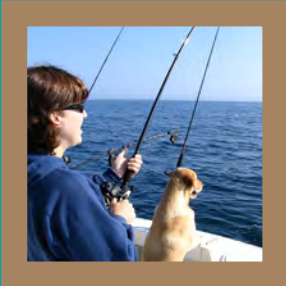


# CHARTING THE COURSE FOR THE BLUEWATER COAST

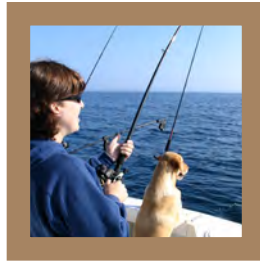
## SOUTHERN LAKE HURON ASSESSMENT

Final Report



MICHIGAN STATE  
UNIVERSITY





# CHARTING THE COURSE FOR THE BLUEWATER COAST

## SOUTHERN LAKE HURON ASSESSMENT

Final Report - Revised 2013

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The project team would like to thank the nearly 100 people who have been involved in this three-year assessment process and attended one or many of the project meetings. Project participants hosted stakeholder workshops, presented updates at meetings, completed surveys, reviewed project documents and were exceptionally generous with their time. In addition, two experts external to the process reviewed this report and provided feedback that improved the final product.

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### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Christine Vogt, Michigan State University

### TEAM MEMBERS AND CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Daniel McCole, Michigan State University

James Diana, University of Michigan

Lynn Vaccaro, Michigan Sea Grant

Mary Bohling, Michigan Sea Grant

Writing assistance from Tracy Rymph, Michigan State University

### PROJECT WEBSITE

[www.miseagrant.umich.edu/bluewater](http://www.miseagrant.umich.edu/bluewater)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### **Christine Vogt**

Professor of Tourism and Recreation,  
Michigan State University  
vogtc@msu.edu  
(517) 432-0318

#### **Mary Bohling**

Michigan Sea Grant Extension Educator  
bohling@msu.edu  
(313) 410-9431

# Charting the Course for the Bluewater Coast

## Final Project Report of the Southern Lake Huron Assessment

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*NOTE: Click on section titles to jump to each section of the report.*

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# Executive Summary

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## *Overview*

Michigan's changing economy and Lake Huron's declining Chinook salmon fishery have negatively impacted the coastal communities of Michigan's Thumb Area, which includes Tuscola, Huron, Sanilac, and St. Clair counties. Historically, individual port towns and coastal businesses in the Thumb Area have worked to promote their own entities individually. This regional assessment aims to help communities work collaboratively in order to adapt to the changing ecology and economy of the region and face those challenges together. The Thumb Area holds untapped potential for boosting the economy back to where it was before the regional fishing industry declined in the last decade by exploring new avenues of growth and promoting other attractions and industries such as fishing, outdoor recreation, and tourism. This executive summary provides an overview of the final project report with highlights of the objectives and outcomes of the Sea Grant project.

## *The Project*

This four-year integrated regional assessment project has brought together researchers, natural resource and tourism professionals, and community leaders to assess current conditions and identify opportunities for sustainable coastal community development. To date, over 75 community stakeholders have participated, representing small businesses, natural resource managers, downtown development authorities, the tourism industry, county government, local municipalities, and elected officials. The integration of technical assessment by scientists with natural and social science backgrounds, coupled with educators who helped translate scientific findings into appropriate stakeholder materials, produced a series of stakeholder workshops that ultimately were focused on creating a successful regional collaboration that would produce results for local, regional and business planning to improve the quality of the Lake Huron coastal resource. Based on the initial interests and ideas of community members, the project team gathered information on trends and best practices in sample communities within the region about topics such as fishing, societal changes, tourism, and regional branding.

Initial Assessment Topics:

- \* Fishing on Lake Huron including commercial, sport and charter fishing trends, food web changes and the economic impact of fishing
- \* Socioeconomic trends including population, employment and housing trends, statewide forecasts, and community values
- \* Travel, tourism, and recreation including parks, marinas, boating, and wildlife watching, statewide trends, and visitor profiles
- \* Regional brand coordination and marketing of recreation and tourism products including what is working locally and around the state

## Project Objectives:

- \* Clarify the issue of a declining fishing economy—including status, trends, causes, and consequences
- \* Identify and evaluate strategies for adapting to the changing economy and fishery
- \* Provide practical information to business owners, chambers of commerce and elected officials
- \* Promote collaboration and coordination across a variety of recommended strategies

## *Key Recommendations*

Based on the results of the Integrated Assessment and the collection of secondary research regarding current issues and trends in a number of categories, the project team prioritized options and recommendations with the stakeholders of the Thumb region.

### Natural Resource Protection and Access

- Expand marinas—in particular, marinas with fish cleaning stations—to facilitate sport fishing, as well as partnerships with restaurants to provide hook-to-cook programs, where tourists take in their harvested fish and have them cooked for dinner
- Expand fishing tournaments in the Thumb Area
- Diversify charter operations, which previously focused mainly on salmonids, to include sightseeing, diving, and fishing for other species
- Introduce shore-based and kayak fishing to provide better access to a changing fishery that includes more “near-shore” species
- Make more information on fishing opportunities and locations available at visitor centers, on the internet, or at local tourist events
- Develop events designed to reverse the decline in fishing among youth
- Expand commercial fishing and related businesses

### Recreation and Tourism Product Development

- Continued encouragement of charter and sport fishing, through tournaments and other events across broader ages and genders
- Pursue diversification of recreational activities that utilize existing regional resources
- Pursue Heritage Route designation on M-25 as a Recreational Heritage Route
- Continue to develop and promote festivals and events
- Collaborate more with travel and tourism associations throughout the region and the state
- Institute local government policies that facilitate the implementation of recommended local product development

### Branding and Marketing

- Any destination marketing programs should attempt to create “new” information sources like mobile applications over “old” forms of sources like brochures and vacation guides, but a mix of Internet-based and site-based marketing materials remains appealing to potential visitors
- List charter companies and new and existing businesses on Travel Michigan’s website, a free service that any tourism related business can use
- Refocus current regional marketing efforts to better address the needs of multiple communities and organizations
- Co-brand state and county parks with a regional image so visitors associate coastal resources and communities as core experiences

## ***Project Methodology***

The project timeline extended for four years of science-based inquiry intertwined with regional workshops. Throughout the study several of the science-based team members visited the area for fieldwork, primarily interviews and site visits, and regularly exchanged e-mails and phone calls to exchange ideas. A series of nine workshops over the study period helped the project team and regional stakeholders work through the timeline in a way that allowed many people to be involved. The assessment process included data analyses on the fishery and fishing supply and demand, data analyses on socio-economic statistics and recreation and tourism trends, scenario exercise with decision makers and community leaders to garner a vision of the region’s assets and liabilities today and into the future, and polls of stakeholders at several stages of the project in an effort to provide community supported innovations.

