



## Executive Summary DNR Conservation Town Hall Meetings



Michiganians have long understood the link between the conservation of our natural resources and a high quality of life. One of the jobs of the Department of Natural Resources is to connect people with nature to foster and enhance that quality of life. Healthy forests, fish and wildlife and clean natural places are invaluable to all of us, and, working together, we can help protect the state we love and the economic investment our natural resources bring to Michigan.

To help the DNR decide “how best to invest” in conservation, five town hall meetings were held across the state during April 2009 to garner feedback from DNR stakeholders and interested citizens. The meetings were held:

April 6, Grand Rapids  
April 8, Midland  
April 12, Marquette  
April 13, Traverse City  
April 20, Novi

As a result of these facilitated sessions, more than 340 concerned individuals provided input to the Department on major activity areas and issues that the Department should bear in mind as it develops work schedules, budgets and other efforts.

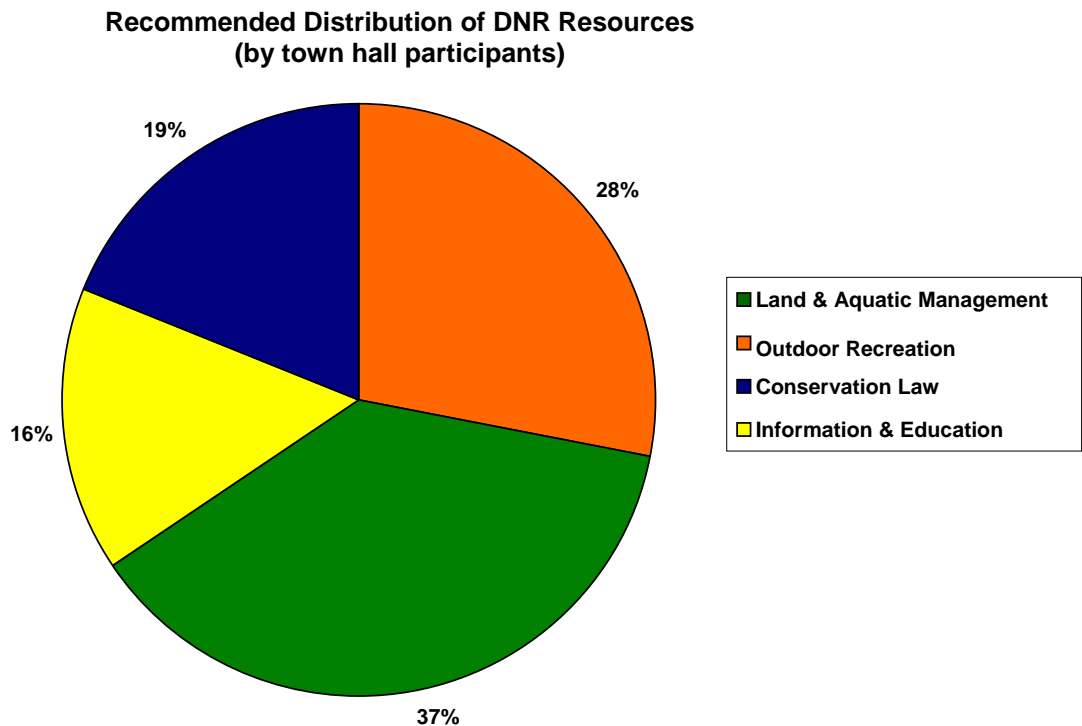
During the town hall meetings participants were asked to complete a couple of exercises. In the first exercise participants were asked to consider how important four major categories of Department activities were to them. The four categories were: Outdoor Recreation, Land and Aquatic Management, Conservation Law, and Information and Education. In small groups, the participants developed pie charts that reflected their distribution of how the Department should spend its effort in the four categories.

In the second activity the small groups generated issue statements in each of the four major categories. Participants generated over 900 issue statements covering a wide array of topics. In addition to the dialogue from the five town hall meetings, 40 individuals commented via the DNR Web site.

## STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

### Pie Chart Results

When considering where the Department's efforts should be placed, town hall participants (all locations combined) placed the highest interest in Land and Aquatic Management (37%) followed by Outdoor Recreation (28%), Conservation Law (19%), and Information and Education (16%).



