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TOP STORY

Valuable dunes need to be protected, experts say

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Nov 10, 2017 Updated Nov 10, 2017



Dune grass blows in the wind Thursday at Warren Dunes State Park in Sawyer. Experts speaking Thursday agreed that these areas need to be preserved for their economic and environmental value.

Don Campbell / HP staff

ST. JOSEPH — The dunes along western Lake Michigan are a gold mine for recreation, tourism and quality of life for residents, and need to be preserved for future generations, according to experts speaking at the Heritage Museum in St. Joseph Thursday.

At a presentation titled “Loving Our Dunes to Death? Balancing Enjoyment with Conservation,” panelists discussed recent research into the value that Michiganders place on these unique geological features.

We have the largest freshwater dunes in the world, said Robert Richardson, a professor of environmental economics at Michigan State University.

Many are finding out about these attractions.

Outdoor recreation in the state is a \$26.2 billion annual industry, supporting 232,000 jobs, and generating \$7.5 billion in wages and \$2.1 billion in tax revenue, according to Brad Garmon, with the Michigan Environmental Council.

About two-thirds of Michigan residents participate in outdoor activities such as kayaking, camping and hiking along the shore, on a par with states such as Colorado and Oregon, he said.



Sand slowly engulfs dead trees at Warren Dunes State Park in Sawyer.
Don Campbell / HP staff

Locations such as Sleeping Bear Dunes, Saugatuck and Traverse City have been recognized by national travel publications.

It's not all about tourism, panelists emphasized. Garmon pointed out that among millennials, those ages 18-34, outdoor amenities are as important as good pay when deciding whether to locate in an area.

An ongoing survey, at www.howyoudunesurvey.com, measured the types of activities important to residents. The survey has drawn 3,600 respondents who answered questions and were able to pinpoint sites they had visited.

The survey found that more than 90 percent of participants thought that preserving scenic beauty and protecting dunes was important, said Richardson, who admitted that the survey was probably weighted toward outdoor enthusiasts.

Michigan "hot spots" included Warren Dunes State Park, which tallied 275 visits from survey respondents. Going to the beach, camping and hiking were the most popular activities there.

The panelists noted the importance of dunes for erosion control, water quality and other environmental benefits.

Michigan's west coast is uniquely located to accumulate its dunes because of the westerly winds that blow unchecked across the lake, shifting and piling up sands left behind by glaciers, said Alan Arbogast, a geologist at Michigan State.

While it was once believed that dunes were created at a single time, more recent research shows that they pile up in stages on top of other geologic formations over eons, Arbogast said. Dunes have periods of stability, when more vegetation grows, and times when they blow around, he said.

Understanding the shifting nature of dunes is important to planning for their preservation, Arbogast said.

The geologist said he was most concerned about gradual development along the coast that could eventually lock the dunescape in place.

Elaine Iseley, with the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, said residents will need to balance tourism and recreation with preservation, as well.

Marcy Hamilton, with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, one of the event sponsors, said information is available on smart ways to build homes near the dunes.

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