Project Stages:	▶ Recruit Partners ▶	Explore Issues ▶	Assess Trends ▶	Identify Opportunities ▶	Develop Vision ▶	Evaluate Options ▶	Provide Tools for Action
Timeline:	2009		2010		2011		Winter 2012

## ***Lessons Learned***

Although this project helped to identify barriers that must be overcome in order for regional collaboration to flourish, there have already been successes in the Thumb region, which are exhibited by the following quotes from stakeholders throughout the region:

*“The Sea Grant provided a small grant for Port Sanilac and Lexington to research feasibility of small cruises between our two towns. This has resulted in a bonding of our villages for more collaboration including a shared bike path, shared destination marketing, and more.”* –Port Sanilac and Lexington stakeholder

*“We are treating the plans, recommendations, and studies from this research as living documents while we roll out our economic development, organizational, promotional, and design strategies.”*- Port Sanilac stakeholder

*“I intend to make a \$50,000 investment to expand my business to the County Parks. My goal is to provide more opportunities for outdoor recreation in the Thumb, support and promote the Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail and promote tourism in the area. I believe my new business ventures (which I would not have come up with but for Sea Grant meetings) will turn the Thumb into a destination for outdoor enthusiasts.”* –Port Austin stakeholder

*“Michigan Sea Grant researchers assisted the Thumb Chapter of the Michigan Steelhead and Salmon Fishermen’s Association in creating a very successful net pen program to raise Michigan Steelhead and release them into Lake Huron. This is the first time that steelhead have been successfully raised in a harbor setting.”* –Michigan Steelhead and Salmon Fishermen’s Association

# Chapter 1. Introduction and the Integrated Assessment Process

---

## 1.1 Background

The Great Lakes are home to a diversity of fish species, with 179 different species found throughout the basin and tributaries. Lake Huron alone has 117 fish species (Schroeder and Dann, 2012). The fish community is influenced by the health of the environment and the availability of food and habitat. As the ecosystem changes, so do fish populations and diversity. The number and size of fish, the mix of native and non-native species, and commercial, tribal and sport fishing catch rates are also tied to ecosystem health and the constantly changing fishery. Throughout the Great Lakes, a healthy ecosystem supports important industries. For example, Great Lakes sport fishing is estimated to be a \$3.6 billion industry in the United States (American Sportfishing Association, 2008; RMFAM, 2007). Angler spending contributes to local recreation and tourism industries through retail and service sales, as well as sales tax and other dedicated taxes.

A variety of economic and ecological changes have affected the coastal communities of Lake Huron. In the 2000's, Sea Grant saw the opportunity to assist the northern and southern shores of Lake Huron in two separate initiatives to help the communities learn from past successes and failures, envision a future that leverages the region's coastal resources, and lay the groundwork for a sustainable and resilient economy. This report describes an assessment of the southern Lake Huron coastline, an area especially impacted by the lake's changing fishery.

In the late 1960s, Chinook and other salmon species were introduced to the Great Lakes to create a sport fishery and help control alewife, an invasive fish species. In the 1990's sport fishing of Chinook salmon along the Lake Huron coastline attracted anglers who spent millions in the coastal communities. Small tourism businesses, ranging from charter fishing operations, marina services, gas stations, restaurants and hotels and motels, all benefited when salmon fishing was strong and, more recently, have suffered as salmon fishing has declined. In 2003, Chinook salmon populations began declining due to a variety of ecological factors (see Chapter 2.1).

The changing fishery has impacted the coastal communities of southern Lake Huron. In the U.S. and Canada, the number of recreational anglers has decreased by 43% and 56% over the past 20 years, respectively (Schroeder and Dann, 2012). Lake Huron is greatly impacted by this trend as its shorelines touch both countries and its anglers. Fishing licenses in Michigan have also decreased. Dann et al. (2008) reported a 14.5% decline in distinct angling licensees from 1995 to 2004, as well as a reduction in the proportion of Michigan residents holding annual licenses from 13.8% in 1995 to 11.4% in 2004, and an increase in average age of an angler from 42.9 years in 1997 to 45.4 years in 2004 for the all-species licensees.

Despite the changing make-up and preferences of anglers, the strength of Lake Huron's fishery is in its diversity. Anglers today can catch lake trout, walleye, perch, bass, and whitefish, as well as salmon species. Demand for whitefish, which is caught by commercial and tribal fishing operations, is strong. There are opportunities to expand the marketing and sales of local fish in restaurants, local fish markets and farmers markets. Packaged local fish and new fish products can be sold to tourists and distributed to other parts of the state. Merchandising and exporting certain aspects of Lake Huron's natural resources may enable a renewed economy for the Thumb region.





Lake Huron offers world-class fishing and other water-based activities, parklands for outdoor recreation, and real estate for permanent or seasonal homes. Changes in border policies and passage between the countries have made it more difficult to travel between the U.S. and Canada for some international visitors. The Lake Huron-based economy has been famous for attracting anglers and boaters with marinas, overnight accommodations, fishing tackle, and food and convenience goods. Residents and leaders are greatly concerned about the future of sport fishing and boating as an economic activity that supports jobs.

Besides those who enjoy fishing or work in the fishing industry, many residents take great pride in the Great Lakes and are active in the stewardship of the natural resources. Residents and leaders have developed unique education programs, innovative partnerships between nonprofits and government, and international policies that protect the waters. However, tackling current environmental threats, such as climate change, invasive species and water quality, will require new approaches to research, governance, community planning and business. Although this assessment focuses on a somewhat narrow range of environmental and economic concerns, many of the solutions explored by stakeholders could help build more sustainable communities that better manage a variety of issues.

Many of the prosperous years of the region can be attributed to the Lake Huron coast being an attractive place for vacationers, seasonal homeowners, and anglers. As the economy, fishery and tourism industry change, the Thumb Area is exploring new avenues for growth. The region must find a new economic future, most likely one that embraces sustainable practices, grows several aspects of their natural-resource economy and maintains a high quality of life. Considering the growth of coastal areas in other parts of Great Lake states, the region could benefit by creating more diverse and richer experiences to attract and keep tourists and residents in their area through a menu of outdoor recreation and hospitality services that fit all budgets and stages of life. Some coastal areas have matured into resort-style communities with high-priced real estate developments (e.g., Petoskey-Harbor Springs) whereas other areas have grown through a large inventory of hotels, motels and attractions (e.g., Mackinaw City) or a single or clustering of state or national parks (e.g., mid-section of Lake Michigan shoreline).

This report describes the process and results of a research project that followed an Integrated Assessment (IA) approach. IA projects engage researchers with natural and social science backgrounds, and community members, including elected officials, citizen volunteers, and business owners. Researchers and participants analyze trends and current conditions and discuss options around a critical natural resource issue. In this report, options are presented that have undergone statistical analysis of secondary data, presentation and discussion in stakeholder workshops, and occasional polling of participating stakeholders in an effort to provide an acceptable and feasible set of options that could be implemented by community members with some level of continued involvement by Sea Grant. A problem statement and focal question for the project was initially developed to gain support and funding for the project, but was modified during discussions with stakeholders.



## 1.2 Problem Statement

Michigan's changing economy and Lake Huron's declining Chinook salmon fishery have negatively impacted the coastal communities of Michigan's Thumb Area. Historically, individual port and coastal towns and their related businesses in the area have worked in isolation. This regional assessment aimed to help communities work collaboratively in order to adapt to changes and challenges. The project brought together researchers, natural resource and tourism professionals, and community leaders to assess current conditions, identify trends, and innovate opportunities for their future.

### Focal Question

How can the natural and cultural resources of Lake Huron and its coast be enhanced and leveraged to benefit residents and visitors of the Thumb Area, support local economies, and maintain environmental quality?

### Initial Assessment Topics

Based on the initial interests and ideas of community members, the project team gathered information and trends on the following topics:

- Fishing on Lake Huron including commercial, sport and charter fishing trends, food web changes and the economic impact of fishing.
- Socioeconomic trends including population, employment and housing trends, statewide forecasts, and community values.
- Travel, tourism and recreation including parks, marinas, boating, and wildlife watching, statewide trends, and visitor profiles.
- Regional coordination and marketing including what is working locally and around the state.

These assessment topics were studied and presented to stakeholders over a two-year period that culminated in creating options, tools and resources that can be used to complement current projects in the Thumb Area or to support new initiatives.

