

EXISTING USES AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

A. Land Use

The major land uses include agriculture, which is more predominant in west central Mason County. Forest activity on private and public land holdings is one of the major land use activities in Lake and northern Newaygo counties.

Recreation is a major activity in the watershed. The major recreation landholders are the state with the Pere Marquette State Forest and the federal government with the Manistee National Forest. The abundant amount of public lands makes the area very attractive for outdoor oriented activities such as fishing, hunting, nature study, camping, canoeing, snowmobiling and off-road vehicle use.

B. Private Recreation Facilities

Commercial canoe liveries are well established on the mainstream. In 1977, Lake and Mason counties had a total of 734 rental canoes available. Of this figure, 450 were located on or near the immediate area of the Pere Marquette River.

In addition, there are over 2200 private campsites which are dispersed through the watershed. Other outdoor recreational facilities provided by private sources include golf courses, horseback riding and skiing activities.

C. Public Recreation Facilities

Although not located in the watershed, there are several state parks located in the vicinity of the Pere Marquette River. These include Ludington, Newaygo and White Cloud state parks. These parks offer almost 600 campsites as well as picnicking, hiking and playground facilities.

In addition, there are three state forest campgrounds located near the Pere Marquette River. These are: Bray Creek - 9 campsites; Little Leverentz - 7 campsites; and Big Leverentz - 11 campsites.

The U.S. Forest Service campgrounds Timber Creek, Nichols Lake and Highbanks Lake offer picnicking and snowmobiling, and have a total of 43 camping sites. In the past, indiscriminant camping has occurred at the Bowman's Bridge access site. The U.S. Forest Service is currently developing approximately 50 designated camping units at this location to alleviate this problem. New camping units will be located back away from the river and will be designed to protect the natural values of the river environment. Camping at the water's edge will be prohibited in the future.

The City of Scottville operates a campground on the Pere Marquette River. This facility offers picnicking, playground, boat launch facilities, as well as over 50 campsites.

Boat and canoe access sites are well distributed on the mainstream. These include sites at: the Forks, Bowman's Bridge, Rainbow Rapids, Upper Branch Bridge, Walhalla Bridge, Indian Bridge, Scottville, and U.S. 31 Bridge. Access sites are also located on the Baldwin River, Middle Branch, Little South Branch and Big South Branch.

D. Fishing

The Pere Marquette River system includes some of the finest trout waters in the nation. The spring and fall spawning runs of steelhead and salmon, the resident brown trout and "brookies" make this river extremely popular with the fishermen.

The Middle Branch contains a sizeable brown trout population. The bottom is generally gravelly and from the last weekend of April through May, steelhead are the number one target.

The Little South Branch is another excellent trout stream along with its two major tributaries, McDuffee Creek and Pease Creek.

The Big South Branch generally is of a different character than the other streams in the Pere Marquette system. Considered only a "fair" trout stream, the waters are usually warmer and slower. Ruby Creek enters the Big South in northeastern Oceana County and provides an excellent nursery stream and offers a good brook trout fishery.

The Baldwin River originates in the expansive Baldwin-Luther Swamp northeast of the Village of Baldwin. Brook trout are abundant in the upper reaches. Cole Creek joins the flow about five miles northeast of Baldwin and provides some excellent coldwater spawning grounds for browns and steelheads. Below Cole Creek, large browns are found. Another tributary of the Baldwin River is Sanborn Creek which is one of the better brook trout streams in the area.

The Pere Marquette mainstream begins at the "Forks" of the Middle and Little South Branches, about 1/2 mile east of M-37. In 1970, the mainstream from M-37 downstream to Gleasons Landing, a distance of about seven river miles, was designated as "quality fishing waters" and special regulations were enacted. Again, this area offers excellent brown trout fishing, and in the spring is teeming with spawning steelhead. The upper reaches of the mainstream offer a very good trout fishery. Tributaries of the mainstream including Danaher, Kinney and Weldon creeks offer good spawning and fish habitat. The lower reaches of the mainstream beginning near the Village of Custer and the Big South Branch downstream, warm water fish species

predominate. Except for the spring and fall steelhead, sucker and salmon runs, pike is the most sought after target.

