



Come on UP: The Great Waters fine!

Not long ago, typical visitors to Michigan's eastern Upper Peninsula drove up from the Detroit area to visit family or friends, maybe fish or hunt a little. After a decade of local collaboration, new visitors are streaming in from all over to visit The Great Waters—and to explore a world-class mix of landscape, heritage, recreation, local food and lively culture.

► The catalysts

The stranded assets. Michigan's eastern Upper Peninsula (UP) is off most beaten tracks. Most travelers turn west after crossing the Mackinac Bridge from the Lower Peninsula. What do they miss? More than 16,000 square miles of forests, lakes, rivers, waterfalls and hiking. Cultural traditions and artifacts. The freshwater shorelines of Lakes Superior, Huron and Michigan. Maritime lore, shipwrecks and picturesque lighthouses. Hidden, underutilized treasures.

The stakeholder circle. The five eastern UP counties had been losing population for over a decade. In 2004, a set of stakeholders—small firms, local tourism bureaus, chambers of commerce, cultural organizations, food concerns, artists, local governments, and land managers—came together to figure out how to connect their dots to attract more tourism. As they talked, enthusiasm grew for trying “something together.”

The regional development group. Northern Initiatives (NI), a regional non-profit community development financial institution, convened the stakeholder circle. NI set out to build a more diverse and resilient economy across the UP, the northern Lower Peninsula, and adjacent Wisconsin counties. NI knew that beyond access to capital, small rural businesses need up-to-date information on markets and what customers want.

► The value opportunity

In the UP, tourism has always been on the map. But “real” economic development had long meant mining and timber, both now in deep decline.

In the early 2000s, UP residents started worrying about their tourism economy as well. Stocks of yellow perch, popular in sport fishing, began dwindling. Hunting and fishing license applications had fallen off. Younger generations were leaving. Tourist cottages were being sold off as private homes. Local tourism businesses—lodging, outfitters, shops and restaurants—were struggling. In spring and fall off-seasons, unemployment neared 30 percent. A nature travel expert visiting the region offered advice: Embrace your potential as a great outdoor destination. Broaden your marketing efforts and partnerships.



**Among the underutilized treasures:
the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum**

The region was behind the marketing times. Too many visitor bureaus measured success by how many brochures they distributed—not by profits or visitor traffic, spending or satisfaction. Multiple tourist bureaus and destinations promoted only their own locales. Many mom-and-pop firms simply weren't up to date on travel and business trends.

Add this: 85% of the eastern UP is national or state park or forest land—or available to the public for recreation.

The public managers aim to preserve the land assets, but had rarely marketed them as natural attractions. And the resource-strapped park services were not very visitor-friendly.

Once stakeholders started convening, they recognized these stranded assets. They also spotted the ingredients to build a stronger regional identity that could bring in more tourism and benefit them all. In short, if they banded together, they could brand it together!

► The demand

But first, they needed to know what tourists wanted. NI linked them to research, data, the state tourism bureau and its Pure Michigan brand campaign. They learned that today's savvy travelers are looking for recommendations, route guides, convenience, quirk and quality—and a rich mix of experience on one trip.

Two critical challenges also surfaced. Too few tourists knew what the eastern UP had to offer. And the region was further from their target markets than competing destinations. Bottom lines: They had to meet rising tourist expectations—and get tourists to go the extra mile.

Locals next identified shared goals: Build out the “shoulder” timeframe of each tourist season. Attract new markets and track visitor trends. Elevate the brand profile. Help visitors navigate the region. Offer reasons to travel further and stay longer.

Critical to every goal was developing the brand, which emerged as The Great Waters, calling forth the region's location amidst three Great Lakes—and the great wonders that lie between.

► Putting it together

The initial stakeholders reorganized as the Great Waters Steering Committee—with business owners, tourism councils, chambers, museums, historical groups, local government, development agencies, Tribal organizations, the state Department of Natural Resources, and the National Forest Service. With NI as lead convener, connector and capacity builder, the Committee started weaving in a network of resource partners who could both help and benefit.

