Sand-trapped History

Uncovering the History of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Marie J. Curatolo

6/1/2010
There is a place where white sand beaches sit at the feet of towering bluffs. On the horizon lie the outlines of islands separated by a channel of deep blue water. As breezes move through the trees, a passing ship sounds its bellow. This description hardly conjures up a vision of the American Midwest. However, the area it describes is located on Leelanau peninsula, in northwestern mainland Michigan. Most who have never been to the area find it strange to think of Michigan as being in possession of a peninsula and islands. However, on the sandy shores of Lake Michigan lies a beautifully scenic, historically and geologically rich well-kept secret; Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. This park hosts thousands of visitors every year, drawing them in with its luxuriously scenic beaches, dense forest lands, warm inland lakes, majestic sand dunes, and proximity to two offshore islands boasting similar amounts of lakeside beauty. Visiting Sleeping Bear today, one is met with a strip of gift shops, restaurants, and specialty stores in the nearby town of Glen Arbor where summer lake house and cabin
owners mingle with campers from the D.H. Day campground inside the park. It is rare, however, that these visitors, or even residents of the area, are made familiar with the history of this unique park. Beneath the water, the trees, the campsites, and the towns, there is a history of human habitation dating back thousands of years. It is a history that takes on all the twists and turns of a place affected by a changing variety of people, ideas, and values. These changes were not instant or smooth transitions. Indeed the story of this area is no simple one. The vision for the use of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore was historically driven predominantly by technological advancements of the time as well as shifting land use values by landowners and politicians; the visions change from one of extractive and instrumental use of the land, to one of recreational and intrinsic value.

Surrounded by lakes on all but one side, the state of Michigan is an inland peninsula, often compared to a giant glove sticking up into the Great Lakes. On this glove-shaped land is another smaller peninsula known as the Leelanau peninsula, constituting Leelanau County. In the southwestern corner of this county is the Sleeping Bear Dunes. Evidence of humans in this area dates back to the paleo-indian period (approximately 11,000-8,000 BCE). Archeological finds in the area in the 1970s and 1980s identified ancient artifacts such as spear points and various types of flint. Consensus among experts is that people were passing through Sleeping Bear during the paleo-indian period and survived by hunting local small game, often near the edge of the retreating glaciers that would go on to form the lakes of the region. The people depended on the biota and the landscape in order to survive. These prehistoric residents appear to have remained in the area and may have even gone on to make up some of the population of the regions Native American tribes. The Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Ojibwa were
considered part of the Algonquin family and were present in the Sleeping Bear area as early as 1620. The Potawatomi migrated south, and the Ottowa and Ojibwa settled in northern Michigan. The Sleeping Bear area was a common hunting and fishing territory used by both tribes, although it is closely associated with the Ojibwa tribe, perhaps due to the origin of the park’s name: As Ojibwa legend has it, long ago, a mother bear and her two cubs attempted to swim across the lake to escape a horrible forest fire in their home woods in Wisconsin. As they swam endlessly, the two cubs began to grow weary. The mother bear finally made it to shore and fell asleep as she waited for them to come to her. Sadly, her cubs had become too exhausted in the icy waters and drowned. Today, the largest dune in the area represents where the mother bear slept and waited for her offspring. The drowned cubs are represented by the offshore North and South Manitou islands. The dunes, the legend says, formed when the sands blew over the bodies of the bears.

The Ojibwe were the largest and most powerful tribe in the Great Lakes throughout the 1600s. The widespread nature of the large tribe allowed for different lifestyles depending on the location of individual groups, or bands, within the tribe. Members in northern Michigan lived in an area with poor, sandy soils and a short growing season and were therefore unable to adopt the larger, permanent villages of Ojibwa living further south of the lakes. The Ojibwa undoubtedly valued the land for the resources it offered for their subsistence. They were hunter-gatherers harvesting wild rice and maple sugar. In addition to providing food to the tribe, these products were especially important because this tribe had no salt and instead used maple syrup to preserve as well as season food. They also depended largely on birchbark from local trees for a variety of purposes such as utensils, storage containers, canoes, as well as
coverings for their wigwams. In addition to harvesting plants, the Ojibwa also depended on the animal species of the region. Fish species were utilized for their sustenance values. Birchbark canoes were especially important because they assisted in fishing. The Ojibwa were skilled fishers and Lake Michigan species, especially sturgeon, made up a large portion of their diet. The arrival of Europeans to the region would soon unveil a new commercial use for animals in the area.