### Issue Statement Results

In order to understand and respond to issues generated during the meeting. The issue statements for each of the major activity categories were further summarized and combined into topics. The results are listed in order according to the major activity category generating the most issue statements. The activity area generating the most issue statements was Outdoor Recreation (29%), followed by Land and Aquatic Management (28%), Conservation Law (22%), and Information and Education (21%).

The discussion below highlights those topics that rise to the top and are most often identified by our stakeholders under each category. It is important to point out that the need for better communication, education and outreach was woven throughout all the issues.

The Department is working diligently on addressing many of the concerns raised at the meetings. Noted immediately below the issue statements are some of the steps the DNR has taken and will continue to take.

## Outdoor Recreation (29%)

- 38% of the outdoor recreation issue statements identify some aspect of access and accessibility. This issue includes providing general access to lands and waters of the state as well as ensuring access to a diversity of users with different physical and skill levels. Cost came up several times as an issue related to access.
- 28% identifies trails - equestrian, non-motorized, ATV, ORV, bicycle and other. Trails that provide recreational opportunities at local level systems and connected trails statewide are gaining popularity. The implication is that a significant segment of this public would like the DNR to improve and provide more marked/legal trails on state-owned lands. The Department needs to increase the visibility of its involvement in trail activities (development, designation, maintenance, granting, etc.).
- 20% includes a variety of issues, such as recruitment of new users, suggestions on increasing funds for Departmental program support, and comments on several state land use issues.
- 14% identifies user conflicts in recreational venues - trails, campgrounds, rivers. There were also a number of comments related to increasing multiple-use on trails and other recreational sites. Implication is that this segment of the public would like the DNR to focus more energy on maximizing access while minimizing user group conflict.

## DNR Reflection and Response

- ***DNR has been working over the past few months to improve the recreation grants information from the perspective of the grant applicant/recipient.***
- ***DNR is striving to improve camping and trails information, user access to information, and maps from the recreation traveler perspective.***
- ***DNR engineers address accessibility issues when designing new facilities, sidewalks, parking lots, etc., and look to upgrade or provide accessibility at older locations when resources allow. All campground upgrades are ADA compliant, and we annually seek grants to improve the system.***
- ***More trails are provided each year, and the railroad and rail-to-trail systems continue to see upgrades and additional purchases. Trail upgrades have significantly increased in the past few years on many trails and continue today with projects like Alpena-Cheboygan, Clare-Evart, and Houghton-Chassel.***
- ***DNR is actively seeking grants to make improvements to the trail system.***
- ***Enforcement has been stepped up of Commercial Forest violations, which include a number of cases where hunting/fishing access had been restricted in some way. We are working hard to make sure this type of access remains open.***
- ***DNR will identify what improvements need to be made to improve horse campgrounds in state park and recreation areas and partner with those equestrian groups that said they are willing to help financially to the extent they can in supporting the upgrades.***
- ***The Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks continues to address the need for long-range funding for state parks and for preserving infrastructure by legislatively seeking a “passport” that will eliminate the two stickers for parks and boating access. The passport will also make the park system less dependent on camping fees.***



- ***DNR has increased efforts to partner with businesses like Gander Mountain for our first-time camper program and Macy's for our park-and-read program.***
- ***DNR has enhanced activities and programs at state park and recreation areas to attract a more diverse audience and wider variety of interests, such as disc golf and geocaching, and facility additions that include yurts and tepees.***
- ***DNR is exploring avenues to adjust hours for boating access, especially opening them as early as feasible.***

### **Land and Aquatic Management (28%)**

- 25% of the land and water management issue statements focus on habitat and wildlife species management and include both game and non-game.
- 21% involves aquatic resources.
- 21% focus on hunting and fishing issues supporting management and changes in regulations for game species.
- 14% identifies timber/forest product concerns.
- 12% underscores land ownership and lease issues. Many of these support increasing state land ownership or leasing of lands to increase recreational opportunities.
- 7% highlights invasive species management.

