

**David Dempsey Remarks**  
**Heart of the Lakes Member Summit**  
**November 9, 2005**

Thank you for inviting me here today. Thank you to Steve Arwood for his leadership in pulling together a group to represent the common interests of Michigan's land trusts. And thanks especially to all of you in the audience for the work you are doing to protect, preserve, and manage the best of Michigan's ecosystems and landscapes – *and* the work you are doing to educate Michigan citizens and visitors on the values of land and our urgent need for a sense of place.

I noticed when reviewing the agenda for today's event that I'm listed as a "noted author and environmental advocate." A couple of thoughts crackled in my head:

- 1) "Noted" sounds a little like "notorious." After 22 years around the Capitol working on environmental issues, my reputation has definitely preceded me in some legislative offices.
- 2) To the extent that "noted" is a compliment, I have learned that the esteem in which I'm held increases in direct proportion to the distance I am from Lansing. Now that I live in Saint Paul, Minnesota, I am well loved in Michigan.

3) In case I'm tempted to let descriptions like "noted author" go to my head, I have plenty of antidotes. For example, there's the time I had a signing at Border's Books in Novi for my first tome, *Ruin and Recovery*. After sitting idle at a table near the entrance for nearly two hours, I finally managed to attract an interested member of the public. He looked at the sign advertising my book by its title, edged away, came back, and finally said, "Is this a book about alcoholism?"

Actually, he may have been closer to the mark than he realized, if we're talking about binge-and-bust consumption of our natural resources.

And I've talked a lot about that – mostly in *Ruin and Recovery*, but also in *On the Brink*. Michigan is not unique among the Great Lakes states, or among nations, in initially pursuing a policy of consuming seemingly inexhaustible resources, only to learn through tragedy and catastrophe that almost all resources are exhaustible. And conservation, in its broadest sense, is the only responsible way for a people to manage their natural resources.

By the way, I use the word "conservation" advisedly. I often preface lectures on college campuses and some community talks with a game of free association. After the audience is assembled, I chalk the word

“environmentalist” on the board and ask volunteers to offer the first word that comes to mind. Here’s what I typically get:

Tree-hugger.

Extremist.

Cares more about animals than people.

PETA.

Greenpeace.

Radical.

Save the Whales.

A lot of the audiences whom I ask to play free association games are groups of college students – many of them enrolled in environmental studies programs. And the image of environmentalists and environmentalism that lurks in their unconscious is not the most flattering. I would have to venture a guess that if young people pursuing degrees in environmental studies carry these thoughts and images around, the population as a whole harbors notions that I don’t even want to think about.

So that’s why I’m going to call myself a “conservationist” from now on, and I don’t think I need to urge all of you to do the same. In fact, what you are doing fits the classic definition of conservation – “a careful

preservation and protection of something; *especially* : planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect.”

I think part of why Steve asked me to speak here today to use my amateur historian’s lens on natural resource policy and management in Michigan. I think he wanted me to look at what you’re doing and where we’re going in the human equivalent of geologic time, and how it intersects with that much more frenzied chronology known as political time. Maybe by doing this together we can come to some conclusions today and tomorrow about the future role of Heart of the Lakes, and of the role land conservancies in Michigan can play generally.

Looking at things from the environmental historian’s perspective, I can’t help but think that all of us in this room are living through a time whose significance will only become known in the next generation, or perhaps the one after that. It’s always difficult, of course, to gain historical perspective on the present, but when you look at what Michigan is coping with today, it’s also difficult to resist the idea that we are being tested in an historic way.

For example, we are seeing an historic disinvestment in our public lands. I shudder to think where we would stand today if Michigan voters had not constitutionally protected the Natural Resources Trust Fund in 1984 –

and several times since. Undoubtedly that money would be paying off interest on an old environmental bond, or perhaps plugging another hole in the general fund budget, but delivering no conservation benefit to the public.

But even with a Trust Fund that is still strong and viable – at least until the Supreme Court rules on the Comben case – our public lands are being pauperized. Consider:

- Since 2002, the DNR has suffered a 45% loss of general fund dollars.
- The entire DNR receives only about \$3 in general fund support for each citizen of the state.
- The state park system is operating almost exclusively on entrance fee revenues.
- Our state forest system is being squeezed dry, with closures of dozens of campsites and increasing pressure to mark trees for timber harvest rather than manage forests for a variety of needs.
- The DEQ's general fund budget has fallen from \$101 million in fiscal year 2002 to \$31 million in fiscal 2006.
- Both the Legislature and the DNR have actively considered selling off blocks of public land to meet short-term needs.

