NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Foundation Document Overview

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore

Wisconsin

Contact Information

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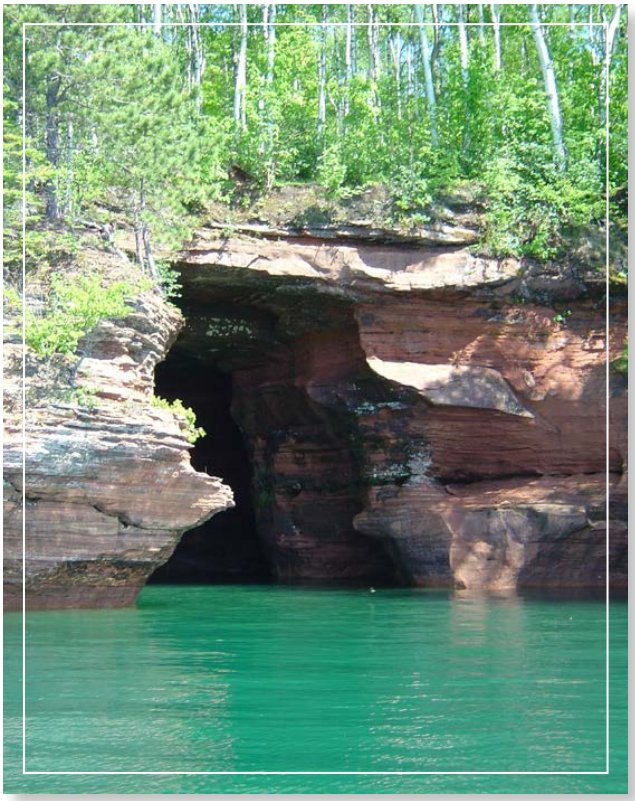
Purpose



Significance

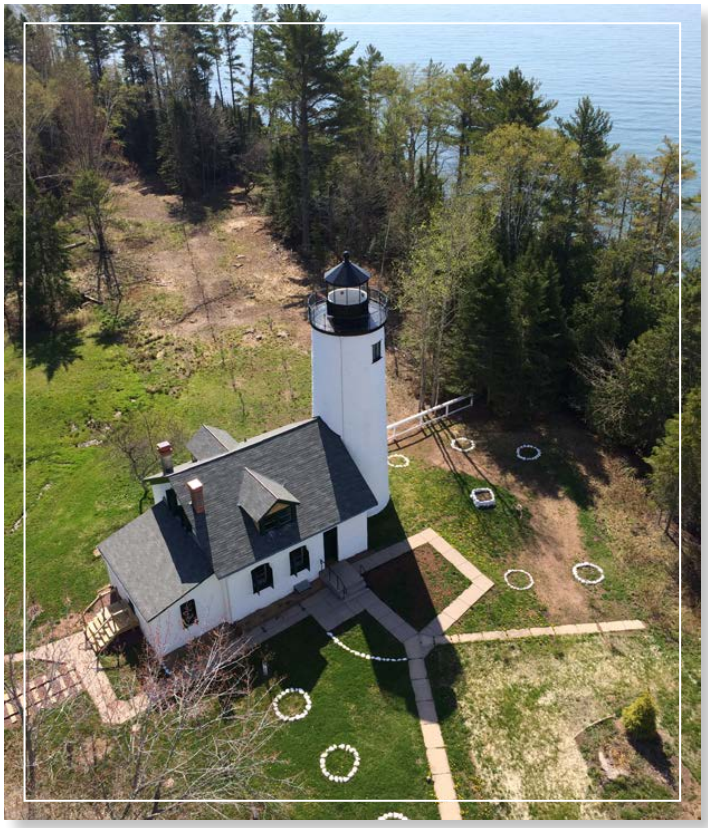
Significance statements express why Apostle Islands National Lakeshore resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The Apostle Islands archipelago contains scientifically important geologic features, including a highly diverse and stunningly beautiful array of coastal landforms that retain a high degree of ecological integrity.
- Shaped and isolated by Lake Superior and located where northern hardwoods and boreal forests meet, the islands of the park sustain rare communities, habitats, and species of plants and animals. Some of these communities are remnants of ancient forests, providing a rare glimpse into the past.
- The Apostle Islands are the traditional home of the Ojibwe people and integral to their culture. They have used the natural resources of the Apostle Islands area for centuries to sustain their way of life, and continue to do so today.
- The isolation and remoteness of the archipelago has preserved an unparalleled variety of historic and archeological resources reflecting human response to the Great Lakes maritime environment.
- The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore has the largest and finest collection of lighthouses in the country.
- Despite hundreds of years of human occupation and use, the Apostle Islands and Lake Superior remain among the wildest places in the Great Lakes, where the unbridled forces of nature prevail.
- The rare combination of remote but accessible scenery, geography, and both open and protected waters affords unparalleled freshwater sailing, boating, sea kayaking and fishing opportunities.
- The “island experience” of the Apostle Islands, which includes quiet, relative solitude, and clear night skies, continues to provide, as it has for generations, a recreational and rejuvenating experience for people seeking relief from the stresses of their everyday lives.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Coastal Features and Processes**
- **Natural Environment**
- **Ethnographic Resources**
- **Historical and Archeological Resources**
- **Light Stations and Cultural Landscapes**
- **Stories and Collections**
- **Wilderness Values**
- **Recreational Opportunities**
- **The "Island Experience"**



