

The Sand River: beauty and power

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Consumers Power proves that preserving natural beauty and providing power are compatible.

The Au Sable River, a masterly work of nature reclaimed and guarded from harm, is proof that preserving natural beauty and providing power are compatible. Both have been priorities for many years at Consumers Power.

Actions by the company to preserve wilderness areas along the Muskegon and Manistee rivers have helped to make both popular recreation areas. But the most dramatic story is that of the Au Sable River — once a wasteland and now

one of Michigan's most beautiful, relatively unspoiled rivers.

The story of the Au Sable, a French name meaning "The Sand," starts in the 1850s. Lumbermen discovered Michigan white pine to be the best lumber available. Many choice stands of the towering trees were located near the lovely stream.

The river provided natural transportation for the logs. Logging operations were carried on during the winter, the

huge pine logs stacked on and under snow along the riverbank. In the spring, the river swelled with rain and runoff from the snow, and the waiting logs were sent crashing down sand rollways to the river. The logs were floated downriver to saw mills in Oscoda and Au Sable, located at the river's mouth on the Lake Huron shore.

Ruthlessly, the cuttings continued as though Michigan's great forests were inexhaustible. Michigan's lumbering operations reached their peak in 1888, when 4 billion board feet were sawed.

By the turn of the century the land on both sides of the Au Sable was bare, littered with debris from logging operations and crushed trees too small to cut. The litter provided fuel for forest fires that swept the area again and again — destroying everything in their path.

One of the lumbermen, Edward Loud, was concerned about what would happen to the area in general and his business in particular once the trees were gone. He came up with an idea to dam the river to generate electricity — a relatively new idea then. He set about implementing his plan by mapping the course of the Au Sable and buying flowage lands along the river. Eventually, he owned most of both banks from Oscoda to Mio — a straight distance of over 40 miles.

Through meetings, and possibly a twist of fate, Loud found himself working with W. A. Foote of the Commonwealth Power Company. Financing arrangements were made through a New York utility holding company for the construction of dams along the Au Sable. Eventually, Foote and others formed a utility — Consumers Power — from an assortment of smaller firms.

Cooke dam was the first of six hydroelectric plants to be constructed on the river. Work began in late 1909. Before it was completed, Five Channels dam was also under construction, followed by Loud, Mio and Foote dams. The last project, originally named Bamfield dam, was Alcona dam. Undertaken in 1917, construction ran into problems, including quicksand. The project was abandoned until 1923, then completed in 1924.

All six of the Au Sable hydro plants still generate low-cost electricity for the Consumers Power system. Seven other dams



Boats docked below Five Channels dam wait out an Au Sable rain shower.

— on the Manistee, Muskegon, Grand and Kalamazoo rivers — were also built between 1909 and 1949, and still provide power. (A number of others were built but are no longer owned by the company.)

Once the company took control of the lands on the lower Au Sable and completed construction of the dams, conservation efforts began. The land was kept as a wilderness area and a large-scale reforestation program was launched.

The first planting of seedlings was in 1926 on land near Loud dam. The bulk of the other plantings along the Au Sable, the Muskegon and the Manistee were done right after World War II until the late 1950s. Over 27 million trees, mostly pine, have been planted through the years, according to the company's Forestry department.

This reforestation includes red pine plantings for use as utility poles when they mature sufficiently. The company has 163 of these red pine plantations, according to Lynn Newell, forestry supervisor in Cadillac.

The Cadillac forestry department, which consists of Newell and assistant

forester Jack VanderMaas, manages and surveys some 59,000 acres of timberland owned by Consumers Power. Nearly 11,500 of those acres are along the Au Sable.

But the management and preservation of the company's riverlands consist of more than the reforestation program. These natural areas have been made available to the public for free use — with few restrictions.

The public has use of all company lands along the rivers, except for those immediately adjacent to the dams, according to Bill Reid, manager of land and right of way. The lands were originally designated for "day" use, but as camping became more popular, campgrounds were developed by municipal and private operators. The land for the campgrounds is leased from CPCo for \$1 a year and tax relief, Reid said.

In recent years, the riverlands that have so faithfully provided power for the customers of Consumers Power have begun to benefit the company in another way.

In the mid-'70s the company decided to sell off lands that were no longer

needed for hydro operations. The sale of over 55,000 acres of riverlands helped the company through some tight financial times, raising \$31 million so far. The sale of approximately 21,200 acres along the Au Sable was responsible for roughly \$13.3 million of that amount.


Land and Right of Way and the Forestry personnel have worked together to arrange these sales, with Land and Right of Way designating surplus parcels, and Forestry making recommendations concerning timber value. The company's Governmental Affairs representatives and Legal department supported the land sales.

Reid said the company has worked with three classes of buyers for the property. Since two national forests lie along the rivers — the Huron and the Manistee — certain Consumers Power property within the national forests has been sold to the U.S. Forest Service. Other properties have been sold to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Private leaseholders, who have been renting property for recreation over the years, comprise the third group of buyers.

In just over 100 years, the Au Sable River and its adjacent lands have been through three distinct phases. First, a pristine river flowed through a virgin forest, and the forest provided lumber for building the Midwest as well as triggering growth and jobs in the northern Lower Peninsula.

Next, in its second phase the now silty river wound through a barren land of fire hazards, littered with debris and stumps.

The final phase of the Au Sable is that of a powerful and beautiful river. It provides low-cost electricity for Michigan residents: at the same time, it ranks high as a natural recreation area. Its waters provide excellent fishing, including trout and coho salmon. It's well known for canoeing, and the lands adjacent to verdant Au Sable banks offer camping, hiking and other outdoor activities.

"The Sand" River threads its sparkling way through a popular, versatile recreation area — thanks to the initiative and efforts of Consumers Power and others devoted to healthful outdoor activity. 



Weathered stumps and a sand rollway at Lumberman's Monument are reminders of an Au Sable that used to be.

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