**Showcasing the DNR: Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund may have made your favorite park or trail possible**

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It was something that had never been done before, visionary in its day.

It was a groundbreaking compromise that has resulted in a $1.2 billion (and counting) investment in the conservation of Michigan’s natural resources and the development of outdoor recreation opportunities for future generations.

In the 1970s, oil and gas resources were found under the Pigeon River Country State Forest in the northeastern Lower Peninsula – resources owned by the people of Michigan.

A debate followed on whether to allow leasing of these minerals, with heated discussion on both sides. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources, governor’s office, conservation organizations, the public and many others worked together to find a solution.

And from this collaboration, the [Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79134_81684_79209_81657---%2C00.html) was born.

“The concept behind it was that you take the proceeds you get from nonrenewable resources, things that can’t be replaced – oil, gas and other minerals that are under the ground, that are owned by the people of Michigan – take the proceeds from those resources and put them in a fund that can only be used to buy additional resources like land and development projects for recreation,” said Bill Rustem in a [recent DNR video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIMwnUnEPiY&feature=emb_logo) highlighting trust fund projects.

Rustem is the current chairman of the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board and was the environmental advisor to Gov. William Milliken in 1976, when the trust fund concept originated.

“No place else in the country ever tried anything like this, and it’s proven to be extremely successful,” Rustem said.

The trust fund was established under the Kammer Recreational Land Trust Fund Act of 1976, named after state Sen. Kerry Kammer, one of the key early figures instrumental in development of the concept.

The trust fund’s original purpose was to fund purchase of land for the public’s enjoyment using revenue derived from oil, gas and mineral rights owned by the state.

In 1984, Michigan voters added the trust fund to state constitution and expanded its purpose to allow the fund’s use for development of public land, such as creating playgrounds, trails and sports fields and renovating campgrounds and park pavilions.

“Since its inception, the trust fund has steadily and significantly improved the quality of life for residents and visitors throughout the state,” said DNR Director Dan Eichinger. “These trust fund-supported projects, which leverage additional investment from local government partners, positively affect the physical, social and mental well-being of community residents.”

Today, the trust fund is entirely dependent on its investment income for grant awards and for asset growth. It’s overseen by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board, comprised of the standing director of the DNR and four members appointed by the governor, all serving four-year terms.

The board recommends trust fund grants for local and state governments who apply for funding for outdoor recreation improvement projects or land acquisitions. The DNR receives grant applications each April. Over several months, the applications are reviewed and site visits conducted, and two rounds of scoring take place.

The DNR then presents the application rankings to the board during its December public meeting. From there, the board recommends projects for funding to the Michigan Legislature.

Once the Legislature appropriates the funding, based on the board’s recommendations, the bill is sent to the governor to sign into law. This process highlights the importance of the grant funding, which has benefited all 83 counties throughout the state.

"Over $1 billion that wouldn't have otherwise been there now go into all of these communities,” said Erin McDonough, current vice chairwoman of the trust fund, in the recent DNR video. “These communities are smart. They're using this money to change their destinies as communities. It's not a single iconic project. It's the fact that you can go anywhere on the Great Lakes and have access to them thanks to the Natural Resources Trust Fund.”

Many recent projects throughout the state can be tied to trust fund grants. Some of these land acquisitions and development projects are well known; others are hidden gems. But they’re all treasures now available to the public because of the foresight of those who worked so diligently more than 40 years ago to make this happen.

“Chances are, if you are an outdoor enthusiast or lover of parks, you have spent time at multiple public places funded by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund,” said Jon Mayes, DNR recreation grants manager.

Here are just a few of those recent projects, with locations spanning from one end of Michigan to the other.

Before visiting facilities, it’s recommended to first check webpages or call ahead. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some facilities are closed or have reduced hours and days of operation.

**Iron Belle Trail**

Extending more than 2,000 miles, the [Iron Belle Trail](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79133_79206_83634---%2C00.html) is an iconic trail touching hundreds of municipalities and crossing through 48 Michigan counties from the far western tip of the Upper Peninsula to Belle Isle in Detroit. Using a compilation of existing trails and networks, along with new connections, this trail offers two distinct routes – one for hiking and the other for biking. It’s in part what makes Michigan famous for being “The Trails State.”

This extensive trail network couldn’t have happened without wide community partnerships and grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, along with a mix of funding from local partners, philanthropy, and state and federal grants.

Two recent trust fund grants for an Iron Belle Trail section near Bruce Crossing in Ontonagon County and another near Gaylord in Otsego County – totaling more than $390,000 combined – showcase the important role the trust fund has had in connecting this trail system.

A 1.3-mile hiking section of the North Country National Scenic Trail, part of the Iron Belle Trail in Ontonagon County in the western U.P., was constructed last year to connect a parking area near Bruce Crossing to the scenic and very popular O Kun de Kun Falls.

In the northern portion of the Lower Peninsula, a 12-mile biking extension of the North Central State Trail from Gaylord to the Otsego-Crawford county line, also part of the Belle Isle Trail, was completed last year. With this addition, the trail now stretches 75 miles all the way to Mackinaw City at the tip of the mitt.

The DNR, in partnership with the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, Michigan Department of Transportation, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation and private partners, is working to develop the western portion of the Detroit Riverwalk and May Creek Greenway. This is another part of the Iron Belle Trail, for walking and biking. Two grants from the trust fund – totaling $5.7 million – will be used in partnership with other funding sources for the purchase of easements for these projects, which are in various phases.

