

Introduction

Michigan's natural world is a kaleidoscope of life. Our meadows, wetlands, waters, woods, and farmland provide an ever-changing show. This display once offered the population a sensory-rich, animated backdrop for living out daily lives. The course of time redirected many of us from rural settings to urban centers. The twenty-first century finds nearly 76 percent of midwesterners have adopted city life. We've traded natural landscapes for skyscrapers, strip malls, and a neighborhood park here and there. But as much as we might love the urban lifestyle, no amount of concrete and steel seems to extinguish our instinct to explore, connect with nature, and investigate fresh horizons.

Responding to nature's beckoning helps us regain inner balance and a sense of wonder, while affording us means to test personal limits. Several buzz terms are tossed around these days to describe travel and outdoor recreational experiences. Labels we hear are *ecotourism*, *nature-based tourism*, *responsible and sustainable tourism*, and now, *eco-explorer*. What do they mean and where do we fit?

Michigan abounds with nature-based tourism, but nature-based tourism is not always environmentally friendly. For example, ATVs carelessly blazing through natural landscapes can harm ecosystems, although the activity is nature-based. Ecotourism emerged in the 1970s from a blossoming environmental movement. It involves more than eco-friendly recreation. The International Ecotourism Society is a non-profit organization advocating principles of sustainability. It defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." It is intimately

tied to benefiting local economies. Sustainable tourism is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization as “tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future.” Simply put, responsible travel embraces the benefits, and limits damaging aspects of tourism.

The eco-explorer is a new breed. *Eco-explorer* describes the individual who bends to the inner call to travel and recreate without negatively impacting ecosystems—and more. It’s the person willing to adopt a thoughtful new ethic—a commitment to minimizing their environmental impact when pursuing outdoor recreation. It is the eco-tourist, the responsible tourist, and the nature explorer all in one curious, adventurous package.

It’s hard to imagine a more perfect location for the eco-explorer than Michigan. The state’s been dubbed the Great Lakes State, Winter Wonderland, Pure Michigan, and of course, the place to seek a Pleasant Peninsula. Eco-explorers, hold onto your hats. The Mitten has 3,288 miles of Great Lakes coastline, 11,000 inland lakes, 75,000 acres of sand dunes, and 19.3 million acres of forest to explore. Along with it, we have a well-established recreation infrastructure and deeply entrenched outdoor traditions. These assets converge to create the playground of the Midwest and extraordinary opportunities to connect to your inner explorer.

The purpose of this book is to unveil possibilities for enjoying low-impact experiences in the Mitten State. You’ll find a sampling of classic Michigan and little-known gems to whet your appetite for sustainable fun. These pages celebrate the fact that being an eco-explorer in no way diminishes opportunities for rewarding outdoor experiences. But being an eco-explorer does ask something of us. It requires raising our awareness and giving careful consideration to our actions. It calls for taking responsibility for the consequences of our recreational activities. It asks that we refuse to exploit the natural world and that we accept and forward new recreational standards.

We choose to adopt a low-impact ethic to preserve nature’s treasures because it is in the interest of the earth’s long-term health, as well as our own well-being. Modern society demands we spend prolonged periods before electronic screens. Connected has come to mean we are engaged technologically, rather than interacting with the three-dimensional,

multisensory world around us. Without realizing it, life has closed in. But nature resurrects dulled spirits. It fully engages our senses to reawaken us to the powers within. In nature, we hear, see, feel, smell, and touch profound mysteries. We are challenged physically and spiritually by outdoor experiences, whether tackling a mountain on skis, paddling a fast-moving river, or gazing at silver moonlight reflected on still waters. In nature, we discover we are more than we ever thought we were.

This book introduces you to sustainable practices developed and developing across Michigan which support outdoor recreation platforms. You will see how each segment of the recreation industry confronts unique issues in the greening process. New products and equipment enter the marketplace every day helping businesses and organizations convert to more sustainable methods. But there are basic sustainability principles the eco-explorer can apply to judge a venue's progress on the green path. In a nutshell, essential practices address waste management, energy use, water conservation, and reduction in the use of toxic chemicals.

