

State Water Trail Designation Program Handbook



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STATE WATER TRAIL DESIGNATION PROGRAM

State-Designated Water Trail Program Background

Throughout Michigan’s history blue highways have been the preferred mode of transportation. Today, these same waters 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, the [DNR Comprehensive Trail Plan](#), the Parks and Recreation Division Strategic Plan, and the Michigan Water Strategy all call for the establishment of a statewide system of designated water trails.

Water trails present great opportunities to:

1. Grow local and regional economies.
2. Strengthen regional identity.
3. Attract out-of-state tourists and workers.
4. Promote healthy lifestyles.
5. Showcase Michigan’s incredible water resources.

The State Water Trail Designation Program will provide information to help users make recreational activity choices and to provide a level of expectation for the water trail experience.

Key Goal and Measurable Objective

The goal of the State Water Trail Designation Program is to create a sustainable system of water trails that are geographically dispersed; locally supported; and offer an array of experiences, including diverse lengths, scenery, heritage exploration, varying difficulty levels, and amenities.

State Water Trail Program Needs

While federal and state agencies, as well as communities and organizations, have made substantial investments in the infrastructure needed to support a designated water trail system, there are some program pieces that must be provided and supported by the applicant, including:

1. Standardized criteria to be considered a state-designated water trail for facilities and amenities such as:
 - a. Location of primary and secondary access sites and rest areas
 - b. Signage and comprehensive mapping
 - c. Overnight accommodation and camping opportunities
 - d. Restrooms, potable water, and accessible features
 - e. Emergency contact and safety measures
2. An inventory of existing and potential trails that currently meet the criteria
3. A means to officially designate the trails
4. A marketing and promotional campaign for designated trails
5. A process for public input on potential designated trails.
6. Encourage respect for property owners adjoining a designated trail
7. Funding sources for local trail development, operations and maintenance, and statewide program management
8. Establishment of strong partnerships
9. Comprehensive understanding of all existing management plans for a water body

This document provides a comprehensive plan for establishing a water trails program within the DNR, supported by partners in the public and private sectors. A trail designation system will provide a template to potential water trail users, including:

1. The length of the trip and time required to complete it
2. The type of trip; designation
3. The degree of challenge and skills required.
4. The degree of solitude, safety and natural viewsheds.
5. Predictable or unpredictable paddling factors one might experience.
6. Access sites, amenities, and accessible features.
7. Community cultural and natural heritage assets connected to the trail.

Clear, consistent communication about water trails will contribute to successful recruitment and retention of new water trail users and encourage return visits to regional destinations, bringing this emerging group to new cities and regions.

Designated Water Trail Criteria [hyperlink from above to detailed sections below.](#)

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

- A quality trail experience
- Clear information for users
- Broad community support
- A sustainable business, maintenance, and marketing plan

1. A quality trail experience

- a. The water trail is a waterway that is open to public recreational use.
- b. The water trail has publicly available access sites and rest areas in reasonable distances depending on the designated type of experience of the trail.
 - i. All access sites, rest areas and portages shown for the trail have been approved by the landowner to be a part of the water trail, this approval must be documented in the application. The goal is to reduce potential conflicts and maintain public support for accessible water trails.
- c. The water trail has reasonable amenities depending on the designated type of trail experience. Amenities may include restrooms, picnic areas, overnight lodging, camping, parking, drinking water, and canoe/kayak racks/lockers.
 - i. Restroom facilities may be available on all trail types but can range from modern facilities to rustic. The spacing between restroom locations will vary by trail segment description.
 - ii. Provide information on trail segments that provide barrier-free access and amenities.
- d. Wherever possible, programmed activities are available. This allows for an 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, bicycling and hiking trails, fishing, hunting, cultural and historic experiences, etc.

2. 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:
 - i. Access site locations, including photos, accessible features, and amenities
 - ii. Trail routes and trail lengths (in miles and time)
 - iii. Degree of challenge and hazard expectation within trail segments. (Dams need to specifically called out, and signed ahead of the hazard) Guidance on this?
 - iv. Natural and cultural heritage features
 - v. Significant landmarks
 - vi. Length and difficulty of portages Important
- 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 provided during the trail experience promotes safety and encourages “leave no trace” principles
- d. Standards to warn of man-made hazards such as dams or electrical lines are used on all trails.
- e. Primary access sites are marked with reflective signage visible from water and will include wayfinding signage and emergency information.

