

PERFORMANCE AUDIT
OF THE
PUBLIC RECREATION ACCESS PROGRAMS
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

August 1998

EXECUTIVE DIGEST

PUBLIC RECREATION ACCESS PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION	This report, issued in August 1998, contains the results of our performance audit* of the Public Recreation Access Programs, Department of Natural Resources (DNR).
AUDIT PURPOSE	This performance audit was conducted as part of the constitutional responsibility of the Office of the Auditor General. Performance audits are conducted on a priority basis related to the potential for improving effectiveness* and efficiency*.
BACKGROUND	DNR is responsible for managing various programs that offer public recreational access to Michigan residents and visitors. The most expansive of these is the State forest program, which consists of approximately 3.9 million acres of forests that offer various types of recreational opportunities. DNR's 96 State parks and recreation areas; various trails; Great Lakes marinas; and boating, hunting, and fishing access sites offer additional public recreational opportunities.
AUDIT OBJECTIVE AND CONCLUSION	Audit Objective: To determine if DNR was effective in ensuring public access to meet public interest. Conclusion: DNR was generally effective in ensuring public access to meet public interest. Although we found no material conditions*, we identified two reportable

* See glossary on page 14 for definition.

conditions* related to stakeholder* surveys and public access publications.

AUDIT SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Our audit scope was to examine the program and other records of the Department of Natural Resources' public recreation access programs. Our audit was conducted in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States and, accordingly, included such tests of the records and such other auditing procedures as we considered necessary in the circumstances.

Our methodology included examining program records and activities for the period October 1, 1995 through April 30, 1998.

To accomplish our objective, we obtained an understanding of DNR's public recreation access programs by conducting a preliminary survey. We reviewed data on public interest to determine if it was current and whether DNR used it for making public recreation access need projections. Also, we compared various information to determine the consistency of data used.

We analyzed public access property acquisitions to determine if they were consistent with established priorities. Also, we determined if DNR was effective in acquiring public access properties. In addition, we reviewed property acquisition planning to determine that plans include site development and maintenance.

AGENCY RESPONSES

Our audit report includes 2 findings and 3 corresponding recommendations. DNR agreed with all 3 recommendations.

* See glossary on page 14 for definition.

Mr. Keith J. Charters, Chairperson
Natural Resources Commission
Stevens T. Mason Building
Lansing, Michigan

Dear Mr. Charters:

This is our report on the performance audit of the Public Recreation Access Programs, Department of Natural Resources.

This report contains our executive digest; description of program; audit objective, scope, and methodology and agency responses; comment, findings, recommendations, and agency preliminary responses; and a glossary of acronyms and terms.

The agency preliminary responses were taken from the agency's responses subsequent to our audit fieldwork. The *Michigan Compiled Laws* and administrative procedures require that the audited agency develop a formal response within 60 days after release of the audit report.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us during this audit.

AUDITOR GENERAL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PUBLIC RECREATION ACCESS PROGRAMS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

	<u>Page</u>
Executive Digest	1
Report Letter	3
Description of Program	6
Audit Objective, Scope, and Methodology and Agency Responses	8

COMMENT, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND AGENCY PRELIMINARY RESPONSES

Ensuring Public Access	10
1. Stakeholder Surveys	10
2. Public Access Publications	12

GLOSSARY

Glossary of Acronyms and Terms	14
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Description of Program

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for managing various programs that offer public recreational access to Michigan residents and visitors. The most expansive of these is the State forest program, which consists of approximately 3.9 million acres of forests. The majority of the State forest lands was acquired through tax reverted land. Within the State forests, DNR has established approximately 150 rustic campgrounds with 3,000 campsites. These campgrounds are usually located near a river, stream, or lake that offers users water access for walk-in boating and fishing opportunities. DNR estimates that over 500,000 people annually use the State forest campgrounds.

The State park program consists of 96 State parks and recreation areas made up of over 267,000 acres of property. State park recreation facilities include modern and rustic campgrounds, hiking and cross-country ski trails, beaches, boat launches, and fishing piers. During 1996, an estimated 23 million people visited the State parks and 5 million people used the camping facilities. During fiscal year 1996-97, DNR expended \$34.3 million on the State park program.

The trails program provides users with a wide variety of public access opportunities. The largest of these is the snowmobile trail program, which consists of approximately 5,800 miles of trails through State and national forests and privately owned land. The annual appropriation for this program is approximately \$5.5 million. The off-road vehicle and non-motorized use (hiking, bicycling, in-line skating, etc.) trails make up the remainder of the trails program. These programs are much smaller than the snowmobile trail program. For example, there are only about 3,000 miles of off-road vehicle trails.