It's the incredible shrinking conservation budget. Yes, fees and gimmicks have replaced some of the lost money, but by no means all. And something more than money is lost when we cut general fund support for protection of public lands, the water we recreate in, and the air we breathe. The public loses some of its stake, and some of its voice, in one of the most fundamental of government services.

The budget is one big challenge I hope you will address. Another is the growing gap between what the people of this state think about public lands and what their elected officials in Lansing think.

Many Lansing elected officials think of public lands as "government lands." Most citizens think of public lands as "our lands."

Many elected officials think of public lands – including our 3.9 million acres of state forest and tens of thousands of acres of state parks – as unproductive land. Most citizens think of public lands as places that produce relaxation, release, and unforgettable memories.

Many elected officials think of public lands as a drag on local government tax revenues. Informed citizens know these lands generate tax revenues through tourism and recreation while consuming relatively little in the way of services from local governments.

Many elected officials think of public lands as “surplus” lands that should be disposed of. Most citizens think of them as a precious resource that will only grow more valuable as population – and the cost of traveling to distant places – expand.

I’m not saying that hostility to public lands is something new. One of the first pieces of “conservation” legislation that I advocated against was a proposal in 1983 to require the DNR to sell off a chunk of its Upper Peninsula lands in small lots every year for five years. Thank goodness that bill didn’t pass.

Reaching even farther back, the pioneers of reforestation in Michigan were initially unwelcome in the cutover, burned lands they sought to renew. In July 1902 the Michigan Forestry Commission and guests traveled to Roscommon to tour the state’s brand-new 35,000-acre forest reserves. “Flags were at half-mast on the flagpoles in the village,” reported a local newspaper, “and the reception they received from the people, although civil and without any hostile demonstration, was speakingly that their presence was not wanted. They were told in unmistakable terms that their forestry scheme cannot and will not be tolerated in the county...I shall not dwell upon the absurd claim which the state put forth on these lands; this will be left to the courts to decide. The people of Roscommon are unanimously

against forestry being established in the county and will never allow it. The future will decide. Our motto is ‘Down with forestry.’”

Thank God that attitude didn’t prevail, either.

I liken the work all of you here today are doing in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to the work that the Michigan reforestation and conservation movement did in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. You are working not just for the Michigan of tomorrow, or of 2010, but the Michigan of 2100. In 1900, before the legislature had even set aside a single acre of forest reserve, a pioneer of Michigan conservation named Charles Garfield, who chaired the forestry commission, printed a pamphlet with this remarkable vision:

“...great areas of trees all up and down this beautiful state, protecting head waters of our rivers, making use of our unfertile sands, giving variety and beauty to our gentle hills and refreshing the weary, whether human or otherwise, with nature’s quiet cathedrals. Some time it may be, our state shall be so ruled by men of vision and men of taste – sometime, it may be fondly hoped, our legislature shall have the leisure from the petty politics and the strident voice of the lobbyist and the crank to turn its attention to the State of Michigan – to renew its waste places with forest life – to make this peninsula, which is bound to shelter 10,000,000 of people, as beautiful as God intended it to be.”

Thanks to Garfield and men and women like him – from James Oliver Curwood to Genevieve Gillette to P. J. Hoffmaster to Joan Wolfe to Tom Washington – this vision of a magnificent, productive, and scenic public estate owned by all of us has come true.

And since I've mentioned P. J. Hoffmaster, let me tell you one of the most stirring stories of conservation I encountered in researching Michigan's conservation history. It has to do with the fight to save the Porcupine Mountains for the public.

In 1925, Hoffmaster had proposed a state park in the Porcupines at least 22,000 acres in size. But the legislature never appropriated the money. But by the 1940s, thanks to the diligent work of an Ironwood merchant named Raymond Dick, local, state and national conservation leaders were lending their voices to the cause of the Porcupines.

