*, visited the park and began publishing articles extolling the island's beauty. Public support for the park grew, though a proposal for a state park and national monument failed. Eventually, Isle Royale National Park was authorized on March 3, 1931, though it wasn't until April 3, 1940, that enough land had been acquired to officially establish the park.

THREATS

- To meet natural resources management needs, Isle Royale needs funding for two more full-time, permanent positions (terrestrial ecologist and wilderness coordinator/database manager), one subject-to-fur-



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lough permanent position (geographic information systems/NEPA compliance), and two secure, base-funded seasonal positions (biotech and wilderness ranger).

- Just part of one staff person's time is devoted to cultural resources management at Isle Royale—a tall order given the size of the park and the extent of its cultural resources, which encompass 4,500 years of human history. Additional staff are needed to provide adequate care for cultural resources and to more fully address resource interpretation. Positions should include some combination of a cultural resource specialist, an education specialist, a museum or archival technician, a historical architect, and an archaeological technician.
- A history of human activities and natural disturbances has shaped the landscapes of Isle Royale. Two major events have significantly altered forest structure and composition. First, moose migration in the early 20th century introduced a large herbivore that browsed on island vegetation. Second, a fire in 1936 destroyed 20 to 30 percent of the forest canopy; evidence of this fire still remains in the island's forests.
- Mercury and persistent organic pollutants that are transported in the air and deposited in park waters are contaminants that have park managers most concerned.
- Limited cultural resources research has been done at Isle Royale. A variety of studies are needed to provide baseline knowledge of the park's archaeological, ethnographic, and historical resources so that park staff can develop plans to care for and interpret the resources. Important work to be done includes a historic resource study, historic properties management plan, historic structures reports, archaeologi-

cal surveys, ethnographic overview and assessment, cultural affiliation study, and traditional use studies. Park staff have requested funds to complete a number of these studies, though it could be years before funds are available.

- Native peoples played a large role in the human history of Isle Royale for thousands of years, yet their stories are not interpreted as extensively as those of Euro-American settlers. Improved interpretive facilities and exhibits would allow the park to display more items from the museum collection and better communicate the park's history to the public. Currently, maritime history is the only theme portrayed in visitor center exhibits.

WHAT'S BEING DONE

- Isle Royale is home to the longest-running study examining predator and prey relationships. Interactions between moose and wolves have been studied since 1958.
- Park staff use education and other efforts to minimize visitor effects on park resources. Interpretive rangers teach visitors about resources during boat rides to the island, campsites are located and designed to minimize ecological disturbances, boot brushes are provided to clean seeds from invasive plants off visitors' shoes, and boaters are taught how to minimize the likelihood of transporting invasive aquatic species.
- As testament to its high quality habitat, Isle Royale is home to about one-third of the breeding common loon population in Michigan, where the species is listed by the state as threatened, and contains the only documented loon nesting areas on the Lake Superior shoreline. The park is also home to some of the largest and healthiest native freshwater mussel populations remaining in the Great

Lakes and some of the most diverse and healthy lake trout populations in Lake Superior.

ABOUT NPCA AND CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

CONTACT US

For a copy of the full report on Isle Royale National Park published by NPCA's Center for State of the Parks, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about Center for State of the Parks, visit www.npca.org/stateoftheparks or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president for Center for State of the Parks, at jnations@npca.org.

For more information on Isle Royale National Park, contact NPCA's Midwest Regional Director, Lynn McClure, at 312.343.7216 or lmclure@npca.org, or visit the park online at www.nps.gov/isro. For media inquiries, please contact Tracey McIntire, NPCA media relations manager, at 202.454.3311 or tmcintire@npca.org. To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of this park, visit www.npca.org/take_action.