The boating access program has been responsible for funding the development of over 1,100 access sites on lakes and streams throughout the State, of which DNR manages 740 sites. DNR estimated that 9.7 million people utilized these public access sites during 1996. During fiscal year 1996-97, DNR expended approximately \$8.2 million on this program.

DNR's dock and harbor program has assisted in the development of 73 protected mooring facilities to serve Great Lakes boaters. Of these, 59 were built in cooperation with local communities which now own and operate these facilities. The remaining 14 are owned and operated by DNR and cost DNR approximately \$2 million during fiscal year 1996-97 to operate. During 1996, DNR reported that over 75,000 boaters docked at State harbors.

DNR has ongoing programs that are responsible for acquiring hunting and fishing access for sports people. Through these programs, DNR either leases or purchases property that is then made available for hunting or access to rivers, streams, lakes, or ponds for fishing. DNR concentrates its hunting access efforts in southern Michigan to provide hunters access to land for hunting within a reasonable distance of their residences. During fiscal year 1996-97, DNR leased 40,600 acres at 223 farms in 35 southern Michigan counties at a cost of approximately \$230,000. In addition, 58 of the 63 State game areas that DNR manages, which are all open to hunting, are located in southern Michigan.

Audit Objective, Scope, and Methodology and Agency Responses

Audit Objective

The objective of our performance audit of the Public Recreation Access Programs, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), was to determine if the DNR was effective in ensuring public access to meet public interest.

Audit Scope

Our audit scope was to examine the program and other records of the Department of Natural Resources' public recreation access programs. Our audit was conducted in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States and, accordingly, included such tests of the records and such other auditing procedures as we considered necessary in the circumstances.

Audit Methodology

Our audit procedures were performed during the months of October 1997 through April 1998 and included examining program records and activities for the period October 1, 1995 through April 30, 1998.

To accomplish our objective, we obtained an understanding of DNR's public recreation access programs by conducting a preliminary survey. We reviewed data on public interest to determine if it was current and whether DNR used it for making public recreation access need projections. Also, we compared various information to determine the consistency of data used.

We analyzed public access property acquisitions to determine if they were consistent with established priorities. Also, we determined if DNR was effective in acquiring public access properties. In addition, we reviewed property acquisition planning to determine that plans include site development and maintenance.

Agency Responses

Our audit report includes 2 findings and 3 corresponding recommendations. DNR agreed with all 3 recommendations.

The agency preliminary response which follows each recommendation in our report was taken from the agency's written comments and oral discussion subsequent to our audit fieldwork. Section 18.1462 of the *Michigan Compiled Laws* and Department of Management and Budget Administrative Guide procedure 1280.02 require DNR to develop a formal response to our audit findings and recommendations within 60 days after release of the audit report.

COMMENT, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND AGENCY PRELIMINARY RESPONSES

ENSURING PUBLIC ACCESS

COMMENT

Audit Objective: To determine if the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was effective in ensuring public access to meet public interest.

Conclusion: DNR was generally effective in ensuring public access to meet public interest. Although we found no material conditions, we identified two reportable conditions related to stakeholder surveys and public access publications.

FINDING

1. Stakeholder Surveys

DNR's surveys of stakeholders and studies of programs offering public recreational access did not accumulate data to determine if the level of public access available satisfied stakeholders' needs or interests. In addition, DNR did not survey users of its hunting and fishing access programs to allow it to evaluate the need for continuation, expansion, or reduction of the programs.

DNR administers various programs that offer public recreational access. These include State parks and recreation areas; State forests; trails; and boating, fishing, and hunting access programs. Our review of these programs disclosed:

- a. DNR periodically performs or contracts for surveys and studies of stakeholders of various public recreation access programs to accumulate user data and level of use. We reviewed available surveys and studies and noted that they did not evaluate whether the level of public recreation access was satisfactory for the respective program. For example:
 - (1) Surveys of the DNR trails program accumulated data to assess the economic impact of the program as well as user demographics. However, these surveys did not accumulate information to allow DNR to evaluate

trail usage or user satisfaction with the existing trail network. This information could be used to evaluate the need for expanding or reducing the trail network.

