**Showcasing the DNR: Eichinger draws on deep outdoor tradition in new role as DNR director**

*Michigan DNR’s 21st director youngest to hold the post*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

As a boy, Dan Eichinger could be found with a spinning rod in hand, haunting the tree-lined banks of the Middle Branch River, trying to avoid the stream’s suckers in favor of a tug on his line from a big brown trout.

Like lots of good Michigan folks, he loves the woods and water – they’re in his blood.

Eichinger, 38, grew up hunting deer in that same part of Osceola County near Marion, a mid-Michigan village of about 850 people, situated along Highway 66 – about 10 miles north of where the Middle Branch flows into the Muskegon River.

Born in Cadillac, raised in Holland, Eichinger’s paternal lineage is steeped in natural resources conservation advocacy and appreciation.

“My grandfather was Ryan Bontekoe. He was a charter member of the Pigeon River Advisory Council and served on that group until he passed away in 1994,” Eichinger said. “So, he was involved from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s.”

Bontekoe was the president of Michigan United Conservation Clubs in 1977. Not quite a decade later, that same post was held by Eichinger’s father, John.

“Later in his career, my dad was the executive director of Safari Club International and he was president/CEO of the Ruffed Grouse Society until his retirement last June,” Eichinger said.

Since those boyhood days in Osceola County, where he got hooked on fishing and hunting, Eichinger has followed the boot prints of his father and grandfather down a path to devoted service and support of numerous conservation and natural resources endeavors.

He was schooled at Michigan State and Central Michigan Universities, earning a bachelor’s degree in political theory and constitutional democracy and master’s degrees in fisheries and wildlife and public administration.

Eichinger worked as membership director for MUCC, after a stint there as an intern during college. From 2004 to 2007, he was a conservation and natural resources policy advisor to Lt. Gov. John Cherry during the Jennifer Granholm administration.

After that, he was hired by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

“From 2007 to 2009, I served as legislative liaison, working under then-Director Becky Humphries,” he said.

His work then included aiding passage of legislation creating Michigan’s Recreation Passport to help fund state parks. The Passport replaced vehicle windshield stickers for park entry.

“I then joined the Wildlife Division and worked with Russ Mason as assistant to the chief,” Eichinger said.

He would help establish the DNR Wildlife Division’s first Policy and Regulations Unit, later serving as its supervisor.

In 2012, Eichinger left the DNR for an administrator’s job at Central Michigan University, which would bring him closer to his home and family.

Two years later, he returned to MUCC to become executive director – continuing his family’s tradition of holding top-level positions with the country’s most effective state-based conservation organization.

After the November 2018 election, Eichinger said speculation began about who might serve in various positions in the new administration of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

Eichinger was urged by several people to put his name forward, given his experience and situational awareness of state government. Weeks later, he said he was fortunate to find himself on a short list of finalists for the DNR director’s position.

He remembers getting the call and the nod as a “great Christmas present.”

“I was still in my PJs on a Sunday morning when I found out,” Eichinger said. “It was a little before Christmas when I was talking to the governor.”

His first day on the job was Jan. 2. Eichinger is the DNR’s 21st director, standing on the shoulders of giants with names like Hoffmaster and MacMullan.

“It’s a huge responsibility, only outweighed by the honor of doing the work,” Eichinger said. “This isn’t just work that I do, this is how I live my life.”

Eichinger’s home is in western Isabella County, where he lives with his wife and the couple’s 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. There, they hunt ruffed grouse and American woodcock. They also enjoy camping and fishing for bluegill.

A waterfowl shooter, he is also a birder. He said he has studied ornithology and has always been interested in bird biology.

“I am not a life-lister, but usually travel with my Audubon guide so that we can identify the different birds we find on our adventures,” he said.

Eichinger sent a message to DNR employees soon after his appointment.

“Over the coming weeks, I look forward to reconnecting with many of you, meeting those I don’t know and learning about how we can advance new priorities, celebrate and maximize our current success, and continually strive toward personal and professional growth and development,” he wrote. “As employees of the DNR, we are fortunate to wake up every day to work on things that matter to so many people.”

Looking ahead, Eichinger said he has a few top-drawer DNR priorities, including continuing to battle fish and wildlife diseases – with the scourge of chronic wasting disease at the spearpoint of those efforts.

Eichinger will insist Michigan remain a leader in preventing exotic bighead and silver carp from entering the Great Lakes, while coordinating state and federal action to curb greater grass carp proliferation in Lake Erie.

He also plans to continue fighting an entire suite of forest resource pests and diseases, which can negatively affect everything from commerce and ecology to recreation and employment.

Eichinger said the DNR’s year-long park centennial celebration in 2019 reminds us of the century-old heritage of state park development across Michigan. The downside of that benchmark is a reminder that Michigan has a 100-year-old park system with a bulging backlog of unfunded park maintenance and improvement projects.

“I’m concerned that at some point that’s going to crush the park system,” he said.

With a declining user base of hunting and fishing license buyers Eichinger said the DNR needs to challenge itself to find solutions to meeting funding needs heading into the future.

In the long term, he said the department needs to continue its work to recruit, retain and reactivate declining numbers of hunters and anglers, reframing the conversation about those activities in rural communities, while remaining relevant.

“In the short-term, we’ve got to change those trend lines now,” Eichinger said.

To do that, he wants to focus on enhanced efforts to make Michigan more of a destination state. Eichinger pointed to a recently released study commissioned by MUCC that showed the statewide economic impacts from hunting and fishing license purchases support 171,000 jobs and generate $11.2 billion annually.

Eichinger suggested making those data available to a wider nationwide audience would increase interest in greater development of Michigan’s recreation economy prospects.

During his first month on the job, Eichinger has been working to reacquaint himself with the DNR, listening to constituents and partner groups, while developing his priorities for the agency moving forward.

“The biggest impression so far is the quality of people we have working here,” he said.

Eichinger said DNR personnel see their jobs as “mission-based work” they believe in because, like him, they are invested in natural resources and recreation activities in their own daily lives.

Eichinger will be meeting DNR staffers face-to-face over the next few weeks through a series of all-employee staff meetings being held from Bellaire to Sault Ste. Marie.

Meanwhile, amid the hectic pace of his new job, Eichinger still plans to find time to return to nature himself, with his family and his hunting dog.

He said Beaver Island has become one of his favorite places on the planet. He also remains rooted in destinations he enjoyed in his younger days, including the Lake Michigan shore near Holland and the Pigeon River Country of the heart of the Lower Peninsula.

The forests, lakes, streams and elk there within the Pigeon’s 104,000 acres remind him of his grandfather and make him feel very connected to his family.

From time to time, his mind drifts back to those beautiful blueberry days down around Marion where he spent those early formative years exploring the Middle Branch River in pursuit of German browns.

“I trout fish now, mostly with a fly rod,” he said. “but I still spin quite a bit, and that is how I first started fishing.”

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**/Note to editors:** Contact: John Pepin, Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. An accompanying photo is available below for download and media use. A suggested caption follows. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

[**Office**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/02/04/file_attachments/1148105/Office.jpg): Dan Eichinger, new director for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, shown in his office at Constitution Hall in Lansing.**/**