- f. Emergency contacts are listed on electronic and printed publications.
 - g. Communicates ordinary risks with water recreation, including safety messages about personal floatation devices, self-rescue, first aid skills, natural and man-made obstacles, paddler immersion and contact with water, ambient water quality, high water or flood events, severe weather and high wind or waves.
3. Broad community support
- a. The proposed water trail will be 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. Successful outcomes for water trail designation will be achieved by diverse community representation from sectors, such as recreation, education, conservation, heritage, business, public safety, health, and local, regional and state government.
 - b. Support from participating local governments adjacent to the water trail is demonstrated by a governing body resolution.
4. Sustainable business, maintenance, and marketing plan
- a. A plan exists that shows how the proposed water trail will meet a quality trail experience and user information expectations in conjunction with public/private partnerships (i.e. local liveries, campgrounds, etc.).
 - b. This plan will include a thorough inventory of environmental, natural and cultural assets along the waterway, including, but not limited to, existing public or private amenities, access sites, rest areas and accessible features.
 - c. This plan identifies gaps in the desired trail and suggests strategies to address them.
 - d. This plan is designed so that increased use of the trail will not degrade the local experience, cultural resources, the environment,

or existing recreational uses. The plan will identify programs and facility designs to ensure long-term sustainability of the waterway.

- e. The trail follows applicable local, state, and federal land use plans and environmental laws.
- f. The trail has partnerships/collaboration/agreement with partners in place that have a demonstrated ability to support routine and long-term maintenance investment on the water trail.
 - i. The agreement includes a plan to meet the maintenance standards for the trail as adopted by the DNR and maintenance is conducted to these standards. Woody debris removal program?
 - ii. There are ways to discourage and address vandalism.
 - iii. Periodic audits are scheduled to ensure standards are being met.
- g. Trail information is promoted locally and as a part of the state's water trail program.
- h. A local marketing plan has been developed to promote the trail, types of water trail designations and descriptions, location tools, etc.

Michigan's State Water Trail Designation Types

There are three types of state-designated trails:

1. Great Lakes
2. Large lakes and connecting waters
3. Rivers and streams

A Great Lakes water trail is any water trail on the Great Lakes, including all connecting water bodies such as St. Mary's River, Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River. Large lakes and connecting waters considered a trail can be along any water system (inland lakes, connected lakes, river systems, or rivers) that are not on the Great Lakes. River and stream water trails are water trails on all other rivers and streams. All designated water trails should identify any segments that have barrier-free entry and exit access points.

All water trail designees will provide users with information on the difficulty level (beginner, intermediate or advanced) and expectations of amenities for each segment of the water body.

1. Beginner trail segments
 - a. Typical development goals
 - i. Exposing the greatest number of new users to paddling and/or water trails
 - ii. Appropriate for large groups, children and new water trail users
 - iii. Trips can be tailored for short excursions or longer but should provide options for those with less experience
 - iv. Emphasis on communicating access, use of safety equipment, hazards, building skills and confidence of new trail users
 - v. 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 made aware that they need to avoid these hazards, and that they may be present.

- vi. Educational opportunities should be included, not only for skill development, but also for environmental, conservation, and historical interpretation to enhance user experience.
- b. User expectations
 - i. A predictable experience with minimum hazards that is appropriate for beginner paddlers
 - ii. A readily enjoyable setting that will appeal to new paddlers
 - iii. Hazards, access sites, rest area information and wayfinding will be well- communicated by signage
 - iv. Shorter length trips will be facilitated by having accessible and frequent access sites
 - v. Amenities are adequately spaced, including rest areas, restrooms, drinking water and more
 - vi. Trail segments that are barrier-free will be identified
 - vii. Motorized boats may be present
- c. Paddling skills needed
 - i. New to basic paddling skills
- d. Access or rest area spacing what spacing?
- e. iLaunches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions, but on average an access site will be available every 1 to 2 hours of float time or 3 to 6 miles.
- f. Lake, river, and stream characteristics
 - i. Slow or moderate flow streams in normal conditions (meaning no bank-full discharge or flood stage conditions).
 - ii. Small inland lakes will have little or no current, and normally possess limited wave action.
 - iii. Under normal conditions, there will be few obstacles and hazards, such as large woody debris (strainers) and low-head dams.
 - iv. Portage around obstacles is non-existent or minimal.