Interpretive Themes

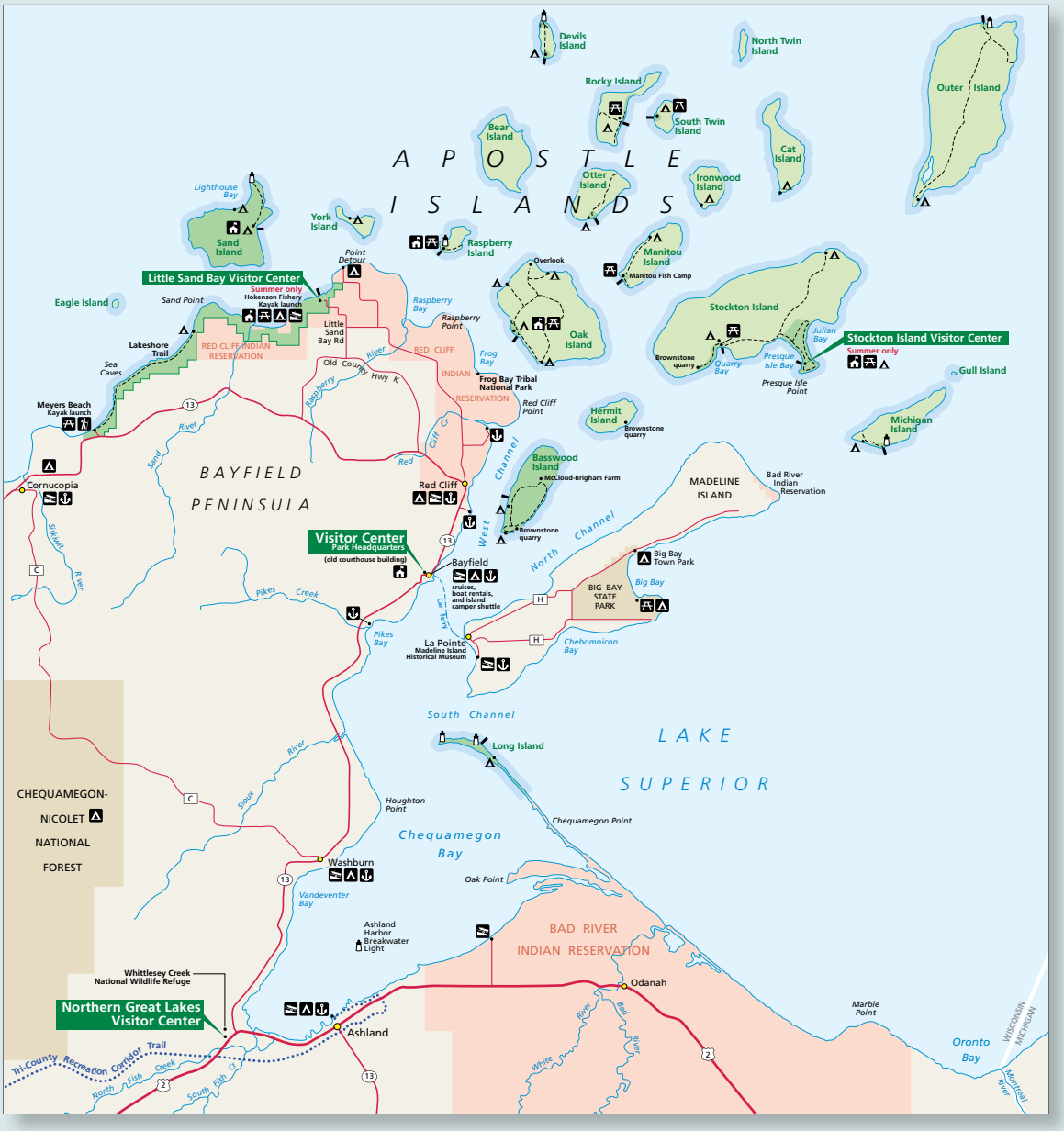
Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Lake Superior has long served as a highway of commerce connecting the Apostle Islands region to the global economy, thereby transforming the landscape and its people.
- The stories of Apostle Islands National Lakeshore reveal themselves along edges where water meets sky, field meets forest, culture meets culture, and past meets future.
- After being altered by centuries of human use, the lakeshore is reverting to its prior wilderness state.
- Apostle Islands has long attracted visitors to Lake Superior's shore to enjoy world-class opportunities for a variety of recreational experiences.
- Apostle Islands' protected plant and animal communities serve as indicators to help measure the health of local and global ecosystems.
- Lake Superior defines the Apostle Islands, shapes its ecosystems, and sustains life throughout the area.
- Dynamic and uncontrollable, Lake Superior is a force to be encountered on its own terms.

