



Public Review of High Conservation Value Areas in Michigan

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What is a high conservation value area (HCVA)?

HCVAs are areas with natural features which have been recognized for specific conservation values and objectives, ecological attributes or significant social values. HCVAs typically possess one or more of the following attributes:

- Areas that contain high-quality examples of natural communities or provide habitat for significant populations of rare plant or animal species.
- Areas that contain recreational features that are not widely available, such as designated quiet areas and wildlife management areas that provide unique hunting opportunities.
- Areas that contain significant large forests, where most if not all naturally occurring plant and animal species exist and function.

HCVAs have significant public consultation and/or public review as part of their identification process¹. Examples are areas designated through legislation, administrative rule, orders from the DNR director or Natural Resource Commission, and project-specific public reviews.

HCVAs also help the DNR to address statutory requirements for management of the state forest and to maintain conformance with Forest Stewardship Council and

¹ Although an important public process, the compartment review process is not a final approval forum for designating HCVAs. It is be a key process for identifying potential conservation areas.



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Sustainable Forestry Initiative forest certification standards. The 2005 set of HCVA's no longer met the standards and needed to be updated.

Why is conserving biological diversity important?

Part of what makes Michigan, Michigan is the incredible diversity of life here and the unique natural places. Rare songbirds and ferns, as well as more common trees, plants and wildlife are all part of our state's rich biological heritage, what scientists call Michigan's biodiversity.

To conserve Michigan's biological heritage, we must conserve the natural places (or ecosystems) in which it exists. These are the places that support the natural processes where living organisms (including people) interact with each other and with the water, soil, air and other non-living things around them. These areas provide essentials, such as clean water to drink, oxygen to breathe, plants that are sources for medicine, and timber for building. Our lives are enriched by the benefits they provide – protection from flooding, jobs, and places to hunt, walk, fish, watch and think. These places help to define our state's natural, environmental, recreational and economic identity.

Conserving biodiversity is also an important element of sustainable forest management and is part of forest certification standards.

What is a natural community?

A natural community is an assemblage of interacting plants, animals and other organisms that tend to reoccur in places that have similar environmental conditions. The structure and function of a natural community is generally driven by natural processes rather than modern human activities. There are 77 natural communities classified in Michigan.

What is an ecological reference area (ERA)?

ERAs serve as models of ecological reference within the state. They are higher-quality examples of functioning ecosystems that are primarily influenced by natural ecological processes. ERAs are based on the Michigan Natural Heritage Database of known natural community occurrences. Operationally, ERAs are comprised of two categories:

Common communities. Select representative examples of natural communities that are generally more common and less vulnerable both globally and within Michigan. These ERAs are of extremely high quality, unless no other or very few examples exist. ERAs in this category may occur on DNR-managed lands, or they may occur on other ownerships where there are protections in place to ensure that the current management will continue and likely maintain the natural community in the long-term.



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Rare communities. Representative examples of natural communities that are imperiled or more vulnerable either globally or within Michigan. All occurrences of these natural communities that are documented in the Natural Heritage Database as occurring on certified state forest lands must be included as ERAs. If of extremely high quality, select representative examples of rare natural communities may also be identified as ERAs on other ownerships where there are protections in place to ensure that the current management will continue and likely maintain the natural community in the long-term.

How will the DNR plan for and manage ERAs?

Within ERAs managed by the DNR, conservation of the identified natural community through restoration and/or maintenance will be emphasized. Planning for, and management of, ERAs will occur through the DNR's normal land management planning processes which include opportunities for public participation.

For each ERA, the DNR will describe in existing planning documents the conditions that it would like to achieve in the ERA, based on the natural community that occurs. This description will include information about the kinds of plant and animal species it believes the ERA should support and the desired structure of vegetation, as well as the natural processes (e.g., flooding, fire, wind) that must be in place or mimicked through management to achieve and maintain the desired conditions. These conditions will be achieved through implementation of management activities followed by evaluation to ensure that the management activities are having the desired effect.

Some ERAs may already have the desired conditions and may only require minimal management to maintain those conditions. Other ERAs may require management to achieve those conditions.

ERAs located on non-DNR lands are equally important to Michigan's biodiversity, but there are no requirements for management or limitations on activities imposed.

What is 'interior core forest habitat'?

There are some species of plants and animals that depend upon habitat that is far away from forest edges and in the "core" of a forest. Due to human influence on the landscape and the fragmentation of habitats that has resulted, the places that provide this interior core forest habitat have become much more limited, and many of the species that depend upon it are more rare and vulnerable as a result.

What is a dedicated habitat area (DHA)?