### Geographic Scope

This project centered on a rural region of eastern Michigan that borders Lake Huron, commonly known as Michigan's Thumb Area. The research team focused on the coastal portion (inland from Lake Huron about 15 miles) of four counties: Tuscola, Huron, Sanilac and St. Clair counties.



Map of study area (in orange) along the eastern side of Michigan's lower peninsula.

## Goals of the Project

Four goals framed the work of the Integrated Assessment:

- Goal 1.** To clarify the issue – including status, trends, causes and consequences.
- Goal 2.** To identify and evaluate strategies for adapting to the changing economy and fishery.
- Goal 3.** To provide practical information that can guide planning related to tourism, recreation and natural resources.
- Goal 4.** To promote collaboration and coordination.

### *1.3 Dominant Trends*

The information gathering process by researchers focused on utilizing historical data from local, state and national information sources, as well as considering research projects that they or colleagues have been involved in over recent years. Jim Diana, Mary Bohling and Lynn Vaccaro took the lead on fishing data; Dan McCole and Chi Ok Oh led on socio-demographic data; Dan McCole and Christine Vogt led on recreation data; and Christine Vogt led on regional marketing trends. Several workshops in 2009 and 2010 were dedicated to presenting and discussing trend data. Stakeholders provided feedback to the researchers on the applicability of the trends to current local and regional planning.

Here we summarize the dominant trends that motivated and informed this project. These trends are elaborated in subsequent report chapters and additional data is presented in slide format at the project website (see: Summary Presentations and Project Meetings).

#### **Selected Fishing Trends**

- In the 1980s and late 1990s, Chinook salmon populations expanded and supported a vibrant charter and sport fishery on lakes Huron and Michigan.
- Beginning in the late 1980s, first zebra and after quagga mussels, arrived in the Great Lakes as hitchhikers on ocean-going ships and began spreading throughout Lake Huron. The invasive mussels consume plankton that support small fish — causing ripple effects up the entire food chain. The invasive mussels are at least partially responsible for the precipitous drop in forage fish, which began in 2003 and continues to impact salmon and other predator fish species.
- Between 2002 and 2005, the number of Chinook salmon harvested fell to just 10% of peak levels (Figure 1.1).
- Since the collapse of the Chinook salmon fishery, many native fish species have rebounded, including walleye, lake trout and smallmouth bass. Walleye have replaced salmonids as the dominant species harvested by recreational anglers. However, these native fish are not as popular among charter fishing customers.
- Fewer anglers are fishing leading to significantly reduced hours of fishing, particularly in the Thumb Area of Lake Huron (Figure 1.2). A decline in hours can be attributed to: loss of Chinook salmon, decline of yellow perch, rising gas prices, economic recession including loss of jobs and population in Michigan, and declining interest in fishing among younger generations.

See also: *Chapter 2 Natural Resource Protection and Access*

### Number of Chinook salmon harvested, 10 Michigan Main Basin index ports

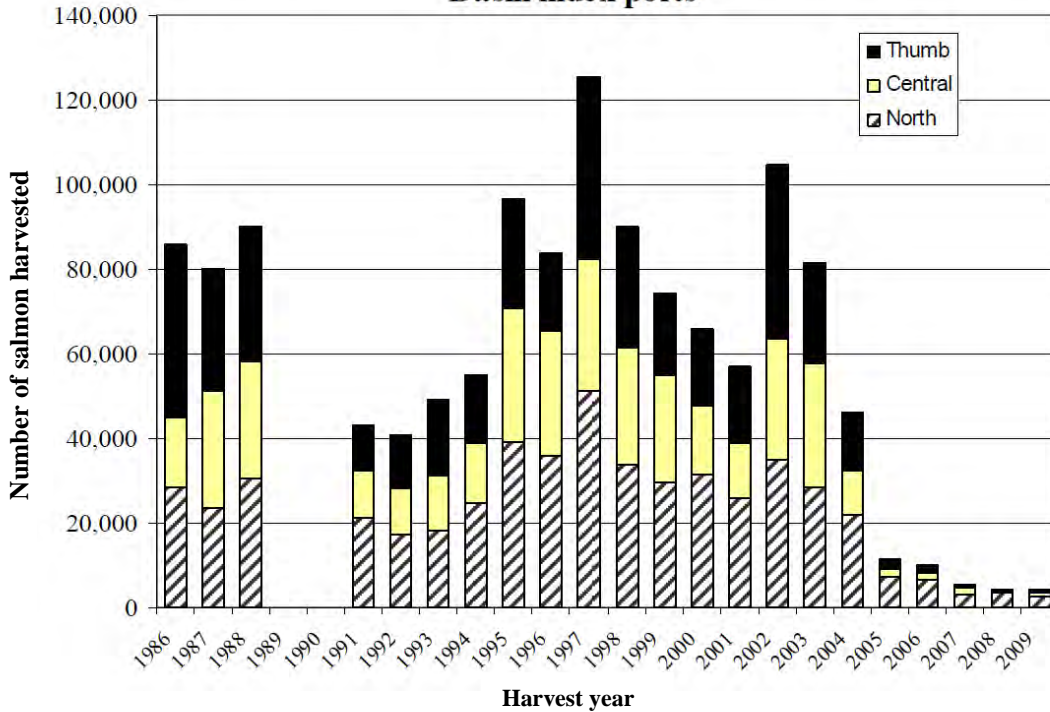


Figure 1.1 Chinook salmon harvest estimates for 10 Index Ports, Michigan waters of the Main Basin of Lake Huron. Source: J. Johnson, MDNR, 2010.

### Trends in fishing hours, 10 Main Basin Index Ports, Lake Huron

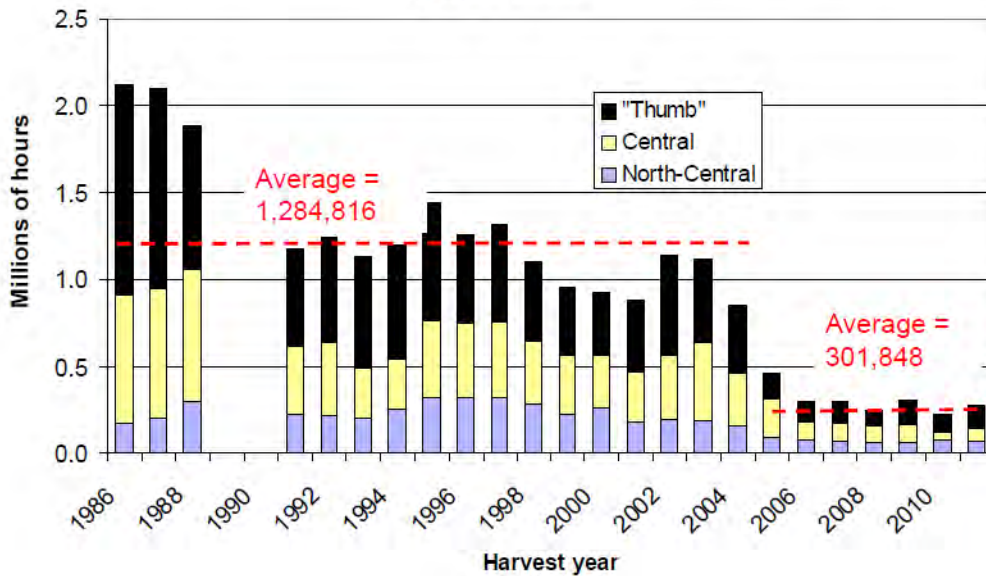


Figure 1.2 Trends in Hours Fished on Lake Huron at the ten Index Ports in Michigan water of Lake Huron. Fishing pressure at these deepwater ports declined in response to the lack of Chinook salmon after 2004. Source: J. Johnson, MDNR, 2012.