The first Europeans to travel along Lake Michigan’s eastern shore were French and Canadian explorers, some part of Jacques Marquette’s clan, who had entered the region not only to do missionary work, but also to survey and assess it. Almost immediately after their arrival came an influx of European fur trappers and traders who explored the area and extracted furs from the mid-1600s through the mid-1800s. The Ojibwa were especially skilled hunters and trappers. The cold climate of the area gave the local beavers thicker coats which were seen as high-quality and very valuable. The Ojibwa became very heavily immersed in the fur trade with the French, often trading beaver pelts for weapons and supplies leading to a boom in wealth and power. This trade relationship allowed the Ojibwa to depend less and less on extracting resources for subsistence, and instead drove them to exploit biota for commercial purposes; something that had previously never been a part of their lifestyle. As a result, the tribe became dependent on European trade goods as it shifted further and further away from its traditional subsistence land uses. As the beaver populations diminished in the mid-1800s, the tribe indubitably suffered from the decrease in trade. They also suffered from exposure to European diseases which spawned epidemics that overwhelmed the traditional medicinal herb treatments of the tribe and proved to be more deadly than anything they had
ever encountered\textsuperscript{ix}. By the time the fur trade was dying out in the region, Native American occupation of the land was already weak at best. The legacies of the Ojibwa and the fur trappers live on: Even today, some pottery and stone tools can be revealed by shifting sand dunes or in the banks of nearby streams\textsuperscript{v}. Also, beaver are no longer harvested for commercial purposes. According to a 2007 furbearer harvest survey, more than 14,000 people hunt or trap furbearing mammals in the state of Michigan each year, however, the species most commonly sought are coyotes, raccoons, red fox, and muskrat\textsuperscript{x}.

Although Europeans had first come to the Great Lakes to pursue the fur trade, this era had died out after about two hundred years. The same climactic conditions that prevented the Ojibwa from pursuing long-term agriculture also prevented Europeans from doing so. This did not attract settlement. The next key industry for the region would be dependent on a different resource; the iconic pine and hardwood trees of the region. Wood products quickly became one of the first commodities to be associated with Leelanau County\textsuperscript{xii}. However, the historical ties between the fur trade and logging are evident. Theodore Karamanski documents the history of logging in northern Michigan in his book \textit{Deep Woods Frontier}. He describes the transition from fur trade to logging and how closely interrelated they are: “Not only did fur traders establish many of the settlements that blossomed into logging ports, but as pioneer businessmen, fur traders began several important logging ventures”\textsuperscript{xiii}. Sawmills and gristmills sprang up throughout the region, often built by the fur traders who had originally settled in the region.

The growth of the timber industry went hand in hand with the growth of another
important industry, without which the exploitation of wood product resources would not have been able to be a viable vision for the land. The rise of logging brought with it the rise of shipping. While logging had occurred on the Leelanau peninsula, a lot of chief lumber companies were actually located further north in northern Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula region. Eastern lumbermen migrated to the region in the post-Civil War period and took over the struggling Chicago Lumber Company in the Upper Peninsula. The Chicago Lumber Company became one of the most powerful and expansive logging agents in the region, expanding until it held about 160,000 acres, three sawmills, 1200-1500 employees, and their own shipping fleet\textsuperscript{xiv}. The heavy production of the lumber industry in the north required a system to transport logs to larger urban centers, such as Chicago and Milwaukee, further south. The Great Lakes provided a waterway system that could serve this purpose. In 1825, the opening of the Erie Canal also contributed to a sharp rise in shipping in the Midwest\textsuperscript{xv}. Initially, boat traffic was predominantly two-masted sailboats known as schooners, but after the development of the steam engine, steamships came to dominate shipping\textsuperscript{xvi}. Steamships depended on wood for fuel and often needed refueling during their journeys. The Sleeping Bear region would prove to be crucial for providing cord wood for ships to passing steamships. Thus, much of the wood harvested in the sleeping bear area was not intended to make it down to Chicago; its commodity value was as firewood to power ships.

