



FIELDREPORT

Midwest Region | Summer 2018



Protecting a Park from Polluters

By Colin Deverell

A plume of neon green, toxic chemicals spilled into a waterway near the Lake Michigan beaches of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in April 2017. National park rangers were notified and immediately closed the beaches. A community drinking water inlet was shut down. The City of Chicago began testing at its nearby intake that supplies drinking water to several million people. For years, regulators failed to enforce the laws to protect the water that millions of people use for drinking, swimming, and fishing. It is time for something to change.

Thanks to NPCA members and thousands of others who want to protect clean water, regulators are finally taking enforcement action against U.S. Steel, the corporation responsible for the chemical spill.

The legal action, brought forth by U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and the State of Indiana, is the result of a Clean Water Act lawsuit filed by a group of surfers who ride the frequent big waves along the shores of Indiana Dunes. The proposed action requires the company to pay fines to the Park Service and other agencies, improve monitoring of its wastewater, and make long overdue improvements to its steel-producing facility. But the penalties are far too lenient. Under the

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A Victory for Wildlife at Isle Royale

By Christine Goepfert and Jenn Errick

In June, the National Park Service made a huge announcement: they will introduce 20 to 30 wolves to Isle Royale National Park over the next three years beginning as soon as September! This is an essential action toward preventing an iconic species from disappearing completely from the park and one that NPCA has long-advocated for.

Isle Royale is a remote island in Lake Superior. Researchers once documented a population of 50 wolves on the island, but now just two remain with no chance of a natural recovery. As top predator, wolves play a critical role in the health of the island. Without them, the island's moose population is growing and may double in the next four to five years, throwing the ecosystem out of balance as they devastate the island's vegetation.

Rolf Peterson is one of two principal investigators from Michigan Technological University studying the interactions of wolves and moose on the island. What began in 1958 is now the longest-running predator-prey study in the world. Last May, Peterson and his colleagues released the 60th annual Wolf-Moose Project report whose findings document the

continued growth of the park's moose population and support the Park Service's plan to bring new wolves to Isle Royale.



"I've been on record for many years recommending new wolves be brought in," said Peterson. "It's all about the integrity of the natural system at Isle Royale... all the players have to be in place, and that includes top carnivores." Peterson noted that the abundance of moose has changed the makeup of plants on the west side of the park. As moose eat native trees and saplings, exotic grasses are moving in, breaking up the forest.

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Top: With no predators, the moose population at Isle Royale is on the rise. © M. Timothy O'Keefe | Alamy
Above: At one time, more than 50 wolves inhabited Isle Royale National Park. ©Gary Kramer

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Design by kelleyalbertdesign.com



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Aunt Lorna Hits the Trail



By Lorna Gleason

“**A**untie Lorna, will you come backpacking with me on Isle Royale?” What 60 something-year-old aunt would turn down that offer from her 23-year-old niece? Not this one. Then panic set in. How long had it been since I hefted around a full pack? Moreover, I had never gone backpacking without my trusty Eagle Scout husband. But like all things in life, you accept the challenge, train and gain confidence. I am so grateful that I did.

Planning to visit Isle Royale requires a number of decisions to be made. Isle Royale is a rugged island out in the middle of Lake Superior, with few concessions to civilization. Do we go out of Michigan or Minnesota? By air or by boat? How much territory do we cover? We settled on taking the ferry from Grand Portage to Windigo and hiking the Feldtmann Lake loop. The trip was planned for four days of hiking in early September.

The drive-up route 61 to Grand Portage was spectacular, and we were able to do some warm-up hiking along the way. We met the early morning ferry for our two-hour ride to the far west end of Isle Royale. Although

a bit chilly, we rode outside on the bow and marveled at the natural world around us. Our ferry was full of eager travelers excited that we were going to experience unseasonably warm and sunny weather during our stay.

After our group orientation by an affable national park ranger, we took off down the Feldtmann Lake Trail. Over the next four days we encountered a cow moose and her young calf, many beavers, a large red fox and squirrels genetically unique to the island. This trail is predominately low lying, so we hiked through marsh lands made more so by the local beavers. On our last two days we reached higher ground and enjoyed the deep forest around us.

We are so fortunate to have this national park. It's a place to truly unplug in an isolated wilderness and experience some amazing wildlife. And a memorable way to spend quiet time with my backpacking buddy, who thankfully invited her aunt on a great adventure.

Lorna Gleason is a member of the Midwest Regional Council and lives in Minneapolis.

