



## People & Place

*Protecting the Ultimate Wilderness for All*



A partnership between the Little Traverse Conservancy, the Village of Mackinaw City and Emmet County didn't just result in a spectacular 600-acre county park in northern Michigan with two miles of frontage along the Straights of Mackinac. It opened a portal for explorers of all ages and from all parts of the world to experience the wonders and starry expanse of the night sky in one of the country's first International Dark Sky Parks—the Headlands.



## People & Place

### Land Conservancies as Community Builders

Place matters as Michigan rethinks its path to restoring prosperity in the 21st century. The way we value place depends very much on the diversity and beauty of the natural resources unique to Michigan. Every community has a story. The time has come for Michigan to recreate our state narrative to reflect the trust, optimism, and inspiration that is evident in land conservancies' work as innovators and advocates.

With initial support from the Consumers Energy Foundation, Heart of the Lakes launched an initiative to document how land conservancies and their partners are important to local economic development and thriving communities. Land protection projects from around the state are selected as case studies to showcase land conservancies in their role as community builders.

Community building projects demonstrate the relevance of conservation to successful Michigan communities – helping to create attractive places to live, work, and play. Land conservancies that engage in this work find themselves more fully integrated in their community and able to deepen their connections and relationships. Through community building projects, conservation is strengthened as a shared value.

This approach becomes even more important in a rapidly changing world where protection of land simply for the sake of conservation may no longer resonate as strongly as it has in the past. Our everyday links to the land continually diminish. Community building projects are a way of tackling that problem at both ends. Meeting people where they are, instead of trying to convince them of some intrinsic values they may not share or understand, will create new opportunities to promote the importance of nature alongside economic development.

As nonprofit organizations dedicated to the permanent protection of land for the public good, Michigan's conservancies help create vibrant places through both land protection, as well as community engagement activities in support of local goals and objectives.

Heart of the Lakes is pleased to highlight a few exceptional projects with this case study and others, while recognizing the great work of the conservancies behind them. These projects exemplify a commitment to building communities and the value of people and place. Thank you to the Consumers Energy Foundation for getting us started.

## Little Traverse Conservancy

Since 1972, the Little Traverse Conservancy has evolved to become one of the most established and effective regional land trusts in the country. The Conservancy is a broad coalition of individuals, families and businesses who agree that the acquisition and protection of natural land is important to retain the quality of life which makes northern Michigan so attractive. The Conservancy's mission is to protect the natural diversity and beauty of northern Michigan by preserving significant land and scenic areas, and fostering appreciation and understanding of the environment in its service area of Chippewa, Mackinac, Emmet, Cheboygan, and Charlevoix Counties.

The Little Traverse Conservancy seeks to adorn its communities, as they grow, with beautiful open spaces. Just as an architect uses plantings and gardens to add to the aesthetic beauty of a building, they work to provide scenic views, open spaces, and wildlife habitat to enhance the communities where they work. For more information, visit [www.landtrust.org](http://www.landtrust.org).

## The Land

Acquiring and protecting the land that would ultimately become Emmet County's Headlands Park was no small feat. In a complex series of transactions, assisted by the Little Traverse Conservancy, the Village of Mackinac City purchased the property from the McCormick Foundation of Chicago with grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the HCS Foundation. The McCormick Foundation then contributed over \$1.3 million in property value to complete the \$5 million project. The Village gave Little Traverse Conservancy a conservation easement to ensure the conservation values of the property would be permanently protected. The Village then determined that Emmet County would be a more suitable owner and with all parties in agreement, the Headlands County Park was established in 1996.

A recreational asset to the region because of its pristine natural features, development at the Headlands has been limited since the park was first established. Consequently, the absence of bright lights in the park and surrounding area created an important naturally dark wilderness for many species of birds and animals.





## The Sky

A vision stemming from the desire to protect this singular natural resource ultimately created something much, much more than 600 acres of parkland and Lake Michigan shore. Several community members, including champions Gary Williams and Mary Stewart Adams, came together with Emmet County Parks and Recreation staff with the idea of seeking International Dark Sky Park designation. With full backing from the Board of Commissioners, the idea was launched—with results as brilliant as the Headlands sky at night.