## Selected Socio-Demographic Trends

### *Population Decline in the Thumb Compared to other Michigan Counties and Regions.*

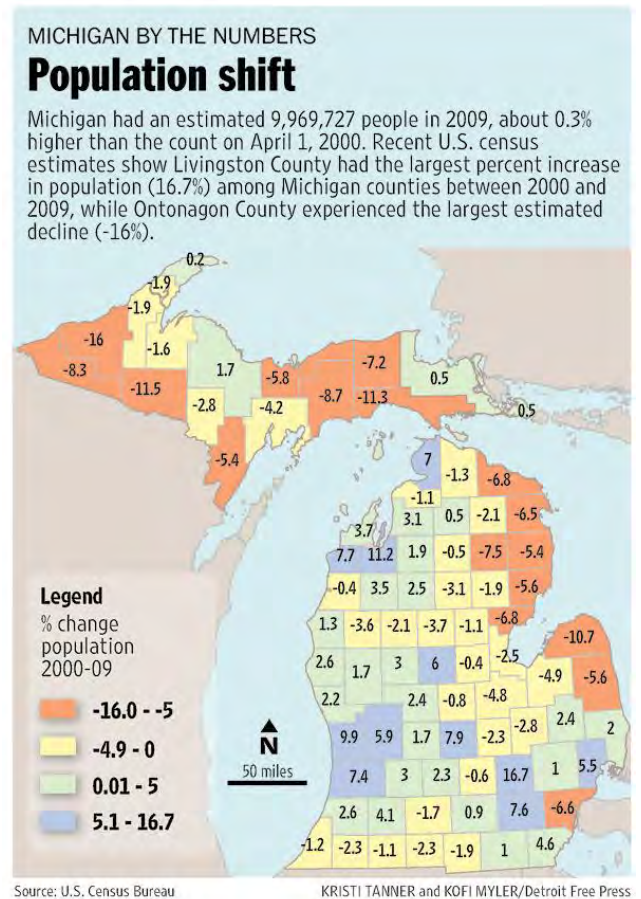
Two of the four counties in Michigan's Thumb Area, Huron (-10.7%) and Sanilac (-5.6%), were amongst a group of counties in Michigan that all experienced between five and sixteen percent decreases in population since 2000. It's interesting that all but one of these counties happened to border a Great Lake (Census data reported in Detroit News – See Figure 1.3). All counties along the shores of Lake Huron experienced a decline in population and only two show declines less than three percent (Cheboygan, -1.3% and Bay, -2.5%). St. Clair County, which is furthest south and closest to Detroit, was the one Thumb Area county that experienced a two percent increase in population.

Some coastal counties along Lake Michigan also lost five percent or more of their population during the same time period. These counties were near Grand Rapids or Traverse City, with the exception of Emmet County, which contains Petoskey and Harbor Springs. These now growing counties have been noted as amenity rich areas with abundant coastal and inland natural resources paired with attractive downtowns including restaurants offering updated menus and local foods, boutique shopping, four and five star hotels and resorts, and golf and ski resorts. These areas have a mixture of full-time and seasonal residents, as well as a growing retirement population desiring the “northwoods” along with high quality medical services and airport access. According to Brian Dabson, president of the Rural Policy Research Institute, “Investments in broadband and other infrastructure can help diversify local economies and spur entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is something that is exciting to a lot of people and we don't have to wait to bring investment to us. We can create our own jobs in our own communities” (Roll Call 10/4/2009). Investments and entrepreneurship are coming from some of the new residents, many who have worked and lived in metropolitan areas. These new residents see opportunities in rural communities and local leaders are taking notice and more actively recruiting small to medium sized business prospects.

Age is another important trend in the Thumb Area. With baby boomers retiring, the already older trending population may get even older in age. The average age of Thumb Area residents in 2008 was 42 years old, with Huron County the highest at 45 years old (U.S. Census data). The median age for Michigan in 2008 was 38 years old and 36 for the U.S. The rate of aging in the region increased 7.0% from 2000 to 2008; almost double the U.S. rate of 4.1% increase. Efforts to retain and attract younger families and adults as permanent or seasonal residents are important to maintaining a balanced population.

### *Unemployment Rates in the Thumb*

The unemployment rate in the Thumb Area was high in comparison to U.S. and Michigan figures (Federal Reserve Economic Data, St. Louis). The highest rate in recent years (almost 18%) was in 2009 when the Integrated Assessment started (See Figure 1.4). Unemployment figures were similar across Huron, Sanilac, St. Clair and Tuscola counties over a twenty-



**Figure 1.3 Population Changes in Michigan.**  
Source: US Census Bureau, graphic courtesy of Detroit News.

year period. Sanilac has been slightly higher in recent years.

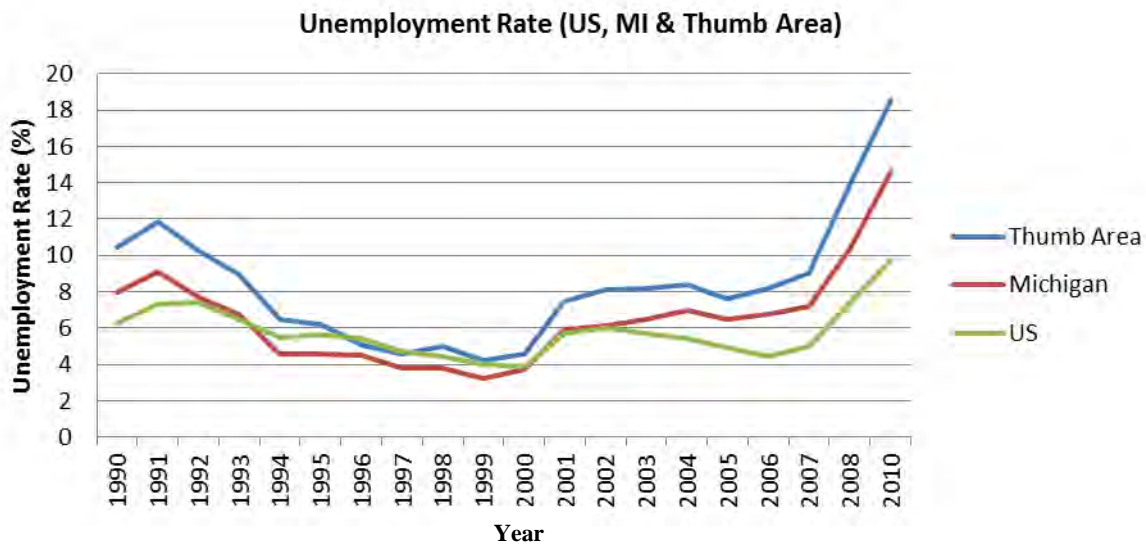


Figure 1.4 Rate of unemployment in the U.S., Michigan and Michigan’s Thumb Area between 1990 and 2010. Source: U.S. Federal Reserve Economic Data, St. Louis.