Because of this new transportation technology, the old fur trapper settlements that were on the decline received a much-needed economic opportunity. The extractive vision for the land would stay the same, but the resources extracted would shift from furbearing mammals to lumber. The first dock was built by William Burton on South Manitou Island and
provided the beginning of a small logging village populated by loggers and dock workers\textsuperscript{xvii}. Other villages like this sprang up as more and more entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to sell firewood to steamships and built docks in the region.

One important dockside village that emerged at this time was known as Glen Haven and is located inside modern-day Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

In 1857, an entrepreneur named C.C. McCarty built a sawmill and an inn on the beach next to Sleeping Bear Bay. He bought a dock in 1865 and the small area became known as Glen Haven. The dock at Glen Haven was favorable to many ships because it offered a more protected harbor than other docks in the region. In 1878, the Northern Transit Company acquired Glen Haven as a stop to provide cord wood as fuel for a 24-vessel fleet traveling from upstate New York to Chicago or Milwaukee\textsuperscript{viii}. The ships carried cargoes of lumber, as well as grain, iron ore, other mined minerals, and various other extracted products\textsuperscript{xix}. Serving as the Company’s agent in Glen Haven was a young man named David Henry Day who would become very influential in the area in years to come. By 1910, Day would own more than 5,000 forested acres, establish the 1,400 acre Day Forest, and would already be promoting reforestation projects\textsuperscript{x}. Clearly, he understood the conservation value of trees as a resource and how, with a lively shipping industry, these resources could sustain local populations. With the growth of shipping,
came the inevitable increase in vessel traffic. The area was especially attractive to shipping interests because of the nearby Manitou Passage between the North and South Manitou islands and the mainland. It offered a deep channel, sheltered from turbulence and winds by the offshore islands, and close proximity to a shore in case of emergency. The increase vessel traffic throughout the Great Lakes also brought an increase in accidents and shipwrecks: Two hundred fourteen people lost their lives in Great Lakes shipwrecks in the winter of 1870-1871 alone \( ^{xxi} \). This helped prompt Congress to fund the establishment of the Sleeping Bear Point Coast Guard Station in 1871. This life-saving station was located in Glen Haven and employed a crew of six to eight men plus a Captain. The crew was trained to respond to a ship in distress by either rowing through the waves, often through stormy weather, to a stranded ship in a surfboat or using a device called a Lyle Gun to shoot a rescue line from shore more than 400 yards to help rescue crew stranded on a ship in distress (7). From 1871-1915, the life-saving service rescued over 178,000 people and boasted an astonishing 99% success rate (7). Crew members and their families lived in Glen Haven along with lumberjacks and dock workers. Lumberjacks in the area worked twelve hour days, six days a week. Most of them were unmarried or had come to the area without their families, so they resided in the Sleeping Bear Inn \( ^{xxii} \). However, another technological shift was on its way and it threatened the cord wood production that sustained Glen Haven’s economy.
The development of highways and the expansion of trucking companies cut back extensively on the need for steamboat shipping and passenger boats. Shipping revenues were falling fast and the Glen Arbor stop on the Northern Transit Company’s line was eliminated in 1918. D.H. Day, the Company’s agent, was already recognizing how the advent of new technology was dictating a shift in land use for the area. Day started a farm and orchard near Glen Haven where he had over 5,000 cherry and apple trees. In the 1920s, he established the Glen Haven Canning Company and began processing the fruit from the farms and shipping it to market from the Glen Haven dock that had previously been used to deliver lumber to steamships. However, perhaps without even realizing it, D.H. Day had helped set the stage for another driving force of land-use vision change in the region. He had helped lay down the foundation for the development of conservation values in the region.