### **DNR Reflection and Response**

- ***In terms of any land transaction—whether buying, selling, or exchanging lands—DNR continues to look to increase recreational lands.***
- ***DNR is broadening antlerless license opportunities so that, in southern Michigan, an antlerless license that is good in one county is good in most other southern counties as well.***



- ***DNR is simplifying the regulations on managed waterfowl areas.***
- ***DNR is concentrating effort and resources on wildlife management areas and managed waterfowl areas to make them as productive and accessible as possible.***
- ***DNR continues to increase hunter access through our cooperative programs, such as the Hunter Access Program.***
- ***Working with our stakeholders, DNR continues to implement programs that are both biologically sound and desired by landowners (e.g., wildlife certification program).***
- ***DNR is increasing its efforts to reduce ecosystem and wildlife health threats posed by invasive plants (like phragmites, some thistles, etc.) and invasive vertebrates (e.g., nutria, feral hogs).***
- ***DNR is seeking recommendations from stakeholders and interested citizens on areas with high-quality native plant and animal communities for inclusion in a statewide network of Biodiversity Stewardship Areas (BSA). Working together in identifying BSAs will result in changes in management of these areas, providing greater protection.***

- *Through the Land Use Policy Committee of the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) we will continue to work through timber and timber contract issues, inviting all perspectives to the table. This began at the August NRC meeting.*

- *We are currently working on simplifying and revamping regulations that govern fishing for trout and salmon in inland waters of the state. Part of that effort will be to make some categories more flexible in setting regulations for the various trout and salmon species.*



- *We continue to work with other agencies and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to ensure the re-licensing process for hydropower facilities throughout Michigan include appropriate protection for the state's aquatic resources and, when necessary, mitigation for aquatic resources that are degraded by hydropower. We also continue to monitor compliance with licenses that have been approved by FERC, and request corrective actions when provisions of licenses are violated.*

- *DNR looks for every opportunity to remove dams, or provide fish passage when removal is not warranted. In addition, much work is ongoing to mitigate the effects of hydropower facilities, especially as those effects relate to water temperature. Significant progress has been made in this area and benefits of cooling streams on the health of trout populations are beginning to take hold.*

- *We continue to work with other agencies and the legislature to improve the assessment tool that helps determine when negative effects of water withdrawal on the state's aquatic resources will occur, based on the historic legislation that was recently passed. This tool will be very useful in determining whether to approve future permit applications for water withdrawal projects, depending upon the effects of the proposed withdrawal on the state's aquatic resources.*

- *DNR continues to look at the possibility of rearing and stocking lake herring into Lake Huron. We have completed a three-year feasibility study and, based on the results of that study, we will determine if the program can move forward on a larger scale.*

- *We have an ongoing statewide angler survey program through which we survey anglers fishing on the Great Lakes as well as those fishing on inland lakes and streams. The survey program is vastly improved over what was accomplished in 1972. We do recognize that with 36,000 miles of streams, 11,000 lakes, and shoreline on four of the Great Lakes, we certainly cannot cover all waters in the state. Budget permitting, however, we will continue the program at its current level.*



- *DNR continues to review opportunities to gather volunteer data, especially as those data relate to creel information. We do have several volunteer programs currently underway in certain highly specialized and targeted fisheries. We are also working with*

*Michigan State University to determine if there are other techniques via volunteer programs, internet-based surveys, etc. that might be successful in obtaining the data and information we need to manage the state's aquatic resources.*

## Conservation Law (22%)

- 55% of the conservation law issue statements involves many individual specific changes to specific outdoor recreation regulations including hunting, trapping and fishing regulations, boating regulations and several other state laws enforced by the Department.
- 15% deals with enforcement of invasive species laws as a method to prevent spread of these species. The highest interest was in the area of aquatic invasives. Invasive species was recognized as an issue both here and in the land and aquatic management sections.
- 12% issue statements identifies natural areas/natural rivers. This group appears to value the unique designations of these sites and looks for greater emphasis to protect those values.
- 10% relates to the number of officers in the fields. The implication is that a significant number of this public would like to see an increase in the number of conservation officers. A number of other issues related to the amount of enforcement effort on several different areas including trespass, baiting, and wetlands law.
- 8% identifies ORV, ATV, marine and snowmobile enforcement issues as a point of contention.