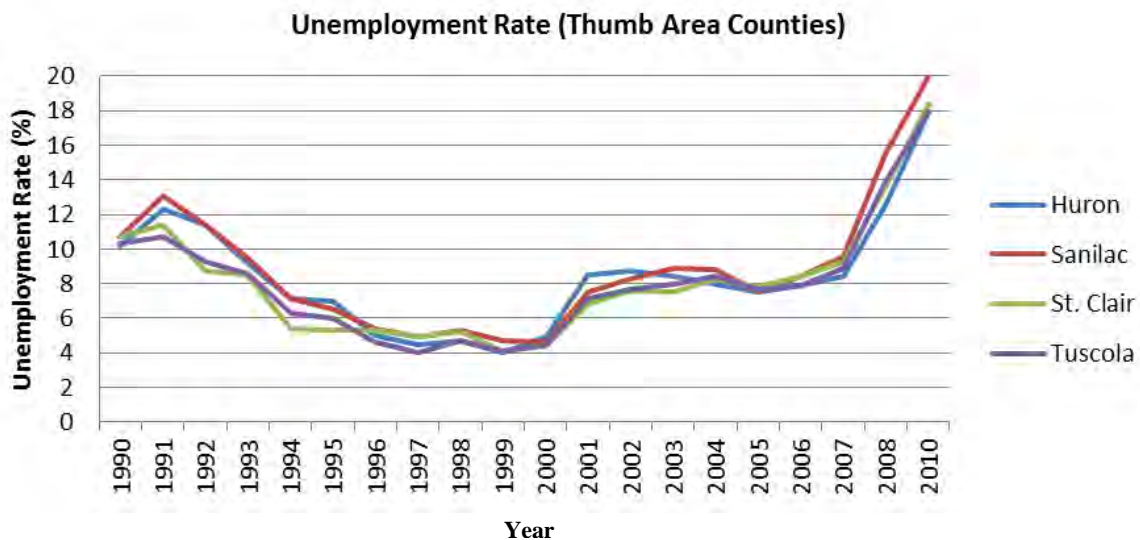


Figure 1.5 Unemployment in the counties of Michigan’s Thumb Area. Source: U.S. Federal Reserve Economic Data, St. Louis.

### Selected Recreation and Tourism Trends

An inventory of recreation and tourism facilities reveals a modest growth in the number of facilities in Michigan between 1998 and 2003, with sharp declines in inventory from 2004 to 2008 (businesses closing and few new ones opening), with the exception of full-service restaurants (Figure 1.6). The Thumb Area was particularly hard hit with significant decreases in the number of marinas (down 50%), hotels/motels (down 40%), and RV parks and campgrounds (down 22%).

State Park visitation at Lake Huron and Lake Michigan coastal state parks is down over a recent five-year period (2004 to 2009), with Lake Huron parks in double digit decreases (Figure 1.7). The five-year period prior was the opposite with increased visitation by campers and day visitors. Day visitors were sharply down (81%) at Lakeport in recent times, while Port Crescent had a small increase (1%).

Camping remains popular along Michigan’s Great Lakes even though recent years have seen a downturn during a period when the economy fell into a recession and many lost their jobs. In 2010, Michigan’s Department of Natural Resources introduced the State Park Recreation Passport allowing free entry to Michigan residents who pay an annual \$10 license renewal.

	Huron, Sanilac & Tuscola		Michigan Total	
	1998-2003	2004-2008	1998-2003	2004-2008
Golf Courses	-17%	-15%	2%	-6%
Marinas	0%	-50%	2%	-11%
Hotel/motel	-21%	-40%	1%	-7%
RV Park & Campground	-10%	-22%	-7%	-3%
Full-Service Restaurants	-10%	3%	2%	7%

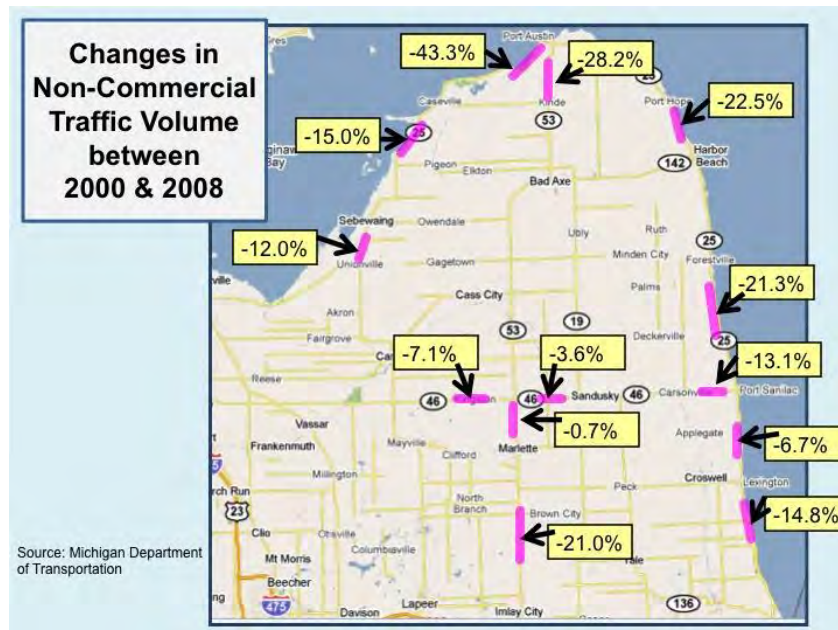
Figure 1.6 Percent change in the number of recreation facilities during two different time periods in Thumb Area counties and statewide in Michigan.

	Lakeport		Albert Sleeper		Port Crescent		Lake Huron State Parks		Lake Michigan State Parks	
	99/00-03/04	03/04-08/09	99/00-03/04	03/04-08/09	99/00-03/04	03/04-08/09	99/00-03/04	03/04-08/09	99/00-03/04	03/04-08/09
Campers	24% ↑	-26% ↓	3% ↑	-6% ↓	-5% ↓	1% ↑	11% ↑	-15% ↓	6% ↑	-5% ↓
Day Visitors	93% ↑	-81% ↓	-7% ↓	-24% ↓	-11% ↓	-8% ↓	8% ↑	-22% ↓	10% ↑	-9% ↓

Figure 1.7 Percent change in the number of day visitors and campers during two different time periods in four parks in the Thumb Area and across all Michigan state parks.

### Highway Statistics

Road volume on M-25, which is collected and adjusted by Michigan Department of Transportation, showed sharp declines from 2000 to 2008, particularly west of Port Austin around the two Michigan state parks. Overall, while the population was down 4.0% in Thumb Area during this time period, traffic volumes were down from a range of 0.7% to 43.3%, with an average decrease of 17.9% (Figure 1.8).



**Figure 1.8 Non Commercial Traffic Volume**

### **Selected Tourism Marketing Data**

This IA project began in 2009 during a period of tourism challenges. Nicholls and McCole (2010) reported decreases in tourism volume in 2008 (6.2% decrease statewide) and 2009 (0.9% decrease statewide). Travel prices were mixed during this same period with a 3.2% increase in prices in 2008 and a decline of 1.4% in 2009. In 2009, travel spending dropped 13.6%. The state of Michigan was clearly in a recession and the tourism industry was impacted. Lost jobs and increased prices caused fewer Michigan residents and out-of-state tourists to visit Michigan’s destinations and attractions.

During several years leading up to the new Governor, Rick Snyder, the state legislature passed a new tourism promotions program. Travel Michigan, the state’s tourism agency, would have an annual budget of \$30 million to promote tourism to more national and international markets (McCole, 2010). The “Pure Michigan” themed advertising and web-based marketing would continue for several more years, allowing greater investments in marketing particularly with leading destinations and regions like Mackinac Island, Frankenmuth, and beach towns on southern Lake Michigan. In 2012, 41 communities or organizations across the state partnered with Travel Michigan on customized marketing using the Pure Michigan platform. For example, in 2011 the newly formed Mackinac Island Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CVB) teamed with Travel Michigan to create and fund a \$1 million marketing campaign. The island mortgaged its new room assessment tax and the state matched the CVB’s funds from its now larger promotion budget. One goal was to convert day visitors to overnight visitors who pay the room tax.