Above: Lorna Gleason travels to national parks every year, including Isle Royale and Big Bend, pictured here. ©Tom Gleason

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What do you like about this newsletter? What other topics or features would you like to see? Please contact us with your feedback at midwest@npca.org.

Administration Backs Off Proposed \$70 Park Fee

In a major victory for park lovers nationwide, the Department of Interior recently reversed course on their proposal to drastically raise entrance fees at 17 popular national parks during peak season. Instead of the proposed \$70 entrance fee (more than double the existing fee at many of these parks), the administration has settled on a more moderate \$5 increase on a larger number of parks, including Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and Badlands National Park.

A broad and organized campaign against the administration's proposal motivated nearly 110,000 public comments, including 20,000 from NPCA supporters. According to NPCA estimates, 98 percent of those comments were opposed to the increase.

The drastic fee hike would have impacted popular national parks like Yosemite,



Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Acadia. The proposed increase could have put these destinations out of reach for some road-tripping families.

While NPCA supports the administration's stated goal to tackle the nearly \$12 billion national park repair backlog, we believe a

legislative solution such as the bi-partisan Restore Our Parks Act will provide a more viable long-term solution without placing an undue burden on visitors.

Above: Fees will rise at Badlands National Park, but not as high as previously proposed. © Kwiktor | Dreamstime



Protecting a Park from Polluters

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Clean Water Act, U.S. Steel could face a maximum penalty of more than \$6 million, making the proposed \$300,000 penalty tiny by comparison. And U.S. Steel's plans to prevent future spills are vague.

In the weeks and months following the

spill, NPCA, local communities around the park and conservation groups called on federal regulators to enforce the laws that protect our waters from harmful pollution.

Record-setting numbers of public comments have been filed in support of strong enforcement action. Although the settlement provisions have not been finalized, NPCA is

confident that our members' voices have been heard. We expect extensive repairs, improved water monitoring, and adequate fines levied so that Indiana Dunes and the waters of Lake Michigan will be protected.

Above: Indiana Dunes fragile landscape is surrounded by industry, making policy enforcement all the more critical. © PVstock.com | Alamy

Winter Wolf and Moose Watching

Keeping track of wolves and moose on a wilderness island is no easy task, especially during the winter months. With the Wolves and Moose of Isle Royale summer study just getting underway, here are some interesting facts about what happens in the cold, snowy time of year:

Why do wildlife counts in the winter?

Bare trees provide fewer places for animals to hide and the snow provides a good contrast so wolves and moose are more visible. Researchers fly over the park and use shadows cast on sunny days to visually locate wolf tracks in the snow. On overcast days, they look for moose, which are easier to spot against the white background.

What are conditions like?

From January into March when temperatures average 10-25 degrees Fahrenheit, five to six people live on the remote island in a bunk house at the west end of the park. This location is near Washington Harbor where ice forms a safe landing spot for the study's most valuable tool – a small, lightweight plane. Weather is the biggest obstacle to flying safely. Any winds more than 15 miles per hour will shut down the plane's ability to take off, so every good weather day matters.

How is the data used?

The researchers release an annual report in the spring, noting changes and trends in the wolf and moose populations from previous years. What they've learned over the last 60 years of study has helped inform wildlife management on other public lands. These research methods have also been modeled elsewhere, including at Yellowstone National Park.

More Wolves at Isle Royale National Park



Photo: John A. Vucetich

NPCA has long advocated to bring new wolves to the national park to protect the long-term survival of this iconic species.

2013

NPCA brought together experts and community leaders to discuss the future of the wolves.

2015

NPCA and members submitted hundreds of comments in favor of introducing wolves to the park.

2017

NPCA continued to engage congressional offices and advocate for an introduction plan.

2018

National Park Service released its final plan to introduce 20-30 wolves over a three-year period.

Photo: John Vucetich

A Victory for Wildlife at Isle Royale

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Wolves did serve as effective predators for decades, but over the years, multiple factors reduced the population, and now warming temperatures have compromised the animals' only route on and off the island: ice bridges. According to Peterson, these bridges were much more consistent and solid in decades past but over the last 20 years, they have been far less common.

Introducing new wolves to a remote wilderness such as Isle Royale is not a decision that park managers have taken lightly. NPCA was an early advocate for wolf introduction, convening a public forum in 2013 that brought together scientists, park managers, wilderness advocates and other experts, including Peterson, to discuss the possibilities. Since then, Park Service staff have weighed several options and announced their plan to introduce more wolves after a transparent public process and in-depth scientific analysis.