Good reader, beware. Not every activity or facility branded "green" lives up to its promotion. There are businesses out there willing to exaggerate sustainability accomplishments to win patronage. The environmental organization Greenpeace calls the deceptive practice "greenwashing." Greenwashing can take various forms, according to Greenpeace. A company may boast of an environmental achievement when the measure is required by law. A business may tout an environmental accomplishment to distract attention from other ecologically damaging practices. There are endless tricks and it can be quite difficult to sift marketing fiction from fact.

To help you evaluate experiences, each chapter of this book contains an eco-checklist relevant to the type of venue showcased in that chapter. The list aids you in understanding how you can be a responsible explorer and helps you assess what vital steps a business or facility has accomplished. It's up to you to keep your eyes and ears open and ask questions of venues. Keep in mind that some well-intentioned facilities are limited by what products are currently available, or by law. Realize the greening of Michigan's hospitality and recreation industry is an evolution. It's a vital transformation affording each of us the chance to participate.

Partnership is a key component to forwarding the greening of our recreation. Resorts, parks, and hotels collaborate with local, state, and federal government authorities to advance sustainability and build tourism infrastructure. In turn, facilities ask for the cooperation of patrons. Hotels may request patrons forego housekeeping services. Parks may ask visitors to reduce electric usage. Small steps, multiplied by hundreds of eco-explorers, create sustainability.

Each chapter concludes with an in-depth look at a related topic highlighting sustainable contributions of Michigan's pioneering individuals, businesses, and conservationists.

Sustainability Begins at Home

If we are intent on preserving Michigan's natural resources for the next generation to enjoy, there are positive changes every eco-explorer can immediately adopt. Fortunately, reducing the environmental impact of our outdoor experiences is quite doable. We may lessen our footprint by reducing the number of getaways we take, by taking fewer getaways but staying longer, or by exploring close to home. Every county in Michigan offers interesting places to enjoy, trails, waterways, and wildlife. Some of your best opportunities may be just down the road. That's eco-explorer thinking!

In the case of most recreational getaways, transportation is the leading offender in creating a negative eco-footprint and typically the greatest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions. Of all transport means, air travel causes the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions. In some areas of the state, it may be possible to access the more eco-friendly public rail or bus transportation, but for the most part, Michigan explorers rely on passenger vehicles to get to their favorite recreational haven. If circumstances allow, consider renting or borrowing a hybrid car for your next adventure.

A significant step in greening your experience is to estimate your trip's carbon footprint. Online calculators allow you to determine the carbon footprint for your specific vehicle and the distance you expect to drive. The calculator found at <http://calculator.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx> allows you to compare the footprint for various modes of

transportation for a specific trip. Add estimates for lodging and dining impact for your total.

Once you've calculated your getaway's carbon impact, you might consider offsetting. Carbon offsets allow you to counteract a trip's impact by funding projects that offset greenhouse gas emissions. Replanting rainforests and funding of wind farms are common offsets, but there are several options. TerraPass (www.terrapass.com) allows individuals to purchase carbon offsets in custom amount units of 1,000 pounds. Make offsetting more personal by planting a tree or two in your own yard or community.

Investing a few minutes researching your destination before making your escape paves the way for green fun. More than anything, the new eco-explorer ethic requires greater attention to the consequences of our activities. With the help of this book, you can find the greenest choices in lodging and recreation for your adventure. You might also want to scope out locations for green entertainment venues and farmers markets for obtaining locally produced food.

You're packed and pumped, but before closing the door behind you, green the home front. Conservation tips we've heard hundreds of times are easy to overlook, like properly inflating your vehicle's tires and making sure the vehicle is operating at peak efficiency. Take a moment to dial down the hot-water heater and unplug electronics. These are simple but meaningful measures. If it isn't yet your habit, now is a good time to include it in your routine.

Michigan state parks, just one of the state's outstanding recreation venues, welcome more than 20 million visitors annually, and national parks in Michigan see more than 2 million visitors each year. Overall, more than 74 million leisure travelers enjoy the state in any given year, according to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Imagine the positive effect if every traveler and adventurer took small steps to green their getaways. Take the challenge. Lead the way. We each have the power to protect and sustain the Michigan we love to explore.