The state’s Pure Michigan website is the top visited amongst all 50 states, and in 2009 the campaign was ranked as the 6<sup>th</sup> best tourism campaign of all time by Forbes Magazine. Statewide, the Bluewater Area CVB website has been on the list of the top 3 CVB websites viewed. In 2006, a five-year strategic plan was developed to guide the tourism industry during this time period (Michigan Tourism Industry Planning Council, 2007) and the annual tourism conference reached all time high levels of attendance. In 2012, the strategic plan is being revised with statewide input sessions from the industry and Michigan residents. Confidence in Michigan’s tourism industry may be at an all time high and efforts to build a positive image of the state seem to be taking hold.



Specifically in the Thumb Area, there is an abundance of coastal resources both natural and built that very much align with the state’s Pure Michigan brand and imagery. 146 miles of shoreline, the M-25 highway that strings together over a dozen small quaint towns, parks, marinas, beaches, and lighthouses makes the Thumb a quintessential coastal destination. The popularity of kayaking, biking and shopping at farmers markets are a perfect match for what the Thumb Area offers and residents and tourists are looking for (Binkley 2010, Project Recreation Profiles).

**Other Land and Natural Resource Use Data**

More acres are dedicated to farming in Huron and Sanilac counties than in any other county in Michigan. As shown in Tables 1.1 and 1.2, in 2007 Huron County farmed 440,967 acres, ranked first in terms of acreage, and ranked third in the state in market value of farm products sold (\$374.5 million). Sanilac farmed 417,083 acres (second in the state) and ranked fourth in terms of the value of farm produce (\$216.7 million). Tuscola was ranked fourth in terms of acreage at 342,729 acres, but was not a top ten rank in market value of crops.

Counties along Lake Huron also are dealing with aquatic invasive species, particularly phragmites, a tall invasive grass that is limiting visual and recreational access to the coastline. Along the Saginaw Bay side of the Thumb, benthic algae has become a concern because the green algae washes up on beaches forming miles of unattractive organic “muck”. Based on analysis of DEQ beach monitoring water quality data, which was collected primarily in Huron County, it is a rare occasion for a beach to close. If a specific area is deemed unsafe for swimming there was evidence that monitoring and reassessment occurred in a timely fashion to reopen the area for swimming (See: Recreation Profile: Lake Huron Beaches).

Table 1.1 Top 5 MI Counties based on 2007 market value of farm products sold

Rank	Counties	In Millions
1	Allegan	\$397.5
2	Ottawa	\$391.1
<b>3</b>	<b>Huron</b>	\$374.5
<b>4</b>	<b>Sanilac</b>	\$216.7
5	Ionia	\$201.2

Table 1.2 Top 5 Counties based on 2007 total farm acreage

Rank	Counties	Acres
<b>1</b>	<b>Huron</b>	440,967
<b>2</b>	<b>Sanilac</b>	417,083
3	Lenawee	348,611
<b>4</b>	<b>Tuscola</b>	342,729
5	Saginaw	324,407

**1.4 Assessment Process**

The Southern Lake Huron Integrated Assessment was a multi-year project with distinct but integrated stages. The project timeline extended four years of science-based inquiry intertwined with regional workshops. The science-based team met on a regular basis to discuss findings and plan workshops. Throughout the study several of the science-based team members visited the area for fieldwork, primarily interviews and site visits, and regular e-mails and phone calls to exchange ideas.

**Year One (2009):** We developed a technical assessment team and established partnerships in the Thumb Area. Early stakeholder meetings helped define the central issues for the project.

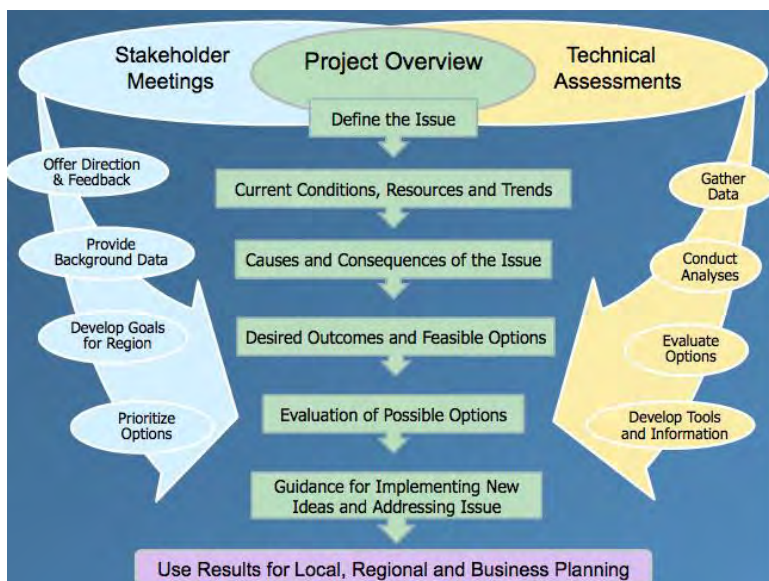
**Year Two (2010):** The focus of meetings and analyses was to: (1) document the status and trends related to coastal resources in the Thumb, and (2) describe the causes and impacts of declining fishing and tourism.

**Year Three (2011):** During meetings, stakeholders established goals and feasible options for the Thumb Area. Researchers evaluated different options and developed practical tools to guide planning (e.g., maps, inventories, case studies). Later stakeholder meetings helped to prioritize and refine options.

**Year Four (2012):** The project team presented their results and solicited feedback. Sea Grant educators will continue working with partners to identify resources for implementing new ideas.

Project Stages:	Recruit Partners	Explore Issues	Assess Trends	Identify Opportunities	Develop Vision	Evaluate Options	Provide Tools for Action
Timeline:	2009		2010		2011		Winter 2012

The integration of technical assessment by scientists with natural and social science backgrounds, coupled with educators who helped translate science findings into appropriate stakeholder materials, produced a series of stakeholder meetings that ultimately were focused on creating a successful regional collaboration that would produce results at a local and regional level for business planning to improve the quality of the Lake Huron coastal resources.



### Project Leadership and Partner Organizations

Stakeholder participation was essential to the success of this project. Initial stakeholder meetings helped the team develop an appropriate focal question and recruit participants (Table 1.3). Fishing organizations and the Department of Natural Resources were active at the onset of the assessment as the impetus of the project was on the decline of the Chinook salmon. Shortly following the commitment of Sea Grant to conduct an assessment in the Thumb Area, Extension Directors and Economic Development Directors joined the project. Several people helped advise and guide the project throughout, including: Carl Osentoski (Huron County Economic Development Corporation), Joe Bixler (Michigan State University Extension) and Jim Baker (Michigan Department of Natural Resources – Fisheries).

As the project progressed, a larger and more diverse group of stakeholders began participating (Table 1.3). Nearly 100 people attended one or many of the project meetings. Many project participants hosted stakeholder workshops in their communities, presented updates at meetings, reviewed project documents, completed surveys and were exceptionally generous with their time. For their extra effort, the project team would like to thank Rita Dahmen, Kris McArdle, Marv Kuziel, Joyce Stanek, Anamika Laad, Sue Fortune, Bill and Sally Moldwin, Pat and Ron Cutler, Zygy Dworzecki, Chris Boyle, Judy Ogden, Ken Merkel, George Lauringer, Kim Kauffman, Lori Eschenburg, Greg Alexander, Kathy Johnson, Cheryl Collins, Marci Fogal, Judi Stewart, Forest Williams, HG Manos, Ken Yarsevichk, Steve Velloff, Chad Gainor and Samantha Jackson. In addition, representatives from several state agencies provided consultations and data during the project.