Description

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, near the tip of the Bayfield Peninsula in northern Wisconsin, includes 21 islands in Lake Superior and a 12-mile-long narrow strip of mainland shoreline. The park is located in Bayfield and Ashland Counties, within the ancestral homeland of the Ojibwe people. Established by an act of Congress (Public Law 91-424) on September 26, 1970, the purpose of the park is "to conserve and develop for the benefit, inspiration, education, recreational use, and enjoyment of the public" the islands and their related geographic, scenic, and scientific values. Apostle Islands National Lakeshore encompasses 69,372 acres, of which 27,323 acres are submerged lands in Lake Superior; the park boundary extends a quarter-mile from the shore of the mainland and from each island. Eighty percent of the land area of the park was designated as wilderness in December 2004 and named the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness. The islands range in size from 3-acre Gull Island to 10,054-acre Stockton Island. The islands are spread out over a portion of Lake Superior nearly 290,000 acres in size—an area larger than Rocky Mountain National Park or Mount Rainier National Park.

A variety of scenic features can be found on the islands, including examples of some of the earliest and latest events of geologic history in the lower 48 states. The park features pristine stretches of sand beaches and coves; spectacular sea caves; some of the largest stands of remnant old-growth forests in the upper Midwest; a diverse population of birds, mammals, amphibians, and fish; and the largest collection of national register lighthouses and lighthouse complexes in the national park system. People have used the islands for thousands of years. During the historic period, people constructed residences and started farms, fishing operations, brownstone quarries, and logging camps on the islands. Several of these historic sites are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The National Park Service and the US Coast Guard transitioned the Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light to NPS control after this was added to the park in the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act.



Apostle Islands National Lakeshore – Summer 2017
Update on Major Action Items and Issues from the 2011 General Management Plan

Since its release in September 2011, much progress has been made in implementing the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore general management plan, but work remains to be done. This update describes direction provided in the plan, progress in implementing the plan, and work yet to be done, as well as issues that have arisen since completion of the plan. Future work may require further compliance and funding before implementation.

General Management Plan Direction

The direction of the 2011 plan remains valid, with preservation of natural and cultural resources a top priority and the current mix of recreational activities the same. The park continues to be a leader in sustainable practices. The plan calls for no change in the number of public docks but allows for docks to be relocated, improved, or expanded. The Raspberry Island Light Station remains the focal point for cultural resource interpretation. Wilderness management remains consistent with plan direction, with no net change in campsite numbers or trail miles. Visitor centers at Bayfield, Little Sand Bay, Stockton Island, and the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center are still in operation.