A DHA identifies a geographic area on DNR-managed lands where there is an emphasis on species-specific habitat, with a long-term goal of ensuring that these species are conserved as examples of our State's biodiversity. These include:



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- Habitat areas for threatened or endangered species, such as the Kirtland's warbler and piping plover, in association with species management plans that have been developed in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal land managing entities such as the U.S. Forest Service.
- Habitat areas for species that require interior core forest habitat, such as American marten, cerulean warblers, red-shouldered hawks, and northern goshawks.

The current public review is specific to DHAs in the second category.

How will the DNR plan for and manage DHAs in relation to interior core forest habitat?

DHAs may overlap with other designations, such as ERAs, Natural Areas or Natural Rivers – in these overlap areas the more restrictive management requirement shall be applied. For the remaining portions of DHAs, forest management and timber harvesting activities (including prescribed fire) may be used to create and maintain the compositional and structural conditions that emulate an intact, mature forest or other successional phases that provide necessary habitat for interior core forest species.

Specific emphasis is given to minimizing fragmentation of the forest by limiting the size, spatial distribution and number of forest openings to those that are characteristic of the natural disturbance regimes associated with the specific forest type. Management direction may be provided by Regional State Forest Management Plans, State Park General Management Plans, State Game Area Master Plans or other local plans.

Threats such as wildfire, natural or exotic pests or diseases may warrant other management measures, such as salvage harvests.

Why aren't there any ERAs or DHAs in the southern Lower Peninsula?

The current identification process was instigated by the findings from the 2013 annual DNR forest certification audit, and therefore the response has been focused on the state forest system and surrounding landscapes. The timeline for responding to the audit findings was very limited, resulting in the decision to limit the initial efforts to those Michigan regions in which the state forest land occurs, which is the northern two-thirds of the state. However, the DNR does intend to complete a similar process in the southern Lower Peninsula for identifying ERAs, but the timeline for this effort has not yet been established.

Once ERAs and DHAs are finalized, are they set in stone?

No. Recommendations and decisions about the current proposed areas have been made based on the best information that is available. However, this information is not complete. As the DNR learns more about these places (and



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other potential places) through surveys, restoration and management efforts, and communication with partners, we may find that there is a need to add, remove, or modify the areas.

The entire set of ERAs and that of DHAs will go through a formal review and revision process with public review at least once every five years.

Is there new funding available to manage these places?

No. These areas will help the DNR to prioritize and more effectively use the financial and staff resources that it has. The DNR hopes that other landowners will also be able to use them in the same way.

Will there be any change in public access to or public use of ERA and DHA lands?

For ERAs on non-DNR lands:

- This designation does NOT in any way change public access to non-DNR lands.
- While the designation may inform a landowner's decisions about use and management of their lands, it does not require or restrict any specific actions by the landowner.
- Identification of an ERA does not affect any previously existing legal or other formal commitments a landowner has made in regards to their lands.

For ERAs on DNR-managed lands:

- In general, land uses that promote or do not impact or detract from conservation of the identified natural community are acceptable.
- Most historical or existing land uses that are already in place will continue and new uses may be allowed if they will not detract from the ability to achieve the desired conditions of the ERA. These uses may include, but are not limited to, recreation, gas or mineral extraction conducted so that the surface of the ERA is not disturbed, and limited timber harvests for purposes of restoration or maintenance of the ERA.
- Legal or contractual obligations or other restrictions on use due to previous designations or due to the funds with which the land was purchased will continue to apply, regardless of the ERA.

For DHAs on DNR-managed lands:

- In general, land uses that promote or do not impact or detract from maintenance of the desired habitat are acceptable.
- Historical or existing land uses that are already in place will continue in DHAs. These uses may include, but are not limited to, recreation, gas or mineral extraction, and timber harvests consistent with maintaining the desired habitat.
- In DHA for interior core forest habitat, as new uses or activities are proposed, specific emphasis will be given to minimizing fragmentation of



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the forest. This may be accomplished through the use of temporary access roads, by minimizing the number and size of permanent access roads and trails, and/or by mitigating the impact roads, trails, and pathways through the maintenance of forest canopy closure over such infrastructure.

- Legal or contractual obligations or other restrictions on use due to previous designations or due to the funds with which the land was purchased will continue to apply, regardless of the DHA.

How do I submit comment on the proposed ERAs and DHAs?

First, review the informational resources available on the DNR website at www.michigan.gov/forestcertification. Then submit your comments to the DNR by mail or email. Mailed comments should be addressed to DNR ERA/DHA Comments, Forest Resources Division, P.O. Box 30452, Lansing, MI 48909, and email comments should be sent to: DNR-ForestCertificationComments@michigan.gov. The deadline for submission of comments is Aug. 22, 2014, for the initial public review and comment period.

What if I still have questions?

Please contact the DNR Forest Resources Division at 517-284-5851 or via email at DNR-ForestCertificationComments@michigan.gov.

For more information, visit www.michigan.gov/forestcertification