**Table 1.3 Participating Organizations**

<b>Project Leadership and Technical Assessment Team</b>	
Mary Bohling, Southeast Extension Educator Michigan Sea Grant	Jim Diana, Professor in Aquatic Sciences University of Michigan
Christine Vogt, Professor in Tourism Studies Michigan State University	Chi-Ok Oh, Assistant Professor in Natural Resource Economics Michigan State University
Dan McCole, Assistant Professor in Commercial Recreation Michigan State University	Lynn Vaccaro, Coastal Research Specialist Michigan Sea Grant
<b>Participating Organizations</b>	
<p><b>State Agencies:</b> MDNR– Fisheries, MDNR– Parks, East Michigan Council of Governments, MSU Extension, MDEQ Office of the Great Lakes, MI Department of Transportation, Travel Michigan</p> <p><b>County Agencies:</b> East Michigan Council of Governments, Sanilac Economic Alliance, Huron County Economic Development, Huron County Parks, Sanilac County Drain Commission, St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission, St. Clair and Tuscola County Parks and Recreation</p> <p><b>Town Officials:</b> Representatives (e.g., DDA, Harbor Master, City Council, Chamber of Commerce and Historic Preservation) from Port Austin, Port Sanilac, Port Hope, Harbor Beach, Caseville, Lexington, Port Huron, Crosswell</p>	<p><b>Tourism Organizations:</b> Thumb Area Tourism Council, Travel Michigan, Bluewater Convention and Visitors Bureau, Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail, The East Ports</p> <p><b>Small Business Owners:</b> Thomas Marina, Port Austin Kayak, Captain’s Quarters Inn, Monitor Marketing, Charter Captains, Thumbworks, Gregory AD Video, Port Sanilac Marina, Huron Shores Golf Course, Blue Water Winery, Irish Rose Woolen Shoppe, Business Soil, Bay Port Fish</p> <p><b>Fishing and Conservation Organizations:</b> Michigan Steelheaders, Thumb Chapter, Bluewater Sport Fishing Association, Lake St. Clair Walleye Association, Thumb Land Conservancy, Alliance for the Great Lakes, Huron Conservation District</p>

## Project Meetings and Workshops

The meetings and workshops were aimed at engaging stakeholders in a process of science-based status and trends analysis, followed by writing IA goals, identifying barriers, and the final phases of creating and discussing options that address the goals and consider status, trends and barriers. Ultimately, the assessment tries to build on current projects rather than give the region a completely new set of initiatives that are disconnected from other local, regional, state or national policies or initiatives.



### **Meeting 1: Identifying Relevant Issues and Project Partners**

September 21, 2009, 2 – 4 p.m., Holiday Inn, Bad Axe, MI

The aim of this first meeting was to invite community leaders as early stakeholders and champions. We secured buy-in from angler groups and county-level and community stakeholders. Early efforts were made to focus the assessment.

During this meeting, results of an initial poll of the early stakeholder list were shared. Economic issues were at the forefront of the responses with the top four concerns being: job availability (4.8 mean on 5 point scale), number of young people in the region (4.2), change in auto industry impacting the area (4.1), and the housing market (3.8). Environmental issues rated high were: spread of invasive species (4.3), quality of beaches or water (4.2), health of coastal habitats (4.1), and changes in fish populations in Lake Huron (4.0). Two other leading issues offered by respondents were: the seasonality of the region that impacts local businesses, particularly those reliant on the tourism and recreation activities; and sedimentation that affects water quality.

### **Meeting 2: Current Issues Related to Coastal Resources**

December 2, 2009, Noon – 4 p.m., Franklin Inn, Bad Axe, MI

The aim of this workshop was to further identify the most pressing concerns for coastal towns and explain how the integrated assessment process could help develop a coordinated response to the changing fishery and change economy.

Between workshops, technical assessment teams were formed. A fisheries working group, lead by MDNR with research assistance by Jim Diana, U of M, and Chi Ok Oh, MSU, examined fish populations, fishing practices, and coastal economies. Specifically, lake survey data and catch rates were used to assess trends in salmon and other species types (walleye, yellow perch, and lake trout). The tourism/recreation working group, comprised of MSU faculty Christine Vogt and Dan McCole, used indicators such as monthly charter boat trips, marina occupancy, hotel occupancy, and tourism revenues to evaluate the economic impact of the salmon collapse and current economic conditions.



**Meeting 3: Trends for Fishing, Travel and Socioeconomics in the Thumb Area**  
 May 13, 2010, Noon – 4:30 p.m., Sanilac County Extension, Sandusky, MI

This workshop featured trend presentations from the fishing and recreation and tourism working groups. Next, stakeholders discussed strategies for diversifying their fishing approach and expanding other coastal attractions and experiences for attracting tourists to the area.

Between workshops, the working groups continued their assessments by examining the causes and consequences of the issue and preparing materials and visioning exercises to improve understanding and identify possible responses to the issue.

**Meeting 4: Changes and Opportunities for the Bluewater Coast**  
 October 1, 2010, 10 a.m. – 3 p.m., Sleeper State Park, Caseville, MI

This workshop aimed to identify and prioritize possible actions for the fishing industry and coastal towns. Trends continued to be compiled and presented on topics of interest to the community stakeholders. A visioning exercise was completed using different rates of change in economic, social and environmental factors. The groups preferred a slow growth approach to development with a strong eye on quality of life and preserving landscapes.

Following the workshop, a poll of stakeholders was conducted to assess their support for various options and any unfilled niches of science-based information to help develop future options.

**Table 1.4 Results of Scenario Exercise**

	Strategies and Goals
Environment— Uniquely Coastal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop shoreline with residential structures that minimize shoreline impact (better sewer systems)</li> <li>• Support a slow recovery of Saginaw Bay</li> </ul>
Recreation & Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop more locally owned tourism operations (not state - more regional)</li> <li>• Increase the number of tourists visiting the area using recreation activities like kayaking and other non-motorized paddle sports to attract visitors</li> <li>• Connect trails and M-25 extended pavement (walking/biking and water trails)</li> <li>• Develop more public and private campgrounds – near shore; inland</li> <li>• Acquire more public land</li> <li>• Develop arts communities/open galleries/open art incubator</li> <li>• Add more recreation activities like birding, winter sports</li> <li>• Receive a high quality of life rating</li> </ul>
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grow population and stabilize across income and age demographics</li> <li>• Manage government services across a more holistic “cradle to grave” mentality</li> <li>• Enhance community centers so younger people/families are served</li> <li>• Attract more young people who will stay or make it attractive for young</li> </ul>

	<p>families to return</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer better healthcare</li> <li>• Offer better life quality</li> </ul>
Place Making & Regional Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broaden the identification and creation of new opportunities to a broader group of people</li> <li>• Increase collaboration of local groups/governments (Partnerships allows for more money and resources at state and local levels); local to local governments; county to county governments</li> <li>• Use reasoned decisions and collaboration in local policy making</li> <li>• Identify new tax revenues (e.g., bed tax on tourism lodging)</li> </ul>
Communities & Economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop local downtown business</li> <li>• Develop more livable communities and less leakage of profits and labor to outside the region</li> <li>• Encourage unique locally owned businesses that are attractive to residents and tourists</li> <li>• Develop better small town land use, main streets, and programs</li> <li>• Develop and sustain Port-to-Port tours</li> </ul>

### **Meeting 5: Progress Review and Planning Future Workshops**

January 20, 2011, Port Austin, MI

An interim meeting was held with a smaller group of stakeholders representing the counties and fishing interests to review progress and plan for future workshops. At the mid-point it was important to make sure the progress and findings thus far were useful to participating organizations and governments. Efforts were made to accentuate the roles of scientists and communities and to show that the second half of the project would have greater leadership from the community side.