Tom Bailey, Executive Director of the Little Traverse Conservancy, inspired others to think about the importance of night sky protection in an article he wrote in 2011:

*It's all there, free for the viewing: constellations, vast spaces, beautiful lights, twinkling colors and endless wonder. The steadiness of the stars in their places, the slow wandering of the planets through the heavens. The occasional visits of comets and the breathtaking spectacle of shooting stars. Moonrise and moonset, the ethereal dance of the Northern Lights, and the mystical glow of things like noctiluminescent clouds. Galaxies, nebulae, and other worlds. . .*

*. . . These same stars have been dreamed of, sung about, worshiped, sought after and wished upon throughout the entire existence of humankind. To protect the night sky is to have not only a vast wilderness area but also a museum of science, mythology and human culture before us every cloudless night.*

## International Dark Sky Park and Community

According to the certifying association, an International Dark Sky Park is a location of exceptional nighttime beauty, dark skies education, and preservation of the nighttime environment. Since the Headlands received Dark Sky Park designation in 2011, only the sixth in the nation and ninth in the world to do so at that time, Emmet County has welcomed thousands of visitors for a glimpse of something that is increasingly harder to find—unobstructed views of the night sky. Eight hundred guests came to view the once-in-a-lifetime Transit of Venus in June of 2012. On clear nights, dozens of people can be found along the shoreline taking in the view, gazing through telescopes or photographing celestial wonders. Due to the success of designation, the State of Michigan protected an additional 23,000 acres of neighboring state land as night sky protected area. Other local communities and businesses are refitting lighting to protect the sky at night.

Even Headlands park staff did not expect the growing economic impact of having a designated Dark Sky Park. Nearby businesses in Mackinac City report an increase in foot traffic and overnight hotel stays, including extended stays, related to the presence and marketing of the park. Local merchants sell sky-related items, and one local ferry service created Dark Sky Cruises.

The Headlands offers monthly programs led by a Dark Sky Park program director. A new walking and driving trail, the Dark Sky Discovery Trail, interprets the stories of the dark sky for each planet, through various stations, mediums and cultural docents. Future plans include an earth-roofed facility for programs with an observatory attached, as well as a welcome center with planetarium and an education/conference center. Beyond those facilities, the Headlands is managed as a natural area—a dark wilderness—and most of its acreage and water frontage will be left in its natural state for study and recreation.

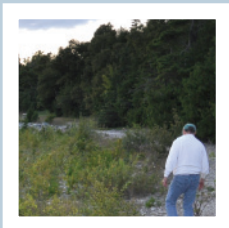
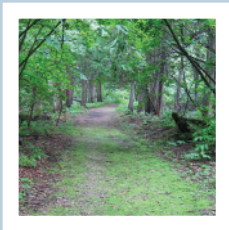
As now just one of thirteen International Dark Sky Parks in the United States and 18 in the world, the Headlands is an extraordinary regional and state natural asset. Its celestial focus and novel recreational opportunities are boosting local economies while offering something very special to nighttime explorers.

<http://www.emmetcounty.org/darkskypark/>

*. . . it is possible to head outside, look up, and experience the primal wonder of the vastness of the heavens. No telescope required. No electrical outlet or device. Just one's self, perhaps a companion or family, and the beauty and wonder of the Ultimate Wilderness, the night sky above us."*

– Tom Bailey





## Heart of the Lakes

Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy was founded by Michigan's land conservancies to unite their individual efforts around a common goal – protecting Michigan's land. Heart of the Lakes supports land conservation by supporting conservation policy and practice, advocating sound public policies, and providing tools to strengthen conservancy effectiveness.

With Heart of the Lakes' support, our members are able to conserve Michigan's forests, farmland, coastline and other extraordinary places critical to Michigan's social, economic, and environmental well-being.



## Heart of the Lakes

Center for Land Conservation Policy

[www.heartofthelakes.org](http://www.heartofthelakes.org)