

The Great Lakes Unbridged Island Communities Project

*Supporting healthy, sustainable island communities
through inter-island communication and coordination*



About Great Lakes Islands

Over 32,000 islands exist in the Great Lakes, representing the largest collection of freshwater islands in the world. The far majority are small and uninhabited, offering valuable habitat for fish and wildlife species and unique plant communities.

A small subset (16) of these islands host year-round communities and lack a permanent bridge to the mainland. They are special places, rich in history and distinct in character, shaped greatly by their isolation.

Though each has a unique character and identity, island communities have much in common with other islands, often more so than to the adjacent mainland. Some islands have developed unique solutions to the common challenges of “island living.” Islanders stand to learn greatly from other islanders, if given the opportunity.



Unbridged islands with year-round populations of 50 or more

The Project

In fall of 2015, we began a one-year pilot project in consultation with the Island Institute in Maine. Working on Beaver Island, located in northern Lake Michigan, the project included multiple community discussions and was highlighted by two “knowledge exchange trips,” where representatives from Beaver Island and several Maine islands traveled to each other’s communities to meet with island leaders and observe first-hand how each location faces its challenges and identifies opportunities.

The participants found the experience rewarding. Through the exchanges, they observed novel approaches to specific issues and have begun to explore applications in their home communities. They concluded that while island communities may feel isolated from the mainland, they should not be isolated from one another.

In Maine, the Island Institute facilitates the Maine Island Coalition, where representatives from the 15 year-round island communities come together multiple times per year to exchange ideas. The Beaver Islanders saw great potential in exploring an inter-island coordination model here in the Great Lakes.

Questions For Collaboration

Do island communities in the Great Lakes have any challenges in common? Would they benefit from regular dialogue? If so, what would this look like?

Possible Examples:

K-12 Education	Cultural Resources	Energy
Broadband Access	Health Care/EMS	Working Waterfronts
Cell Phone Coverage	Marketing/Tourism	Island Infrastructure
Natural Resources	Leadership Capacity	Small Business Support
Historical Resources	Prof. Development	Public Safety
	Waste Management	Social Activities

How can individual islands initiate and nurture growth opportunities while not sacrificing the very character that defines them?

Existing institutions or organizations are available to provide coordinative, backbone support. What types of core roles or functions would be needed?

Challenges

Permanently inhabited, unbridged islands face a variety of unique, inter-related social, economic and environmental challenges which may include:

- Changing demographics, including shrinking and aging populations.
- Expanding or diversifying economies and creating jobs, while retaining island culture and character.
- Providing quality K-12 education to island children.
- Conserving natural and cultural resources and protecting environmental quality across a range of public and private ownerships.
- Understanding and respecting Native American history, culture and traditions.
- Ensuring adequate health care and emergency services, especially for the elderly population.
- Creating diverse housing options for year-round, seasonal, and workforce residents.
- Gaining the understanding and consistent assistance of mainland governments and other decision-makers who often focus on larger, more visible populations.

Many mainland communities face similar struggles to island communities; however, on islands the risks and implications of failing to meet these challenges are greater.

Opportunities

- Distance learning technology for schools and continuing (adult) education.
- Public interest in eco-tourism, including water trails, birding, and other outdoor pursuits.
- Fascinating cultural histories and historic landmarks.
- Favorable shift in employers willingness to accomodate remote employment/ telecommuting.
- Recent influxes of federal funding and interest in Great Lakes natural resource protection and restoration.

By the Numbers

5 Great Lakes

**10 +
Island
Schools**

**3 States
1 Province**

0 Great Lakes Island Conferences
For energy, broadband, or teachers...

VS

3 Yearly Maine Island Conferences

16

**Year-Round
Unbridged Island
Communities of 50+**

**20 +
Ferries**

**LIMITLESS
OPPORTUNITY**

~8189

**Total
Year-Round
Population**

.4 Square Miles: Smallest Populated Island
134 Square Miles: Largest Populated Island



Vision

We envision a durable, coordinated network of connected Great Lakes island communities providing the following outcomes:

- **Exposure:** Islanders learn of new ideas and tangible approaches to addressing the diverse complexities of island living.
- **Implementation:** Concepts and projects to benefit an island community may be carried out on individual islands, at their own discretion.
- **Cooperative Relationships:** A unique opportunity for positive cross-border interactions between distant places in three U.S. States and one Canadian province.
- **Awareness:** Knowledge of island communities are advanced in governments, institutions, organizations and the media.
- **Influence:** Great Lakes islands have an opportunity for a more amplified and consistent, if not always unified, voice to mainland decision-makers.

Next steps

The project team believes there is tremendous potential benefit from the creation of a “Great Lakes Islands Coalition.” The first step is to engage additional island communities in the Great Lakes. We need help to better understand what Great Lakes islands need. Ultimately, for such a network to be successful, we believe it must be developed *by* island communities, not *for* them.



Project Team:

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July 2016

Cover Photo: St. James, Beaver Island. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Additional Photos: Michigan DEQ Office of the Great Lakes
Design and Editing by the Michigan DEQ Office of the Great Lakes

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