His forest lands were one of the first managed forests in northern Michigan and they had been protected in order to promote future lumber harvests. The conservation ideals at play created helped shift the vision for the land from one of boundlessness to one of managed extraction and calculated exploitation. No longer were the forests providing an endless supply
of timber for the taking and the future of the resource on which many livelihoods depended was not as secure as perhaps was once thought. This was the first time any natural resource was attempted to be managed, but the demand for the resources would be virtually depleted by the 1920s. However, the ideas of management and protection of the land would continue to be applied, only its focus would shift from protection of natural resources to something new: recreation.

In 1920, Day donated thirty two shoreline acres connecting Glen Haven to the nearby village of Glen Arbor to the State of Michigan. This land became the D.H. Day State Park. The land had been turned over to the public and people were already promoting the protection of the shore for its scenic views and beachfront activities. In 1948, a man named Pierce Stocking who had worked for many years was a lumberman in Michigan during his youth, purchased forest land from D.H. Day near Glen Haven. Stocking loved spending time in the woods and was an avid hiker, self-trained naturalist, and appreciative viewer of the scenic beauty observable from atop the sand dune bluffs of the region. After spending lots of time there, he decided he wanted to share this beauty with others and was going to do so by building a road to the top of the dunes. The road was completed in 1967 and was open to the public. Stocking operated the road until it became a part of the National Lakeshore, where it was renamed the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive. Pierce Stocking seemed to see the area differently than many before him. Like D.H. Day, he saw a need to protect and manage the land, however what he was protecting was not an extractable resource, but rather the intrinsic wonder of the land.
Stocking’s view ran parallel to a changing political climate that was also fueling the rise of recreational values in the area. The post-World War II era had given rise to larger families and increased recreational demand, and the government felt the need to respond accordingly. Economic prosperity allowed people to have more leisure time and afford to take vacations by automobile, which more and more families were acquiring. As one report documents, the automobile made faraway recreational destinations reachable by many, rather than a privileged few; it was easier to travel and many sought to seize the new opportunity. This provides, yet again, an example of how changes in transportation technology have helped create and reinforce land use visions for this area. In response to popular demand, citizens formed a highly-publicized “Save the Dunes” campaign that helped push for the establishment of the first national lakeshore, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore in the Upper Peninsula, and the second, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Land use planners became interested in opening up more land to the public for recreation. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s secretary of the interior Harold Ickes who spoke of interest in implementing a national shoreline program in order to keep shores open to the public and out of private ownership: “I say it is the prerogative and the duty of the Federal and State Governments to step in and acquire, not just a swimming beach here and there, but solid blocks of ocean front hundreds of miles in length.” This was the beginning of the shoreline conservation focus of the National Park Service. However, as historian/author Brian C. Kalt points out, the task of defining recreational values as either preservationist or conservationist is difficult because on one hand, recreation can be viewed as a resource in need of protection just like any other, and on the other, recreation is indicative of the human relationship with land and the ability to value it for its
intrinsic qualities. The struggle between preservation and conservation was very much alive in the 1960s, and it only contributed to the expansion of the environmental movement of the time. Nonetheless, these values would be highlighted and thrown around in arguments once legislation was proposed to turn the Sleeping Bear area into a federally protected area. The senate bill outlining such a plan was introduced and supported by Senator Phillip A. Hart. Hart had a view that “the power of the federal government was an important tool in improving the life of the average person.” Hart’s conservation efforts are further characterized as being “directly related to accommodating the increasing demand for recreation” and he comments “I think we can foresee the time, not far distant, when we in the East will prize natural resources for recreation as highly as we have valued them for their use by industry, by agriculture and by municipalities.”