Light Stations and Cultural Landscapes

The general management plan calls for rehabilitation of one or two historic light stations and preservation of the remaining light stations at current levels. Professional staff interpretation is to continue at Raspberry Island Light Station, and staff is to be added at one or more of the additional rehabilitated light stations. In 2014, Congress passed legislation transferring the Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light in Chequamegon Bay from the U.S. Coast Guard to the National Park Service.

Progress

- Historic structure reports and cultural landscape reports providing guidance to inform historic preservation have been completed for all light stations except the newly acquired Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light.
- Critical structural stabilization and rehabilitation have been completed at all of the park's light stations except Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light.
- Michigan Island Light Station is now the second "crown jewel" of the park, complete with newly restored flower beds and fruit trees and new interpretive exhibits inside the rehabilitated Old Michigan Island Lighthouse and around the grounds of both towers.
- Significant cultural landscape rehabilitation has been done at Devils, Sand, Raspberry, Long, and Michigan Island light stations, as well as at the Hansen Farm on Sand Island and the Manitou Island Fish Camp.

Yet to be Done

- Prepare national historic landmark nomination for the collection of light stations. A regional study is underway that will assist in preparing the nomination.
- Review and make minor adjustments, as needed, in management zone mapping around the light stations based on cultural landscape reports.

Life Estates and Former Use and Occupancy Properties

Three life estates on Rocky Island and two on Sand Island remain. Although the structures are owned by the National Park Service, residents enjoy exclusive rights to their use under one-time nonrenewable legal arrangements instituted at the time of land acquisition. If any of the life estates naturally expire, the properties will be made available for public use and access according to guidance in the general management plan.

Progress

- On Sand Island, rehabilitation is being done at the Hansen Farm, and compliance for the trails identified in the general management plan is complete.
- The life estates on Bear Island and at West Bay on Sand Island reverted to the National Park Service upon the deaths of the leaseholders.
- Preliminary work is underway to determine if any Bear Island facilities are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The entire site is in wilderness.

Yet to be Done

- Develop and implement site-specific management direction for former life estates on Bear Island and at West Bay.
- Preserve historically significant structures at the Hansen Farm; partially rehabilitate surrounding agricultural landscape and interpret that landscape using park staff and waysides/brochures.
- Build a trail to connect the Hansen Farm with existing trail network, and re-establish a trail along the historic road from East to West Bay.

Nonwilderness Lands on the Islands

The general management plan directs the National Park Service to explore ways to encourage inexpensive public transportation to some of the inner islands, such as Basswood or Sand. If these efforts are successful, a small amount of basic infrastructure (e.g., toilets, picnic shelter) could added to accommodate small or large groups that visit these islands. Although no new docks are to be added, the plan provides flexibility to add individual and group campsites on Sand and Basswood Islands and in the nonwilderness portion of Oak Island if there is adequate demand and resource conditions on the ground are favorable.

Progress

- At Quarry Bay on Stockton Island, newly built accessible boardwalks and group campsites enhance visitor experience for those of all abilities while protecting the fragile coastal environment and archeological resources. The unneeded ranger housing was removed and its foundation used as a base for an accessible group campsite.
- On Sand Island, unsafe docks have been replaced with a larger, fully accessible dock that provides much safer docking, reduces impacts on coastal processes, and is better adapted to changing lake levels. Other enhancements include improved campsites and a day-use picnic area near the new dock.
- Public docks were replaced and upgraded at Basswood and South Twin Islands and significantly improved at Michigan Island. Similar to the new dock at Sand Island, these docks are sensitive to lake level variability and coastal sediment transport. The Raspberry Island dock will be replaced in 2017, and the Devils Island dock is planned to be replaced in 2018.

Yet to be Done

- Create additional campsites on Basswood Island.
- Relocate most of the tombolo campsites on Stockton Island to Presque Isle to reduce resource conflicts.
- Determine feasibility of rehabilitating historic triplex on Long Island for NPS staff island-based housing.
- Develop Ojibwe cultural demonstration site on Basswood Island in cooperation with local tribes.
- Explore ways to encourage inexpensive public transportation.

Wilderness

The general management plan also serves as the park's wilderness management plan. The 80% of the park's land that is in the congressionally designated Gaylord Nelson Wilderness will continue to be managed as it is now. Although there is to be no net change in the number of individual campsites or trail miles, the plan allows campsites or trails to be relocated to protect resources.