E. Wildlife Observation and Hunting

The watershed contains a variety of wildlife. Hunting for both large and small game and waterfowl are popular recreational activities. Non-consumptive uses of wildlife for photography and observation are gaining in popularity. Most participants in these activities come from the metropolitan areas to the south and provide a major source of revenue to the local economy. Trapping of furbearers is popular with local residents.

White-tailed deer is the most important big game species. Deer greatly benefited from plant succession following the logging and wildfire era in the late 1800's to the early 1900's. Carrying capacity of the range increased and subsequently deer populations rose dramatically about 1920. Populations exceeding the carrying capacity in the 1930's leveled off in the 40's, declined again the 50's, and has now again leveled off. A controlled harvest has helped to balance the population with habitat carrying capacity. Stream floodplains and adjacent uplands are used by deer as winter habitat.

The watershed is one of three areas in the state supporting a huntable population of turkeys. Hunting is controlled by a permit system. The birds are the result of an intensive management and stocking program by the Department of Natural Resources with the cooperation of the U.S. Forest Service. The presence of these magnificent birds adds to the attraction of the area.

The river area is used extensively by waterfowl and shore birds for nesting and brood rearing during spring and summer, and by migrating waterfowl during the spring and fall. Mallards, black duck, wood duck, red breasted and American mergansers, coot, teal, bitterns and herons nest in the floodplain marshes and woodlands. The diving-duck group: redheads, goldeneyes, blue bills, etc., use the river primarily during the spring and fall migration. A few ducks, primarily goldeneyes, winter over in the open water areas of the river. Shore birds such as sorarail, yellow rail, and Wilson's snipe are common in the area.

Dutch elm disease has killed large stands of American elm in the river's floodplain. As a result, the ecological changes have been beneficial to certain species of dabbling ducks (Mallards, Teal, etc.).

Upland game birds found in the area include ruffed grouse, woodcock, turkey and, in the farm areas, some ring-necked pheasant. Ruffed grouse and woodcock provide the major upland shooting. Small game include the cottontail rabbit, snowshoe hare, and fox and gray squirrels.

Furbearers which are open to trapping include beaver, muskrat, mink, otter, red fox, raccoon and skunk.

F. Canoeing and Boating

The Pere Marquette is an extremely popular river for canoeists. The moderately fast current, the clear water, the low degree of stream bank development, have all helped to make this river a mecca for the canoeist.

The U.S. Forest Service has estimated that 90 percent of the canoe use in the system occurs from the "Forks" to Upper Branch Bridge with 65 percent of the canoe use occurring from the "Forks" to Bowman's Bridge. Canoeists on the Pere Marquette are further characterized by:

Over half of the use is by organized groups who tend to travel in parties.

Most of the use occur on weekends, with Saturday being the most popular single day.

Few trips are the more than one day, with four to six hours being the most popular canoe length.

Most canoeists are inexperienced and many are first-timers.

Use is concentrated from 9:00 am to 7:00 pm.

Use season is from late May to October.

Boating with motors is concentrated from Indian Bridge to the mouth. Such boating is usually concentrated with fishing rather than pleasure boating and most often occurs during the spring and fall and steelhead and salmon runs.

G. Historic and Archaeological Sites

There were six distinct Indian cultures that developed along the river. The first occurring around 10,000 BC with the last ending 1600 AD.

Through scientific excavation of the various village sites, it is possible to trace the development of the various Indian cultures of Michigan by study of their tools, weapons and life styles.

These sites, some of which have not yet been scientifically studied, are significant in that they were continuously occupied and they have not yet been destroyed by later man's activities.

Many bloody battles were fought for control of the river in ancient times. Fierce tribal warfare was part of the later Indian's life style. After one such battle, the heads of the defeated warriors were placed on stakes at the mouth of the river as a warning to others not to trespass. This gave rise to the old name for the river, "Not-a-pe-ka-gon", which meant "head-on-sticks". The

village near the present site of Ludington was called "Nidebekatunning" or "Place of the Skulls".