**Laughing Whitefish Falls Scenic Site**

Considered by many to be the most spectacular of Michigan’s waterfalls, [Laughing Whitefish Falls](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79133_79200_31427-54016--%2C00.html) cascades through a picturesque gorge with old-growth white pine and hemlock towering above.

It’s certainly worth the trip to Alger County in the central U.P. to decide for yourself. It’s only a moderate, half-mile hike to the falls. In 2019, a $300,000 trust fund grant financed reconstruction of the 1970’s-built boardwalks, staircase and scenic overlook for improved safety and accessibility and erosion stabilization along the trail. The site also serves as a trailhead for the Iron Belle Trail.

**Palms Book State Park**

Each year, more than 100,000 visitors ride the glass-bottomed raft over Kitch-iti-kipi, or the “Big Spring,” at [Palms Book State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=425&type=SPRK) in Schoolcraft County in the U.P. And, thanks to a $50,000 trust fund grant to replace a worn canopy over the raft, along with other needed repairs, visitors can continue to enjoy this spectacular spring indefinitely. The project is due to be completed next month, but visitors can still access the raft in the meantime. Completed project repairs include replacement of the raft’s stainless-steel bottom pan – the covering attached to the bottom of the raft that protects its flotation material from damage caused by animals.

At 100 feet across and 40 feet deep, Kitch-iti-kipi is Michigan’s largest freshwater spring, gushing 10,000 gallons of water a minute from fissures in the underlying limestone. Because of its constant 45-degree temperature, the spring only freezes over during extremely harsh winters and the raft remains available to visitors year-round (although the parking lot isn’t plowed, so plan for a short hike to the spring in winter months).

By means of this self-operated, cable-pulled observation raft, visitors are guided to vantage points overlooking fascinating underwater features like ancient tree trunks, lime-encrusted branches and fat trout, all quite visible through the crystal waters far below.

**Oden State Fish Hatchery**

The DNR manages six cold-water fish hatcheries throughout the state, geared toward hatching fish eggs and rearing fry – baby fish – and stocking some of Michigan’s public lakes, streams and ponds. Among these is the [Oden State Fish Hatchery](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79133_79207_81179---%2C00.html) in Emmet County in the northern Lower Peninsula.

In addition to rearing brown and rainbow trout, this hatchery offers an array of fishing and educational experiences such as a visitor center that sees more than 30,000 guests a year; interpretive facilities and trails; an underwater viewing chamber to see fish in native habitat; seasonal programming like kid-friendly fishing activities and more.

Many of these experiences were expanded in 2012 through a $300,000 trust fund grant. With the grant funding, a fishing pier, boardwalk and viewing platforms were built on two natural springs near the visitor center. This allowed a better opportunity for local and visiting adults and youth to get up close and personal with the numerous natural features at the hatchery.

The grant also ensured protection against erosion of the hatchery grounds. The hatchery was originally built in 1920 and underwent a total rebuild that was completed in 2002.

**Muskegon State Park Winter Sports Complex**

Located within Muskegon State Park, near Lake Michigan in Muskegon County, the [Muskegon Winter Sports Complex](https://www.msports.org/) is a multi-faceted winter playground offering a luge run (and an all-season luge run), lighted cross-country ski trails, a skating rink and a skating trail. The complex, managed by the nonprofit Muskegon Sports Council in partnership with the DNR, boasts one of only four winter luge tracks in the nation and the world’s only universally accessible all-season luge run.

Understanding the need to include more all-season recreation and improve accessibility, the Muskegon Sports Council updated its master plan to include new components. With a $300,000 trust fund grant, the Muskegon Sports Council is working on completing the first phase of the forest canopy tour project, which consists of a zip line through the trees. When completed, this zip line is expected to be universally accessible.

**Holly Oaks ORV Park**

In 2017, the DNR, supported by a $2.9 million trust fund grant, purchased 235 acres on a former mining and gravel site in southeast Michigan. Fast forward to today, and this reclaimed land – now part of Holly Recreation Area – is Michigan’s second state park area to be jointly managed by state and county recreation agencies. Known as [Holly Oaks ORV Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=756&type=SPRK), it is operated by Oakland County Parks and Recreation in partnership with the DNR.

After years of planning and collaboration, the park’s first 113 acres opened in September as the first off-road vehicle park in southeast Michigan. It’s already serving an active riding community. Riders enjoy the challenges of 4x4 trails, single-track trails for motorcycles, steep hills, water crossings, rock crawls and other elements. The park’s remaining 122 acres of ORV trails and terrain are expected to be ready for riders by 2023.

**DNR Outdoor Adventure Center**

The goal of creating the [Outdoor Adventure Center](https://www.michigan.gov/oac) was to bring “Up North” to downtown Detroit. In addition to other funding sources and partnerships, a $9 million trust fund grant was used to acquire the space for the completed center, which is housed in the historic Globe Building.

The center, completed in 2015 after three years of work, was a collaborative effort with the City of Detroit to bring the outdoors downtown and provide educational programs to visitors from Detroit and beyond. Since opening, the center has averaged more than 100,000 guests annually. It’s no wonder why. Visitors experience hands-on activities, exhibits and simulators, such as walking behind and touching a waterfall, stepping into a fishing boat and reeling in a big fish, hitting the trail on a mountain bike or snowmobile, and much more.

From dozens of recreation projects big and small, to important land acquisitions for critical deer wintering habitat and other uses, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund has compiled a nearly 45-year history of success.

No doubt the future holds much more in store.

Learn more about the trust fund at [Michigan.gov/MNRTF](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79134_81684_79209_81657---%2C00.html).