Progress

- Wilderness is being managed consistent with law, policy, and general management plan direction.

Yet to be Done

- Relocate group campsite on Oak Island to nonwilderness area near the dock.

Mainland

The general management plan directs that the 12-mile coastal mainland unit continue to be managed as previously, with a few minor exceptions.

Progress

- A permanent shelter for the historic Twilite fishing boat, complete with exhibits, is scheduled to be built in 2017 at Little Sand Bay.
- The Little Sand Bay Visitor Center is in very poor condition and will be replaced in 2018–2019 with a much more energy efficient building. A covered exhibit area will allow visitors to access safety, orientation, and interpretative exhibits 24 hours a day.
- Meyers Beach continues to be a very popular area for kayaking to the mainland sea caves in the summer and in the winter when ice caves are accessible. Buried electric lines have been installed for use during the ice caves event and at the future ranger station.
- A new lease is being negotiated for the National Park Service marine operational center at Roys Point, which includes shops, docks, storage space, and some offices.

Yet to be Done

- Create small loop trail at Little Sand Bay and increase number of trailer pads to six.
- Build visitor contact station at Meyers Beach and install fully accessible ramp from the parking area to the beach.

- Make minor renovations at park headquarters (through lease renewal).
- Reconsider feasibility of building a new sustainable-design visitor center on or near Bayfield waterfront and possibly consolidating the facility with an adjacent waterfront facility for NPS operations.

Additional Studies

The general management plan identifies additional plans and studies that are needed to make decisions about management, visitor enjoyment, and resource protection at the park.

Progress

- Climate change scenario planning (2015)
- Accessibility self-evaluation and transition plan (2011)

Yet to be Done

- Resource stewardship strategy
- Commercial services strategy

New and Emerging Issues

Since adoption of the general management plan, a number of issues have arisen that need to be addressed by park management.

Ice Caves. During the extremely cold winter of 2014, the combination of exceptional ice formations and social media resulted in unprecedented visitation to the park's mainland ice caves. Social and conventional media focused an unaccustomed, but welcome, spotlight on the park's winter recreational opportunities and spectacular scenery. In 2015, the rate of visitation was even higher despite a shorter ice cave season. Appreciation for the park and the National Park Service has never been greater and economic benefits to the gateway communities enormous. (The park's regional economic impact for 2014 was estimated at $54 million.) Providing safe visitor services under extreme winter conditions is, however, a logistical and financial challenge for both the park and surrounding communities and jurisdictions. Although the frequency of safe access to the ice caves is likely to decline in the future due to climate change-caused reductions in ice cover, the polar vortex and extreme variability from year to year mean that the park and surrounding communities need to plan for ice cave operations every winter for the foreseeable future.

Congestion at Meyers Beach and Little Sand Bay. Changing patterns of day use and outfitted kayak trips are contributing to increased congestion at the park's popular mainland launch sites and sea caves. In addition, expansion of the Town of Russell campground at Little Sand Bay has increased use of and impacted park facilities and the visitor experience. Increased use at the popular "Lunch Beach" site east of the mainland sea caves may require the National Park Service to address issues of human waste and the need for a commercial services strategy. Although the new visitor center at Little Sand Bay will improve some services at that location, site-specific planning and additional infrastructure improvements at both sites, as identified in the general management plan, remain important but unfunded. In addition, minor, but key improvements to circulation at Little Sand Bay are needed to reduce launch site congestion. Staffing limitations at both sites remain a challenge because the need for visitor orientation and search and rescue operations will likely continue to increase.

Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light Addition. Permanent protection of "the largest and finest single collection of lighthouses in the country" was assured when Congress amended the park boundary and transferred the Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light from the U.S. Coast Guard to the National Park Service in 2014. That legislation also expanded the purpose of the park to explicitly include the conservation and development of historic light stations. Although the Ashland Harbor Breakwater Light is in fair condition, additional funding is needed for its long-term maintenance. Currently, there are no plans to provide visitor services at the light, but future opportunities should be explored. The City of Ashland and local nonprofit groups have welcomed the park as a partner, generating optimism for future partnerships to provide visitor services and historical interpretation at the light and on the Ashland waterfront.

