

Portrait of a Place:

The Apostle Islands

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The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is located along the beaches of Lake Superior in the Bayfield Peninsula region of northern Wisconsin. The islands were previously recognized only as a source of raw materials; however, the region currently exhibits millions of years of geological transformations, as well as hundreds of thriving plant and animal species. Additionally, the Apostle Islands are a source of Ojibwe culture that remains central to the region's history. The "Wild Archipelago" forms a chain that links the past to the present, as both the geography and the history of the land are a result of years of natural and cultural trends that have shaped the regional story.¹

Known as some of the most pristine islands in all of the Great Lakes, the Apostle Islands are a group of 22 islands covering over 720 square miles of Lake Superior.² Millions of years ago, the advance and retreat of the Pleistocene era glaciers carved the islands out of sandstone.³ This exposed the "beautiful white sand beaches, dramatic cliffs, sculpted shorelines, and water-worn caves."⁴ Of the islands, Madeline Island is the largest, although each of the islands has a relatively similar geography: mostly low and flat, ranging in size from a few acres to over 13,000 acres.⁵ This prehistoric work of nature has created an intricate network of cliffs, sea caves, and beach dunes that displays the glacial impact on the islands. Each island boasts a "rich forest mosaic," including areas of original growth that once covered the entire Great Lakes region.⁶ The forests consist of

1 National Park Service, *Apostle Islands*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006.

2 Gerry Volgenau, *Islands: Great Lakes Stories* (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Media Group, 2005), 217.

3 Harold C. Jordahl and Annie L. Booth, *Environmental Politics and the Creation of a Dream Establishing the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 11.

4 *Ibid.*

5 E. W. Beals and Grant Cottam, "The Forest Vegetation of the Apostle Islands, Wisconsin," *Ecology* 41, no. 4 (October 1960): 743–751. JSTOR.

6 James W. Feldman, *Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 4.

various hardwoods as well as white pine and spruce-fir.⁷ Alongside this forest vegetation, the wildlife of the Apostle Islands includes black bears and whitetail deer, as well as various species of birds, including loons, bald eagles, and herring gulls.⁸ Surrounding the islands is Lake Superior: the most dangerous of the Great Lakes.⁹ The islands have been the site of many historical shipwrecks; however, the islands also feature the largest collection of lighthouses within the United States, providing guidance for ships navigating the lake. Existing in Lake Superior, the Apostle Islands consist of unique sandstone formations, while also fostering a pristine ecosystem for thriving wildlife.

As the Apostle Islands have an extensive geographical history, there are also economic histories tied to the region. American Indian inhabitants met with European settlers in the seventeenth century, who valued the

Apostle Islands as a location for French fur trade.¹⁰ By 1790, the islands had become the main trading center of the Lake Superior region. Yet, as fur became scarce, the islands entered an industrial age in the 1870s, becoming a source of lumber, fish, and stone.¹¹ The lumber industry was initially very successful in the Apostle Islands due to the variety of available tree species, specifically white pines. However, these prime timber species were depleted by the 1920s, and logging came



Photo via Apostle Island National Lakeshore, National Park Service. www.nps.gov/apis/index.html.

to a halt with the establishment of the island's national park in the 1970s.¹² Similarly, the islands were a source of commercial fishing, mainly lake trout and whitefish, the primary commercial species of Lake Superior.¹³ Unlike logging, fishing became part of the "fabric of community and family life" on the islands.¹⁴ Fishing provided jobs for island residents, while also offering a source of food and recreation. Lastly, the Apostle Islands provided sandstone building material to growing cities like Milwaukee and Chicago

7 Jordahl and Booth, *Environmental Politics*, 12.

8 Ibid.

9 Volgenau, *Islands*, 218.

10 Jordahl and Booth, *Environmental Politics*, 14.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 National Park Service, *Apostle Islands*.

13 Jordahl and Booth, *Environmental Politics*, 18.

14 Ibid.

throughout the late-nineteenth century, especially after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 created a need for more reliable—and less flammable—building materials.¹⁵ This sandstone was extracted from quarries and almost exclusively exported to larger Great Lakes cities. Much like the fur and lumber industries, stone was also seen as an inexhaustible resource, until the quarrying ceased in the twentieth century. Historically, the Apostle Islands have provided economic benefits to people within the Great Lakes region through the depletion of their fur, lumber, fish, and stone.

The Apostle Islands also have a history rich with American Indian culture, including the stories of the Ojibwe Indians. The Ojibwe people came to live on Madeline Island around 1490, and it is estimated that up to 20,000 Ojibwe people lived on the island. They originally came to the islands after being pushed out by the western Sioux Indians and the southern Fox Indians. While the Apostle Islands served the Ojibwe well, severe winters led to a shortage of food. As a result, the Ojibwe medicine men advocated for cannibalism, specifically selecting female children as their victims. Thus, many tribe members became angry with the medicine men, and by 1610, all Ojibwe members had moved off of Madeline Island. However, they did not move away due to their anger towards the medicine men—there was a fear among tribe members that the children’s spirits roamed among the islands at night. This caused such a fright throughout the Ojibwe people that “they refused to spend the night on Madeline Island for another two hundred years, unless they were protected by French or British guns.”¹⁶ While the Ojibwe fearfully moved off of Madeline Island, they still view the Apostle Islands as “a sacred site for its role in their migration to Wisconsin,” further representing the importance of the islands to Ojibwe culture.¹⁷ The Apostle Islands have been home to the Ojibwe people since they migrated to the islands across the Great Lakes, and they continue to live in this region as it is essential to their ancestral migration.

Today, the Apostle Islands are known as a source of rich cultural history, recreation, spiritual rejuvenation. The islands are no longer seen as a place for resource extraction; rather, they are valued exclusively as a place of wilderness. Likewise, the geography, history, and culture of the Apostle Islands are dependent on Lake Superior. The islands and their surrounding lake have been a means of transport, place of commerce, and above all, a source of life. As said by the National Park Service: “Cloaked in a mantle of regrown forests, the Apostle Islands resonate with

15 National Park Service, *Apostle Islands*.

16 Volgenau, *Islands*, 223.

17 Christina Robertson and Jennifer Westerman, *Working on Earth: Class and Environmental Justice* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2015), 34; Volgenau, *Islands*, 223.

human stories reaching back to time immemorial.”¹⁸ The dense forests and sandstone cliffs of the islands hold clear signs of geographic history; however, beyond that, the Apostle Islands hold centuries of Great Lakes culture that is central to life in the region today.

¹⁸ National Park Service, *Apostle Islands*.