

Our use and subsequent impact on the wetlands

Once regarded as wastelands needing to be drained or filled, wetlands are now recognized as important features in the earth's landscape that provide numerous benefits for people, fish and other wildlife.

Healthy wetlands are vital because they:

- clean the water
- recharge water supplies
- reduce flood risks
- provide valuable fish and wildlife habitat.

In addition, wetlands provide recreational opportunities, aesthetic benefits and sites for research and education.

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to rain forests and coral reefs. A great variety of microbes, plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, fish and mammals can be part of a wetland ecosystem.

The functions of a wetland depend on a complex set of relationships between the wetland and the other ecosystems in a watershed. Often these relationships aren't fully understood until it is too late — after a wetland has been filled or drained.

WATERSHED FACTS

■ Although wetlands represent only about 5 percent of the land surface of the contiguous United States, they are home to 31 percent of our plant species.

■ In 1991 wetland-related ecotourism activities such as hunting, fishing, bird-watching, and photography added approximately \$59 billion to the national economy.

Protecting Wetlands

Laws and regulations that protect wetlands can be implemented at the local, state or federal level. State and local regulations can only be more stringent, not less, than federal law. In Michigan, in the absence of strict local ordinances, the primary regulatory responsibility for protecting wetlands is shared by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Army Corps of Engineers (for wetlands contiguous to the Great Lakes and navigational channels).

There are many laws that affect wetlands, but the primary tool in Michigan's wetland regulatory structure is Part 303, Wetland Protection



Due to low water levels, emergent wetlands are establishing themselves along many Great Lakes beaches. As water levels rise again, these wetlands will protect the shore from erosion.

of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act.

This law protects the public from wetlands loss, establishes a permit program, provides enforcement language, establishes penalties and authorizes regulation of wetlands by local government.

Michigan law requires a permit for the following wetland activities: depositing fill material; dredging or removing material; construction within or development of a wetland; and draining wetlands.

Whether or not a wetland is regulated depends on its size and whether or not it is contiguous to a water body.

Contiguous wetlands are those in close proximity to a lake, stream or pond, or that have a direct hydrological relationship to it. In Michigan "close proximity" means within 500 feet of an inland lake, stream or pond and within 1,000 feet of a Great Lake.

Non-contiguous wetlands

are isolated from lakes and streams hydrologically, and usually geographically.

Activities in contiguous wetlands are regulated no matter what size they are. However, only non-contiguous wetlands that cover more than five acres are protected under NREPA. In counties of less than 100,000 people — which includes all counties in the Grand Traverse Bay Watershed, non-contiguous wetlands are not regulated at all until a wetland inventory is complete.

Recently, the Traverse City Commission considered adopting a wetlands ordinance to protect non-contiguous wetlands of less than five acres.

So, if you're wondering why some wetland fills seem to get more attention than others, consider the size and location of the site.

Many small wetlands are disappearing because they do not fall under the protection of current laws.

In addition, some agricul-

tural activities affecting wetlands are exempt from regulation under Michigan's "Right to Farm" provisions.

WAYS YOU CAN HELP

- Protect the wetlands on your property.
- Help raise money to protect vital wetlands. Critical wetland areas have been identified for protection as part of the Grand Traverse Bay Watershed Protection Plan.
- Participate in the permitting process. Public oversight is a valuable component of the regulatory system.
- Urge your local officials to adopt better ordinances for protecting wetlands in your area.
- There are many beautiful, protected wetlands here, visit one.
- Call the MDEQ Cadillac District Office at 1-231-775-3960 or The Watershed Center at 231/935-1514.

WATERSHED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

■ The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians developed a Wetland Protection Plan for tribal lands which included a complete inventory of wetlands, identification of potential and existing threats to the wetlands and proposed protection and conservation activities.

■ In early 2003, a statewide effort was mounted to fight legislation regarding the destruction of emergent coastal wetlands. Although the bill allowing beach maintenance under certain conditions passed, its provisions were considerably less lenient due to the advocacy efforts.

■ In the past five years, local conservancies have protected or are in the process of protecting many acres of wetlands, including significant preserves on Elk/Skegemog Lake (128 acres of strictly wetland property); St. Clair/Six Mile Lake Preserve (150 acres of wetlands in a 191 acre preserve), and Upper Herring Lake Preserve (140 acres of wetland in a 160 acres preserve).