Environmental Concerns and Opportunities. Since adoption of the general management plan, major industrial developments have been proposed in the Lake Superior watershed near the park. These include the world's largest open-pit iron mine in the Penokee Hills in the upper Bad River watershed and a concentrated animal feeding operation housing 26,000 pigs southwest of Ashland. Manure from that animal feeding operation would be spread on nearby agricultural fields. Runoff and contaminants that would enter streams from these operations could threaten Lake Superior water quality within and adjacent to the park, and NPS scientists and managers are assessing the potential impacts on park resources and values. Neither project has been approved, but the prospect of these or other major developments in the heretofore isolated Apostle Islands area is very real and likely to increase.

Algal blooms, previously almost unheard of, have been detected in recent years in park waters following major storm events that generated sediment plumes in Lake Superior.

On a more positive note, a citizen's initiative to create a national marine sanctuary in the Lake Superior waters surrounding the park has generated a great amount of enthusiasm, as well as some concern. The sanctuary would be managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and involve a stakeholder advisory group, of which the National Park Service would likely be a member. Although the National Park Service has not taken a formal position on the nomination and designation of the proposed sanctuary, NPS management believes such as sanctuary would complement the values and objectives of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore without impacting treaty fishing rights in Lake Superior. The prospects for nominating and establishing the sanctuary are murky, however, based on both local and national political realities. The National Park Service welcomes this discussion and would be a participant in the formal public process, should one occur.

Park Lands within the Red Cliff Reservation. About two-thirds of NPS-owned lands in the park's mainland unit are within the reservation of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. The band has approached the National Park Service about repatriating their historic land base and co-managing that part of the park. In addition, a 51-acre inholding to both the Red Cliff Band and the park, with 1,400 feet of Lake Superior frontage west of Little Sand Bay, has been offered to the National Park Service by a willing seller. This parcel divides the narrow mainland unit of the park into two sections and is the last remaining acquirable property in the park. Acquisition of this property by the National Park Service or the Red Cliff Band would assure continuous protected shoreline habitat; the alternative to its acquisition is potential private development, ecological fragmentation, and alienation of these lands from both tribal members and the public.

The National Park Service is hopeful that these lands can be protected and has proposed to the Red Cliff Band that co-management options be explored and tested. If these efforts are successful, it may be appropriate to initiate a new public planning process to examine the potential for a new model for the National Park System of a tribally owned, cooperatively managed protected area within an existing national park unit.

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Funding provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has enabled the National Park Service to accomplish a number of important projects that protect or restore coastal habitat in the park. These include restoration of rare plant communities through reduction in deer browse; protection and restoration of coastal vegetation; reducing impacts on coastal processes through dock design; nonnative invasive plant control and interpretation; increased understanding of aquatic nearshore environments; and protection and understanding of threated and endangered species.

Experiencing, Monitoring, and Communicating about Environmental Change. Studies show that severe storms in northern Wisconsin are increasing in both frequency and intensity. In addition, lake levels are more volatile than in the past, fluctuating more rapidly between high and low stages. Projections for climate change in this area indicate that these trends are likely to accelerate. Record low lake levels were observed in 2007 and prolonged high levels in 2013–2016. Intense storms during periods of high water cause extensive shoreline erosion, geomorphic changes, impacts on archeological sites, and damage to infrastructure including docks and campsites. Three severe blowdown events since 2010 have damaged park trails and buildings. The surface water temperature of Lake Superior reached record highs during the summers of 2010 and 2012 and came very close again in 2016.

Although conditions on Lake Superior always pose safety challenges for boaters, particularly kayakers, the risks increase when warm temperatures and prolonged calm conditions are interrupted by intense storm events. As a cumulative result of all of these factors, the safety of park visitors and staff is of increasing concern. To address this risk, the National Park Service has incorporated lake level projections into the design of all docks replaced since 2011, established a real-time wave monitoring system near the mainland sea caves, installed three automated weather and/or lake data monitoring stations in the park, and emphasized environmental changes and safety in interpretation and public communications. Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is increasingly viewed by both the National Park Service and the scientific community as a site for monitoring environmental conditions, and the National Park Service will continue to seek opportunities to leverage this information for public benefit.