One of the first white men associated with the Pere Marquette River was probably the most famous -- the Jesuit priest, Father Jacques Marquette. Following his famous exploration of the Mississippi River with Joliet, Father Marquette was returning to his mission at St. Ignace, Michigan, when the party was forced to winter over at which is now Chicago. There Marquette sickened. Wanting to reach the mission before he died, Marquette and his party set out by canoe from Chicago in the spring of 1675 to follow the shoreline of Lake Michigan northward to St. Ignace. His condition worsened on the trip and not wanting to die on the lake, Marquette requested they put ashore. A crude shelter was built for him on a sand spit at the mouth of the river now bearing his name. There he died on May 18, 1675, and was buried at the site. Two years later, members of his party exhumed the body and returned it for burial at St. Ignace, thus fulfilling Marquette's last wish. They erected a wooden cross to mark his original resting place. The site was known to the Indians as "the place of the Black Robe", their name for the Jesuits.

Since that time, the original wooden cross has been replaced several times. Today a plaque and cross-topped stone monument mark the site of his death. This site is on the State Register of Historic Places.

It was not until the white pine-logging boom that large number of white settlers were attracted to the area. In 1847, only a few farmers and traders had settled in the watershed. The first mill at Ludington was built in 1859. It was small and served primarily local needs. In 1869, however, a general movement in the manufacture of pine lumber began. In 1870, it was estimated that the watershed contained over three billion board feet of virgin pine sawtimber. Hardwoods and other species were then of little consequence. Soon huge volumes of white pine logs were floating down the river to feed the hungry saws at Ludington. Starting with a capacity of only three of four million board feet per year, by 1880 the eight Ludington mills were producing a combined total of 10 million board feet. With water improvements, this increased to 15 million feet per year.

The seemingly inexhaustible supply of pine eventually was gone. From 1870 to 1896, 3 1/4 billion board feet of pine were driven down the river, cut into logs and shingled and shipped to markets throughout the Midwest. A large share of it was used to reconstruct Chicago after the disastrous fire of 1871. This volume of timber would, under present day standards, provide enough lumber to build 312,000 three bedroom houses -- enough to house a new city with the population of Detroit.

With the pine gone, the lumber barons set their sights on the virgin forests farther west. Not all of the lumberjacks went west with them. Many of the

Swedes, French, Poles, Danes, Dutch, Irish and English that had cleared the land now stayed to settle and farm it.

Some logging of the hardwoods, hemlock and other species spurned by the pine loggers continued into the 1900's. It never approached the frenzy or volume of earlier pine days. The Pere Marquette Railroad was built to carry those logs too heavy to float on the river to the Ludington mills. Hemlock bark was peeled to produce tannin for the leather industry. Loggers were now farmers during the summer months, and the days of the brawling, brawny, fast-spending lumberjack were gone.

The lumberjacks and timber barons had left their mark on the area. The names of many creeks, hills, lakes, roads and bridges can be traced to people or happenings of the logging days. They also left their imprint on the land which was now desolate and bare of trees. The Michigan grayling was disappearing from the river. Eroded riverbanks marked the location of log rollways. Fires burned unchecked in the logging slash. Some of their legacy is still visible today if one knows how and where to look. Occasionally, one of the old logs buried nearly a century in the streambed will rise up to snag a fisherman's fly or dump the unwary canoeist. Rollways still have not healed and remain as raw eroded banks.

There are two sites in the immediate vicinity of the Pere Marquette River that are on the National Register of Historic Places. One is the Marlborough Historic District which is located just south and east of Baldwin. This town was built during the experimental stage of Michigan's cement industry and was begun by the Great Northern Portland Cement Company. Ruins are all that remain at this privately owned site.

The other site on the National Register is the Nat-a-pe-ka-gon Site in Custer Township. This is a relatively undisturbed multicomponent site preserving information on the Middle and Late Woodard Periods in Western Michigan. One occupation contains early French trade materials.