2. Intermediate trail segments

- a. Typical development goals
 - i. Provide day trip opportunities and have potential for overnight, group, and family experiences.
 - ii. Provide a longer and more difficult experience than that of a beginner segment.
 - iii. Access sites and amenities may be less developed and farther apart compared to beginner segments.
- b. User expectations
 - i. A slightly less predictable experience than a beginner segment, which will require some boat control and intended for paddlers with some experience and stamina.
 - ii. May have varied settings and natural vistas.
 - iii. Dam hazards, access sites, and wayfinding will be communicated by signage as needed.
 - iv. Trip length could increase, and rest areas may be less frequent when compared to a beginner segment.
 - v. Amenities may be more rustic than on a beginner segment.
 - vi. Portages will be signed.
 - vii. Trail segments that are barrier-free will be identified.
 - viii. Motorized boats may be present.
- c. Paddling skills needed
 - i. Basic boat control
 - ii. Forward and reverse strokes
 - iii. Basic self-recovery skills, such as tip-over
 - iv. Basic map reading or GPS skills
- d. Access or rest area spacing
 - i. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions but could be spaced around 2 to 4 hours of float time or 6 to 12 miles.
- e. Lake, river and stream characteristics

- i. Varies from narrow and sinuous to wider channel stretches.
- ii. Some sandbars, rocks, riffles, strainers or mild rapids (Class I & II) under normal conditions.
- iii. May require some portages.
- iv. Lakes may have expectation of moderate waves when windy or a moderate current.

3. Advanced Trail Segments

a. Typical development goals

- i. Day trips and multiple day trips are possible.
- ii. Rustic launches may be more difficult for some users, including steep slopes.
- iii. Long portages may be present and will be signed.
- iv. Resource protection, conservation of habitat and experiential wilderness recreation may be key goals.

b. User expectations

- i. Advanced trail segments will provide a more difficult experience than intermediate segments and are more suited to advanced paddlers.
- ii. Paddler expects to manage risk and should possess self-rescue skills.
- iii. Some degree of solitude and expectations of scenic vistas with little evidence of built infrastructure (bridges, power lines, homes, etc.) may be present.
- iv. Segments may include stretches of whitewater rapids (Class III+).
- v. Expect varied settings and conditions.
- vi. Navigational aids may be infrequent on the river or large water bodies.
- vii. Launches, access sites and/or rest areas may be far apart and rustic.

- viii. Dam hazards and primary access sites are communicated by signage.
- ix. Cell phone coverage may be limited or non-existent.
- x. Trail segments that are barrier-free will be identified.
- xi. Motorized boats may be present.
- c. Paddling skills needed
 - i. Good to excellent boat control.
 - ii. Advanced tip-over recovery skills.
 - iii. Good endurance.
 - iv. Navigational skills.
 - v. Ability to create a trip plan and provide information to someone who can contact authorities if overdue or in an emergency.
- d. Access spacing
 - i. Launches, access sites and rest areas will vary by distance and conditions. An access site location could exceed 4 hours of float time or over 12 miles.
- e. Lake, river and stream characteristics
 - i. May include faster water, rapids, large lakes and expansive wetland areas.
 - ii. Lake segments may include long open-water crossings and one may encounter motorized vessels. There is a potential for high waves, coupled with steep or rocky shorelines.
 - iii. Streams may include a moderate to high number of hazards, including rapids, logjams, strainers, dams and/or other obstacles.

Designation Process

An organization(s) that desires to develop and manage a designated water trail, including the DNR, must submit to the department an application that does the following:

1. Describes the quality trail experience
 2. Provides clear information for users
 3. Demonstrates broad community support
 4. Provides a sustainable business plan that includes maintenance, marketing and emergencies
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1. Describe the quality trail experience
 - a. Provide a written summary of the trail, including designation type, segment experiences and length.
 - b. Provide maps of the river, river segments or water body, which includes all available access sites, rest areas, portage routes, amenities, signage and launch type plus known static hazards such as dams.
 - c. Name, photos and lists of access sites, launches, rest areas and signage must be provided. Launches, access sites and rest areas need to have adequate spacing as indicated in segment descriptions.
 - d. Plan for providing educational opportunities on natural and cultural heritage, conservation and health benefits.
 - e. Documentation of land-owner approval of public and privately-owned access sites, rest areas and portage routes.
 - f. Trail segments that are barrier-free should be noted. All barrier-free amenities should also be noted and described.
 - g. Provide a plan for promoting safe trail use that respects the water, lands and private property including “leave no trace” principles.
 2. Provide clear information for users
 - a. Standardized safety and wayfinding communications are 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.), as well as contact information to provide user input.
3. Demonstrate broad community support
 - a. Minutes of public meetings 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 those participating from the education, heritage, conservation, tourism, business or health sectors.
4. Provide 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. Documentation that the trail and amenities meet all local, state and federal land use plans and laws.
 - c. Inventory of cultural and natural heritage assets, conservation concerns and an explanation of how they are incorporated into the trails.
 - d. Plan for providing educational opportunities on natural and cultural heritage, conservation and health.
 - e. Provide documentation on existing trail partnerships/collaborations/agreements.
 - f. A proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the organizations committed to developing, operating and maintaining the trail.
 - g. Provide the budget and proposed sources of funding for managing and maintaining the trail, including in-kind volunteer hours.
 - h. Emergency planning and communication plan that will inform first responders, engage in their feedback and provide agencies with maps, launch sites, etc.
 - i. Provide a viable marketing plan

Application Process

1. Review
 - a. The application shall be submitted to the DNR water trail coordinator who will review the application and do any further research, such as inspecting the water body, to determine if it meets the criteria for designation.
 - b. If it meets the criteria, the DNR water trail coordinator will input the water trail information on the state's trail proposal system. This system will allow for each DNR department to review and make comments on the proposed trail. However, the state water trail coordinator will have final approval.
 - c. If criteria are left unmet or the proposal is not approved, the DNR water trail coordinator will provide feedback to the applicant organization and/or committee.
2. Designation
 - a. If the trail proposal is approved, designation will be announced as follows:
 - i. Designation will consist of a letter from the DNR state trails coordinator and an MOU between the DNR and the applicant. The MOU shall be written for a period no shorter than 10 years.
 - ii. A DNR press release will be done to announce the designation.
 - iii. The DNR incorporates the trail into its maps and marketing materials.
 - iv. State-designated water trail branding/signage will be placed in appropriate locations by the designee.

Applications and documentation should be sent to: MorrisonM4@michigan.gov or:

State Trails Coordinator—State Water Trails Designation
Parks and Recreation Division
Michigan Department of Natural Resources
PO Box 30257
Lansing MI 48909

State-Designated Water Trail Auditing

The designee will need to perform an audit on the trail per the DNR water trail audit process every five years and as weather conditions warrant to determine if the trail continues to meet the criteria for being a state-designated water trail. This includes maintaining maintenance standards established for water trails and the possible need to revise any segment descriptions as appropriate in marketing materials.

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

The designee must promptly address identified shortfalls in operations, maintenance, and safety. If they fail to address known issues per the state-designated water trail criteria, then the DNR state trails coordinator will prepare to remove the designation status of the water trail per the proposal process.

If the water trail is removed from state designation, the designated water trail will also be removed from all marketing information and all designated water trail identifiers along the trail will need to be removed by the designee. The water trail and trail facilities will be returned to the condition prior to designation or as approved by the landowner.

Definitions and Roles

Access site: Public (federal, state, county or local units of government) or private land where it is legal for the public to access, launch, and land a watercraft 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 may include amenities.

Authority for establishing a designated water trails program: PA 451 of 1994, Section 502: “The Department may provide and develop facilities for outdoor recreation.”

Barrier-free access: A facility and its amenities can be approached, entered and used by people 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 certain 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.

Paddling Route: A route used by paddlers that has no particular management entity.

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, potable water, picnic areas and boat racks. A primary access site is also an access site and a rest area.

Portage: The practice of carrying watercraft 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 necessarily a place to access the water from a road. Rest areas may have campsites and amenities.

Trailhead: See “Primary access site”.

Water trail: Managed recreational routes, motorized or non-motorized, on waterways with a network of public access sites.

State-designated water trails: Water trails that have been approved for designation by the DNR following a prescribed process. Designated water trails are supported by

broad-based community partnerships and a statewide marketing program, which provide conservation, heritage and recreation opportunities.

Pure Michigan® water trails: Exceptional Michigan water trails that have been approved for designation by the DNR and other involved groups following a prescribed process. Designated water trails are supported by broad-based community partnerships and a statewide marketing program, which provide conservation, heritage and recreation opportunities. They are 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). Make clear that this is a separate application process

National water trails: 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.