## DNR Reflection and Response



- ***DNR is diligent in protecting our waterways from invasive species. This can be done not only through the enforcement of existing regulations but through user education. DNR conservation officers have extensive contact with users at boat launch sites and on the water as individuals fish or enjoy water recreation activities. Educating users and gaining voluntary compliance will often have a positive and long-lasting impact. This same concept applies to land based invasive species as well.***
- ***Education is an important component in understanding the regulations of our natural areas. DNR will continue to enhance our stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of those areas and the regulations that protect them.***
- ***DNR has streamlined the conservation officer recruiting and hiring processes so that when vacancies occur and budgets allow, we can fill those vacancies more efficiently and more frequently. We have moved to a system that creates a hiring pool of acceptable candidates who can be hired as the positions open, within budget constraints.***
- ***DNR is working more closely with ORV, ATV, marine and snowmobile groups as we move forward to relay accurate and current information, and to hear their concerns so we can move forward in a more concerted way with our user groups. DNR's Law Enforcement Division recently filled a new ORV/Snowmobile Safety Coordinator position to assist in this effort.***
- ***DNR is working with other agencies and the federal government to have legislation passed that closes the door on invasive species entering the Great Lakes through ballast on ships.***
- ***Since the emergence of Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia virus (VHSv) in the Great Lakes, DNR passed Fisheries Order 245 that sets very specific, and we believe tough, restrictions on the use of bait and roe. A significant portion of FO-245 and the restrictions contained therein are also hopefully helping educate anglers to modify how they use and dispose of bait, etc. Without their help, we cannot prevent the spread of VHS and other invasive species. Thankfully to date, we have only observed VHSv in one inland lake in Michigan. We believe this is in large part due to the significant help we are receiving from anglers around the state in not moving bait and roe between bodies of water.***

## **Information and Education (21%)**

- 36% of the information and education issue statements are concerned with better/more information regarding resource management rules, greater explanation of resource management decisions, and agency administrative decisions. This transparency in decision-making came up several times in the town hall meetings.
- 24% involves developing volunteer recruitment and training opportunities at various age levels, how to modify and improve user behavior, increasing DNR use of electronic media, and a variety of information needs pertaining to specific, individual issues.
- 23% identifies a need to make a greater effort in environmental education/natural resource education programming. Much of the concern relates to the future protection of the resource and developing good decision-makers in the future.
- 17% underscores the need to improve the Department's Web site.

## **DNR Reflection and Response**

- ***DNR will redesign its web site to engage our users and visitors to the site more effectively.***
- ***DNR will institute a "how we are doing" feedback mechanism on our Web site.***
- ***DNR will establish a DNR-wide e-newsletter to publicize the DNR's programs and efforts.***
- ***DNR is exploring a revision of the hunting and fishing guides so they are shorter, more logically organized, and easier to understand.***
- ***DNR is working on putting all our trails on the DNR Web site.***
- ***DNR works with several stakeholder groups in Salmon in the Classroom program and has improved the curriculum and increased participation by schools statewide.***
- ***DNR is developing a "sturgeon loaner" program for schools and outdoor outlets.***
- ***DNR continues to improve and upgrade its interpretive programs and displays at our six state fish hatcheries and statewide visitor centers.***
- ***DNR recently reinvigorated a teacher education program, the DNR Natural Resources Academy, as a tool for teachers to receive hands-on training from DNR staff and other partner outdoor experts. The training is designed for use in and outside of their classrooms to instill conservation stewardship in young people.***
- ***DNR continues to maintain strong relationships with stakeholders and partners through ad hoc committees and work groups related to our natural resources; e.g., the Upper Peninsula Citizen Advisory Councils, Great Lakes Citizens' Fisheries Advisory Committees, bear management and wolf roundtables, Michigan natural resource educators.***
- ***DNR recently institutionalized Project WILD (formerly housed at Michigan State University), a K-12 curriculum to train teachers and arm them with lesson plans to get kids outside. DNR facilitates Project WILD workshops.***



- *DNR's Operation Service Centers and other DNR offices are the key points of contact for greeting the public. We provide training and information to keep them updated on Department issues, rules, etc. We will advance our training to provide further background and detailed information so it can be explained easily to our stakeholders.*
- *The DNR continues to post monthly budget reports on its Web site.*

The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value.

~Theodore Roosevelt

We encourage all our stakeholders and partners in conservation to stay involved with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and other individuals, agencies and organizations that share a common passion for our state's amazing natural resources. Listening to our publics is an integral part of how the DNR does business, and we look forward to continuing to work together to ensure that family outdoor traditions are handed down to future generations. Passing on a natural heritage—enriched and enlivened—is a vision we share and a commitment we will keep.



Rebecca A. Humphries, Director  
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Great Lakes, Great Times, Great Outdoors