The Park Service plans to introduce the wolves by capturing and moving animals from one of several upper Midwest or Canadian locations. "Our primary concern is the health of each animal while in our care," says Phyllis Green, Isle Royale superintendent. The wolves will be rounded up using humane methods and will be transported from the mainland to Isle Royale via plane, helicopter or boat. They will also be radio collared so scientists can learn from this historic event.

Peterson indicates ideally new wolves would be on the ground in time for the next breeding season, which usually begins in February. "The sooner that happens, the better it is for the integrity of the whole island," he said. And the sooner we'll once again hear the unmistakable howl of wolves at Isle Royale National Park!

Above: Isle Royale is tranquil during winter months when the wolf and moose study is underway. ©Rolf Peterson

Contrasting Colors Speak to Future

By Christine Goepfert

Earlier this year on a visit to the Ozark National Scenic Riverways in southern Missouri, I experienced the vivid colors of this national park, even though it was a gloomy February day. The crystal blue waters of the Jacks Fork River flowed over the crisp green watercress on the riverbed below, in perfect harmony with the deep red of the Alley Mill nearby. This beauty was in sharp contrast to the caked mud and leaves that clung to the walls of the campground buildings we just visited.

A record-breaking flood in April 2017 damaged about 25 percent of the park's facilities along the Current and Jack Fork Rivers as well as many homes and businesses in the region. Parts of the park were still closed and sat in need of repair months later. Park service staff members were working overtime to ensure the park would be open during the busy summer season. This popular park welcomes over one million visitors annually.

According to the National Climate Assessment (2017), heavy downpours are increasing in frequency and intensity, especially in the Midwest, Northeast and Great Plains. These downpours result in more erosion, washing out trails and damaging park infrastructure.

Unpredictable weather like stronger storms, longer droughts, hotter temperatures and intense wildfires are harming national parks across the country. According to the National Climate Assessment (2017), heavy downpours are increasing in frequency and intensity, especially in the Midwest, Northeast and Great Plains. These downpours result in more erosion, washing out trails and damaging park infrastructure.

After my visit to Ozark, I traveled to Kansas City and presented NPCA's testimony in support of the Clean Power Plan rule. This plan, in danger of being repealed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), is a critical step in addressing climate change

as it aims to lower carbon dioxide emissions from coal-burning power plants. These coal plants are the same sources of harmful air pollution that threaten the health of national park visitors, staff, wildlife, plants and neighboring communities. After delivering testimony, NPCA delivered 16,000 comments against the repeal to the EPA from our members around the nation.

EPA can still change course and stop their plans to undermine this critical rule. We must take steps to reduce carbon pollution in order to protect our national parks from the disastrous effects of climate change so that the natural beauty of places like the Ozark riverways welcomes visitors, not "closed" signs.

Around the Midwest



Above: Thanks to Alderman Anthony Beale, volunteers from NPCA, nearby high schools, and the community, there is a new mural at Pullman National Monument in Chicago. The mural highlights George Pullman, the 19th century founder of the company town, as well as its architecture, the 20th century Pullman porters and President Barack Obama, who designated the monument in 2015. ©Colin Deverell | NPCA



Above and Below: NPCA released a vision, developed by more than 100 people, for a new national park visitor experience at the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock in Minneapolis. The lock was closed due to our advocacy to protect the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area from the threat of invasive Asian carp and it now provides a true once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. www.npca.org/transformingthelock ©Eric Miller





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Six Students, Seven Days, Big Results

By Colin Deverell

With the snip of shears and the dab of a sponge, the next generation of conservation scientists sets out into Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Working carefully around mature white oak trees, the Student Conservation Association (SCA) students worked to restore this sensitive habitat. Their experience in the park is preparing them to be strong advocates for national parks.

Indiana Dunes is located in a large industrial and residential landscape and is comprised of several disconnected pieces of land. As a result, the park is under constant threat from invasive species encroaching from every direction. With park budgets shrinking, volunteers and advocates are critical, and it's increasingly important for young people to embrace their role in protecting these special places.

NPCA, SCA and Save the Dunes, a local environmental group, worked together to remove invasive species from a large natural area in the heart of the dunes landscape. Using newly learned techniques for removing invasive plants, the students



prepared fire lines for the upcoming controlled burn season. After spending a day removing non-native plants, NPCA staff and the students talked about the importance of making your voice heard with decision-makers and about how good science helps shape policy.

At the end of their week in the park, these students were ready to take their experiences and turn them into advocacy.

Above: Student volunteers have trouble keeping up with the invasive species at Indiana Dunes.
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