**Despite pandemic, much to celebrate in Michigan’s outdoors, history**

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By any measure, it’s a pretty big deal: one hundred years and counting. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources marked its centennial anniversary in 2021, and in the planning years prior to COVID-19 realities, everything was on the table. We had dreams of storytelling events, outdoor skills learning, lantern-lit trail tours, programs for classroom groups and much, much more.

Though the pandemic required understandably cautious changes to our celebration plans, we focused on ways to help people safely connect – or, in some cases, reconnect – with Michigan’s natural and heritage resources, starting with a [DNR centennial webpage](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-84430_104730---%2C00.html) that offered:

* [An interactive, visual timeline](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e529d87cc67544a4beb4bb5f34fb9edd). Reintroducing elk, moose and turkey, protecting wild places like the Pigeon River Country State Forest, bringing salmon to the Great Lakes and many other milestones are captured in this quick look at how the DNR has been taking care of Michigan’s outdoor places and stories since 1921.
* [100 ways to celebrate](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-84430_104730_104758---%2C00.html?page=1&limit=100&filterCategories=&searchQuery=). From the tried and true (elk viewing, lighthouse tours and fishing) to newer traditions (forest bathing, fat-tire biking and geocaching), here are dozens of fun ideas for people of all ages, skills and abilities.
* [Centennial stories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-84430_104730_106013---%2C00.html). Historic Walker Tavern and Irish Hills tourism in the 1920s, the Tuskegee Airmen in Michigan, Porcupine Mountains logbooks, the Belle Isle Park sawmill … these are just a few of the interesting subjects covered in special “Showcasing the DNR” stories this year.
* [Centennial gear](https://shoppeninsulas.com/collections/dnr-centennial). With keepsake T-shirts, beanies, mugs, patches, hoodies, magnets and more, you can get a little something for yourself and others – and feel good knowing that a percentage of every sale supports Michigan state parks.

**DNR directors, past and present, talk conservation**

Throughout the year, too, some staff worked on a special video project, talking with several of the department’s directors, including current director, Dan Eichinger, about the history of natural resources conservation in Michigan, some of our success stories, and being ready for future challenges and opportunities.

David Hales, DNR director from May 1988 to May 1991, said he believes that Michigan’s future depends on the state’s natural resources base, adding, “It’s about what’s good for the second and third generations down the line that we’re going to leave Michigan to.”

The video includes vintage footage of foresters, park rangers, conservation officers, fisheries technicians and many other DNR staff doing the day-to-day work of protecting and managing the fish, forests, wildlife, parks and visitor experiences that are uniquely Michigan.

It's just 17 minutes long, but the [DNR centennial video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zevobn51wN4) provides a satisfying slice of perspective, insight and experience from the people who have guided the department for much of the last 45-plus years.

**The outdoors: a safe, welcoming space**

When Michigan implemented public health and safety precautions aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19, it was undeniably difficult. People were peppered with constant, but necessary, messages about keeping 6 feet apart, washing hands, wearing face masks and avoiding large gatherings, especially indoors.

While many places temporarily closed, the outdoors stayed open. Parks, trails, forests – even our own backyards or rooftop patios – provided desperately needed sanctuary, solace and space to safely spread out without fear of getting yourself or someone else sick.

And people showed up in droves. They wanted to try new trails, discover different hunts, gaze at starry skies and gather ‘round the campfire – anything to shake up their routines, shake off the uncertainty of the pandemic and just feel normal for a while.

DNR Parks and Recreation Chief Ron Olson called it “quite remarkable” that the department’s centennial coincided with Michigan state parks and recreation areas reaching an all-time visitation record of nearly 35 million visitors, as well as setting a new yearly benchmark of more than 1.4 million camping and lodging nights.

“Our state parks and recreation system resources, including trails, boating and state forest recreation, are as relevant now as they’ve ever been to the state of Michigan in the past 100 years,” Olson said. “I want to thank all the current and past staff, volunteers and partners for continuing this great legacy.”

The DNR’s parks and recreation employees were among those – along with conservation officers, fisheries and wildlife biologists, customer service center staff and hundreds of others – who remained in the field and on the front lines despite the pandemic, doing their very best to protect natural and cultural resources while helping the public safely connect with the outdoors.

Gary Hagler, chief of the DNR Law Enforcement Division, said the last two years have quickly reshaped the approach to conservation law enforcement, and the DNR has used this as an opportunity to refocus on staff to ensure they have the training, equipment and support they need to be safe and successful.

“As we move forward as a society to put the pandemic behind us, we hope to continue meeting new outdoor users who originally found escape from the world in the outdoors,” Hagler said. “This surge of customers has introduced a new demand for outdoor recreation areas and opportunities, reiterating the importance of recreational safety education staff and programs and the need for readily available conservation officers.”

**Building on tradition**

Some DNR divisions found simple ways to give a centennial nod to their program areas, by connecting to resources customers use most. For example, this year’s [hunting digests](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79136_79772_80260---%2C00.html) offered covers that were either illustrated or used historic photos.

The department also invited artists take part in a contest to design a centennial-edition 2021 deer management cooperator patch. The patches have been a popular collector’s item for hunters since the early 1970s. The [winning patch](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79119_79147_81438-428919--%2C00.html) was created by Larry Tucci of Fort Collins, Colorado. Tucci is a former state resident who learned to hunt deer with his Uncle John in Michigan’s woods.

While our centennial year, set against the backdrop of COVID-19, showed promising new pockets of outdoor recreation enjoyment, some battles remain.

“The continued decline in hunters over the last 30 years or so means a decrease in funding for conservation in Michigan,” said DNR Wildlife Chief Jared Duquette. “Our challenge over the next several decades will be to prove our relevance to other stakeholders and to find alternate sources of funding to continue our stewardship of wildlife and habitat in Michigan for a variety of wildlife species and recreational interests.”

That desire to demonstrate relevancy, protect fish and wildlife, and ensure ample space for outdoor fun is a big part of what drives the DNR forward.

Jeff Stampfly heads up the DNR’s Forest Resources Division, which manages nearly 4 million acres of state forests in the northern Lower and Upper peninsulas.

“One of the most important jobs for the DNR 100 years ago was working to reforest Michigan after the lumber era,” Stampfly said. “Our most important job now is looking toward the next 100 years and making sure that generations to come will have healthy forests that will provide wood products, wildlife habitat and many recreation opportunities.”

**Making history right now**

Sandra Clark is the director of the Michigan History Center, an agency within the DNR that works to integrate cultural history into our understanding of the natural world and the role people play in shaping it. We gain such understanding through gathered and shared stories, and one of the Center’s current initiatives captures just how important that effort is.

Launched in early 2020 at the start of the pandemic, [Collecting COVID-19](https://www.michigan.gov/mhc/0%2C9075%2C7-361-99041_99042---%2C00.html) gives state residents the opportunity to share their accounts of these trying times, making it easier for future generations to understand what it’s like to live through a global health crisis.

So far, more than 225 people have submitted stories and photographs. Once the need for social distancing lessens, MHC staff expects to collect many more physical artifacts to complement the written and oral histories.

Clark said although the photographs in the collection are often connected to disappointment and struggle, the accompanying photo messages smacked of hope and persistence, too.

“One description of a woman waving from the sidewalk to her friend in a second-story apartment window before they start their Friday after-work phone chat, ends with, ‘We cannot let social distancing distance our friendship. Love and friendship is what will get us through the crisis.’”

That’s a sentiment worth celebrating today, tomorrow or 100 years from now.