The legendary Aldo Leopold wrote in the May, 1942 issue of *Outdoor America* that the remaining unlogged land in the Porcupines was “a symbol. It portrays a chapter in national history which we should not be allowed to forget. When we abolish the last sample of the Great Uncut, we are, in a sense, burning books...To preserve a remnant of decent forest for public education is surely a proper function of government, regardless of one's view on the moot question of large-scale timber production.” Hoffmaster

and Raymond Dick persuaded Governor Harry Kelly to ask for \$1 million in 1944 to buy the land “as a timber museum” and hold the land in trust for future generations.

That was the easy part. World War II was coming to a climax and the national defense need for timber was also peaking. A private lumber company that owned much of the land being purchased for the state park balked at the project and enlisted the War Production Board in Washington, D.C. to support its bid to a big chunk of this last great intact virgin hardwood forest.

Hoffmaster refused to back down. The company wanted to skin lands along the Presque Isle River, which the department of conservation said were among the most scenic in the park, and timber along the shoreline between the river mouth and the mountains. The company had even laid track for a railroad across the Presque Isle River to cut through three-quarters of a mile of the park to get into land it owned outside the boundaries.

Finally, with all other options exhausted, in the spring of 1945 Hoffmaster went to the Conservation Commission and asked it to authorize the condemnation of the private lands for a park. Agreeing to his request, Commission Chairman Harry H. Whiteley said if the railroad was

built, “the Presque Isle River watershed would become a denuded waste and its beauty destroyed forever.” With the loggers literally at the boundaries of the proposed park, the state stopped its destruction cold.

The victory was an enormous one, celebrated nationally. “...[I]t is no exaggeration to say it is being done in the nick of time,” wrote Dorothea Kahn of the *Christian Science Monitor*. “The axes of lumbermen could be heard at the borders of the forest.” *National Parks Magazine* editorialized, “It is little short of a miracle to have succeeded in this endeavor in the midst of a war. By so doing, Michigan has set an example to the whole nation...Michigan conservationists, our hats are off to you!”

What a story – of vision, courage, and faith in a trying time. It’s a story that reminds me of the kind of Michigan conservation I remember hearing about when I entered the scene. The kind of gutsy leadership I think we could use more of today in Michigan conservation. And that’s where you come in.

As leaders of Michigan’s land conservancy movement, you have one great advantage your predecessors of the last 100 years did not have. You enjoy the broad support of Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, free market advocates and big-government worshipers, rural and urban communities, old and young, wealthy and low-income.

Yes, you have critics, but by and large the work you do is the most popular work any conservationists are doing in this state.

You are doing your work with the assistance of the latest in science.

You are protecting for all time places we associate with happy times with family and friends, or even alone in the majesty of the natural world.

You are building a natural museum, a mosaic that represents the best of wild Michigan as it was shaped by the Creator.

You are doing something tangible – something all of us can see. You are bringing about results, not rhetoric.

So you have that rare opportunity, which we have really not seen in Lansing in more than 20 years, to work across and span partisan divides and find – literally – the common ground that defines us as Michigianians.

But I believe you can only do it if you have the boldness and the ambition and the public spirit to go beyond the successes of your first year as members of the Heart of the Lakes Center.

Assembled in Heart of the Lakes, and in this room, are representatives of the overwhelming majority of the land conservation work being done in this state. Do you realize how powerful a force that is? Not just on the ground in thousands of places around the state – but in that one place we call the State Capitol.

You have that precious gold called political capital. I urge you to use it. Wisely.

That means not waiting for the next absurd Lansing proposal to sell state parks, or school forests, or freeze public land purchases, or prevent public access to public resources.

It means having a vision of the Michigan you want in the year 2100.

It means deciding what steps we need to take to fulfill that vision.

It means taking the power in this room and using it to build a strong, affirmative agenda of ecosystem conservation and public lands protection.

It means taking the power in this room to define values and goals, communicate them to the public, and build support.

It means taking the power in this room and articulating not just the aesthetic and scientific values of conserving native landscapes, ecological communities, hunting and fishing access, hiking trails, and wildlife viewing opportunities – it means also articulating the *economic* values to both the public and private treasuries.

It means taking the power in this room and the power of Michigan's natural wonders to persuade public officials to do the right thing by the future.

It means a great burden, and an even greater opportunity, falls on you.

I know you're up to it. And I wish you well these next two days in beginning to write the most important chapter of Michigan's conservation history in the last 100 years.

Thank you for devoting your passions, talents, and intellect to this selfless cause.