One example of the rise of growing importance of recreation came in 1959, when the National Park Service in conjunction with Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton conducted published *Our Fourth Shore: Great Lakes Shoreline Recreational Area Survey*. In this massive survey of the entire Great Lakes region including all five lakes and all eight states bordering them, Sleeping Bear Dunes is one of only three areas in the state of Michigan specifically recommended for federal shoreline protection consideration. The report included an outline of remaining opportunities in the Great Lakes region for recreation development, of which the Sleeping Bear dunes area is one. The report is far from objective; it does not address any other opportunities for economic or social development in the region other than tourism and
recreation. Our Fourth Shore gives a detailed account of common recreational activities in the region including boating, camping, hiking, hunting, guided nature tours, waterfront activities, and scenic drives. It notes that the area’s potential for recreation was huge, however mostly unfulfilled because most of the public lands were too rocky or too cold for recreational uses. It also highlights the importance of recreational values at the time and how they came to be such a dominant value system: “Our national population continues to grow. Incomes have risen. Living standards have constantly improved. Leisure time has increased. And in most Americans, as in most other people, there is a hunger for the outdoors”.

Senator Hart’s first introduction of a senate bill came in 1961 and in that same year was met with opponents from the area who formed the Citizen’s Council of the Sleeping Bear Dunes Area who were concerned about losing their long-held properties to the government. After a fierce nine-year public legal fight, President Nixon signed HR 18776 into law, officially authorizing the establishment of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. However, the stiff opposition to the creation of any sort of Dunes park on a federal level did not go down without a fight. Transportation technology also plays a tangential role as it was involved in helping distribute newspapers and other forms of media coverage of the fight which reached every corner of the state and even sparked interest throughout the Great Lakes region and the nation as a whole. The extensive media coverage and the degree to which it took sides and stirred controversy undoubtedly brought issues of environmental protection and recreation into the public eye.
Reflecting on the history of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore recalls a story that is deeply rooted in shifting values and ideals. In the early years since the beginning of human habitation of the area, the vision for the land was one of a home that provided resources for subsistence of a local, place-based culture. The increased use of exploration vessels by Europeans brought the ships and crews of European explorers. As they entered the scene with their vast trade network and globalized vision, the value of the land remained extractive, but shifted towards commercialism in the fur trade. Suddenly, the goods from the land were being used by people in far away markets and no longer extracted solely for those doing the extracting. As the fur trade dissipated, a new transportation technology arose; the steam engine would power ships that would allow the timber industry of the north to boom and would promote the establishment of the logging villages near Sleeping Bear to provide them with wood fuel. Again, the vision for the land was one of extraction of a resource and its sale to, and use by, a nonlocal industry. The construction of highways and increased presence and prowess of the trucking industry rendered the logging and shipping enterprises less valuable. D.H. Day’s cannery operation was the last land use vision that extracted resources, in the form of farmed cherries and apples, and sold them to a more distant market for commercial profit. After this time, there exists a changing political climate, not unaffected by transportation technology innovations, but nonetheless the most visible cause of changing land use values. As the average American became wealthier and more able to afford leisure activities, the demand for recreation grew and the scenic shores of northern Michigan became a focus for potential recreational development. This was greatly facilitated by the rise of the automobile as a vehicle for transporting people to previously unreachable destinations. Throughout the history of the
area, it is evident that the shifting values and land use visions for the land known as Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore make a gradual shift from extractive and instrumental uses for the land and its resources, towards recreational and intrinsic values. This change is subtly, but powerfully, affected by the advent of new technologies, specifically in the arena of transportation, that helped foster the area’s economies, ideals, social and political climates, and all of the ensuing influences and consequences of these forces.
“Glen Arbor, Empire, and the Sleeping Bear Area.” *Leelanau Historical Museum.*

(accessed May 3, 2010).


http://www.nps.gov/slbe/historyculture/glenhaven.htm (accessed May 9, 2010).


*Recreation Area Survey.* 1959.

---


vii “History of the Ojibwe.”

viii “History of the Ojibwe.”

ix “History of the Ojibwe.”


xiv Karamanski, 42-43.


Kalt, 60.
Kalt, 69.
Kalt, 4.
Kalt, 61.
Kalt, 12.
Kalt, 13.
Kalt, 5.
Kalt, 45.