- (2) Surveys and studies of the DNR boating access program have accumulated user demographics, locations frequently used, frequency of use, etc. DNR used these surveys and studies to determine the estimated level of use by geographic area of the State. None of the surveys or studies evaluated the level of satisfaction with the availability of boating access sites. As a result, DNR could not ascertain the need for additional boating access sites or the expansion of existing sites.
- b. DNR leases property from private landowners to provide southern Michigan hunters access to land for hunting within a one-hour drive for its hunting access program. In addition, DNR purchases property to provide anglers access to lakes and streams throughout the State for its fishing access program. Our review of these programs disclosed that DNR did not formally survey the hunters who used the hunter access program or anglers who used the fishing access program. As a result, DNR did not obtain information that would allow it to determine whether these programs should be continued as is, expanded, or reduced.

Accumulating data on the level of user satisfaction with the various public recreation access programs would allow DNR to evaluate whether the existing programs should be continued as is, expanded, or reduced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that DNR's surveys of stakeholders and studies of programs offering public recreational access accumulate data to determine if the level of public access available satisfies stakeholders' needs or interests.

We also recommend that DNR survey users of its hunting and fishing access programs to allow it to evaluate the need for continuation, expansion, or reduction of the programs.

AGENCY PRELIMINARY RESPONSE

DNR agrees with the recommendations. DNR will add questions to future surveys of stakeholders and studies of programs offering public recreational, hunting, and fishing access sites to determine if the level of public access available satisfies stakeholders' needs or interests.

FINDING

2. Public Access Publications

DNR's public access publications for fishing access sites, marinas, and boat launches did not provide complete listings of available public access sites.

DNR distributes publications listing fishing access sites, marinas, and boat launches to the public upon request. According to DNR staff, these publications were developed from information obtained from DNR's involvement in the development of the respective sites.

We compared information contained in DNR's publications to information available from other sources and noted that the DNR's publications were not complete:

- a. The Fisheries Division's publication of public fishing access sites did not agree with its facilities inventory, which lists all property for which the Division is responsible. We compared information contained in these records for 15 counties and noted that information for 10 did not agree. For example, one county was shown as having 6 fishing access sites according to the facilities inventory, but the Division's publication did not list any sites for that county. In another county, the publication listed 6 access sites although the Division's facilities inventory listed only one.
- b. The Parks and Recreation Division's publications for harbors and boat launches did not include all available sites open to the public:
 - (1) The Division's marina publication lists only the 73 marinas that have been developed through its assistance. According to a 1994-95 report, which was based on a study conducted for the Division on Great Lakes

marinas, there is a total of 626 marinas available to serve Great Lakes boaters.

- (2) The Division's boat launch publication lists only public boat launches that have been developed through its assistance. We compared this publication with information we obtained from other sources and site visits and determined that it did not include all public boat launches. We noted that one 2,000-acre lake that has three public boat launches was not listed as having any boat launches. Another lake, which was over 650 acres, was also not listed in the directory as having public access. This lake was included on the Division's list of lakes on which it is attempting to acquire property to develop a public boat launch. We determined during a site visit that two public boat launches already exist on this lake, including one that is operated by the township in which the lake is located.

Including all public access information in DNR's publications would provide users with complete access information from one source. In addition, it would provide the Fisheries Division and the Parks and Recreation Division with a comprehensive inventory of all available access sites.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that DNR include all public access sites in its publications for fishing access sites, marinas, and boat launches.

AGENCY PRELIMINARY RESPONSE

DNR agrees with the recommendation. As public access site inventories and publications are updated, they will include the latest information. Also, new publications to present information, along with other media tools like the Internet, will address how to present a comprehensive list of all the public access sites to our stakeholders and the public.

Glossary of Acronyms and Terms

DNR	Department of Natural Resources.
effectiveness	Program success in achieving mission and goals.
efficiency	Achieving the most outputs and outcomes practical for the amount of resources applied or minimizing the amount of resources required to attain a certain level of outputs or outcomes.
material condition	A serious reportable condition which could impair the ability of management to operate a program in an effective and efficient manner and/or could adversely affect the opinion of an interested person concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of the program.
performance audit	An economy and efficiency audit or a program audit that is designed to provide an independent assessment of the performance of a governmental entity, program, activity, or function to improve public accountability and to facilitate decision making by parties responsible for overseeing or initiating corrective action.
reportable condition	A matter coming to the auditor's attention that, in his/her judgment, should be communicated because it represents either an opportunity for improvement or a significant deficiency in management's ability to operate a program in an effective and efficient manner.
stakeholders	Parties interested in DNR's program activities (e.g., direct users of services, advocacy groups, and local agencies interacting with the State program).