Early on, the Committee realized that local tourism promotions were not reaching the right audiences—

or linking visitors to each other’s attractions. And their colorful brochures stashed in Welcome Center racks weren’t the answer. With The Great Waters, communities pooled funds to afford buying into a partnership with the Pure Michigan campaign—leveraging their visibility into wider regional and national markets.

To drive people further and deeper into the region, the Committee developed three “trails” tourists could follow over a block of days—each named after a Great Lake. They launched a website that integrates places to see, events, lodging and outdoor recreation options. Facebook and social media campaigns followed.

NI worked with many small tourism-related firms to boost business planning and operations know-how, and leverage marketing and financing. In a partnership with Northern Michigan University, tech-savvy students developed new websites for local firms.

Local government and public land managers facilitated more access to natural and cultural sites. Old territorial habits started melting, as cross-marketing each others’ attractions helped them all do better.

And NI has kept the useful data flowing. For example, a 2010 visitor survey helped the Sault Tribe of the Chippewa Indians

recognize a market beyond gamers. The tribe is now developing cultural tourism in tandem with its casino.

► The bottom line: Grow your own wealth

Tourism revenues have stabilized or grown in eastern UP communities, despite recent economic downturns and weather woes. Jobs have been retained and created.

Local perceptions that tourism can’t produce a better economy are changing, as ripples move beyond beyond tourism. For example, Mackinac Straits Fish Company

has retained jobs and diversified its market to meet growing demand from local customers. Pictured Rocks Cruises’ business increased by 12 percent in a period in which tourism grew by only 8 percent.

Successful Great Waters collaboration

is reviving “community.” Some local firms and organizations witness higher participation by board members. Others report more frequent and effective meetings. Local firms are seeking ways to share marketing and outreach efforts. And overall, small firms are finding and adopting regional “best practices.” New young leaders are emerging. Even the state Department of Natural Resources has been holding community meetings, asking, “What can we do differently? How can we better connect with local communities?”

Not two decades ago, denizens of the declining eastern UP saw little future. To some, their Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point might have felt more like a metaphor for their economic situation than an economic asset. But today, the museum caps their new Lake Superior Trail and draws new visitors. Working together, finding common ground and linking their resources, isolated communities and firms in the eastern UP have become The Great Waters—“where the wonders never end.”



Routing a stream of new tourists

The Great Waters and Northern Initiatives believe in tracking great data to tally progress and prospects for their region. Here’s a sample:

- **Individual capital.** Dozens trained to identify and document natural and cultural assets. Financial, marketing and planning training for tourism businesses and nonprofits.
- **Intellectual capital.** Brand adopted, promoted, and now utilized throughout the region. New shared understanding about how tourism can build economy and opportunity.
- **Social capital.** More collaboration, transparency, cross marketing and connected services. New annual regional tourism forum. Needed: more outreach to Tribal residents and businesses.
- **Natural capital.** Increased volunteer restoration and maintenance projects. State Heritage Route designation for the scenic, 63-mile 123 Corridor. Eligibility for federal Scenic Byways program.
- **Built capital.** New lodging and tourist attractions. New Grand Island ferry. New wooden boat school.
- **Political capital.** New federal support for tourism. Greater credibility from engagement with state and national economic and tourism agencies. Local elected officials active in the effort.
- **Cultural capital.** Heritage sites being rehabbed, upgraded and marketed. Local foods gaining reputation and creative use.
- **Financial capital.** New regional investments leveraging state and federal resources for tourism.
- **Local ownership and control.** The Great Waters Committee and Northern Initiatives fill gaps in the value chain with local firms and organizations, retaining local decisionmaking authority and control over the region’s assets.
- **Better livelihoods.** Stabilized revenues for struggling tourism firms. New jobs for local residents.