### **Meeting 6: Strategies for Promoting the Thumb Area**

May 19, 2011, Noon – 4 p.m., Tuscola Technological Center, Caro, MI.

A strong need for improved marketing strategies to tourists and recreationists at a county and community level was satisfied with a workshop dedicated to marketing. The day started with Mary Bohling teaching how businesses and community groups can link to the state's tourism website [Pure Michigan Travel](#). The afternoon was filled with market research provided by Travel Michigan (Ken Yarsevich) and several other local marketing experts (Judi Stewart, Chuck Frost, Kris McArdle) presenting their marketing programs.

Between workshops, a need for a meta-analysis of community, county, regional and selected state planning documents was identified by the assessment team. Lynn Vaccaro and Christine Vogt organized planning documents and hired two stakeholders, Rita Dahlman and Kris McArdle, to review and code planning documents to identify existing priorities. These priorities were further coded and categorized by the assessment team and integrated with possible actions and priorities identified in the assessment process.

### **Meeting 7: Evaluating Possible Options**

October 17, 2011, 10 am to 4 pm, Uri's Waterfront Dining, Port Sanilac, MI.

This workshop was marketed as a particularly important meeting for all to attend. Forty-two attendees from parks, harbors, fishing, water quality, historical societies, downtown and community development, and marketing discussed and prioritized 60 different potential strategies for the region. The potential strategies came from a detailed review of leading state reports, appropriate county and local master plans, reports by two stakeholders and the Sea Grant team. During the workshop, stakeholders were grouped based on their areas of expertise and discussed a list of potential strategies that related to their topic (tourism and recreation, community development, fishing, and regional coordination). These groups determined that 19 of the 60 strategies were high priorities for the Thumb Area. During a second round of discussions and voting, stakeholders ranked the 19 strategies in terms of their importance, achievability and level of support. The workshop ended with a discussion about how strategies could be integrated to meet multiple goals and overcome barriers. Past participants who were unable to attend were involved in the same evaluation effort via a web survey. Results are available through the project website.

### **Meeting 8: Subcommittee Planning Workshops on Prioritized Options**

January 27, 2012, 9 am to 5 pm, Franklin Inn, Bad Axe, MI

This workshop used the priorities from workshop 6 to provide some examples of options to stakeholders and confirm the existing or potential investment made toward various options. The

day was segmented into three sessions to specialize the larger group around working groups from workshop 6 (see list above). An idea session on branding, including making lists of images and words describing the Thumb Area, was conducted. A presentation on and discussion of the M-25 Heritage route status occurred which led to a smaller group of stakeholders volunteering to “activate” that effort. Since then, a draft pre-management plan document was drafted by Chad Gainor, Business Soil, Harbor Beach and has been shared with other stakeholders. A presentation by the Thumb Land Conservancy was made to provide another approach to resource stewardship that is popular in other parts of the state (e.g., Leelanau Peninsula, Little Traverse Conservancy in the northern part of the lower peninsula and the upper peninsula of Michigan).

From this workshop, the scientists were better able to complete the final rendition of options, tools and current projects for presentation at the final workshop 8.

### **Meeting 9: Final Project Meeting on Implementing Various Options**

April 26, 2012, 11:30 am to 4 pm, Old Town Hall Winery, Lexington, MI

The final workshop was held to provide an overview of the project findings and to focus on feasible options for achieving the goals identified by stakeholders. A total of 50 people attended the meeting. The scientists and stakeholders currently active in the themed area made presentations. For branding and marketing, Samantha Jackson and Rita Dahmen each gave a presentation on marketing practices or potential marketing strategies. For recreation and tourism product development, presentations by stakeholders (Carl Osentoski, Chris Boyle, Steve Vellof and Connie Currie) on bike routes, marinas, and wineries were made. For natural resource protection and access, presentations were made by DNR on state park planning, a fishing organization (Judy Ogden) and a commercial fishing business (Bay Port Fishery). Joe Bixler, MSU Extension concluded the workshop by calling all participants to anticipate a report in mid fall 2012 and attend a stakeholder planned and lead meeting sometime in November 2012 (tentative date of Nov. 13).

Following the meeting, a web-based survey was sent to workshop participants and all others on the comprehensive mailing list. The survey asked to provide ratings and rankings of specific ideas for implementing in the region. Open-ended questions were included to solicit stories and opinions of how the Integrated Assessment process influenced their involvement in the community or region. Scientists used the results of this survey to emphasize certain options over others.

Thirty respondents completed the online survey. Twenty-four of the 50 attendees to Workshop 8 participated. A range of 9 to 13 respondents attended one of the earlier meetings or workshops. Seven respondents attended the mid-project meeting, which was made up of initial stakeholders. While there was some attrition over the course of the project, the participation in our final workshop and survey suggest strong interest by a growing group of stakeholders in the Thumb Area. The geographic representation of respondents approximately matches the miles of coastline in the region. One-third of the respondents live/work in Huron County, followed by Sanilac, north coastline of St. Clair, and Tuscola counties. Twenty percent of respondents live/work outside the region. The respondents are a mix of individuals who came because of personal or civic interest (63% of respondents), job responsibilities (56%), networking (47%), volunteer work (31%), business development (28%), professional development (25%), or elected officials (3%); with many serving in many capacities or roles.



The themed topics that emerged and changed over the course of the assessment were evaluated on relevance for a final time. An overall theme of “enhancing the coastal area” received the highest vote of relevance (2.6 on 3 pt. relevance scale), followed by coastal resource protection and access (2.4), recreation and tourism development (2.4), and branding and marketing (2.2). Branding and marketing was the only category with an equal mix of votes of “high relevance” (13 selected) and “some relevance” (13 selected).

Respondents rated effectiveness of the overall project. The results were fairly consistent across the four project goals. Most respondents selected “highly” or “somewhat” effective at addressing the goals. Four to six people rated the goals as a “little effective” or “not effective.” Accomplishing the promotion of collaboration and coordination very slightly edged out the other goals. Over half found the recreation profiles to be very useful to the region and only four respondents had not seen them. Evaluation of the project was also measured by the benefits or changes occurring from the process. The top benefits were: new professional or personal relationships (69% of respondents), better understanding of tourism and recreation in the Thumb Area (69%), better understanding of Lake Huron’s fishery (66%), more collaboration between communities (59%), increased motivation to implement changes (59%), and a more regional focus when considering issues or solutions (55%). Other benefits were rated but received less than 50%. Some benefits expressed by participants include:

*Port Sanilac is using much of the research results that have been presented so far in developing long and short-term strategies and goals.*

*I was quite taken by several speakers at the last meeting on how they found this side of the state and started their businesses here and to learn that they have been successful and growing. This proves that with the right mix, all reasonable things are possible.*

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# *STRATEGIES AND OPTIONS*

## **Chapter 2. Natural Resource Protection and Access**

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Much of the discussion during our integrated assessment focused on the changing natural resource base, as well as documenting natural resource potential and access for multiple purposes. In particular, early discussion focused on the status of the fishery and changes that have driven economic change in Michigan's Thumb Area. This section divides natural resources into the fishery resources and coastal lands and details outcomes of the integrated assessment in each of these categories.

There were three prioritized strategies related to natural resources. These were: 1) conserve a network of shoreline, riparian, and wetland areas for water quality, public access, and recreation; 2) expand community involvement in environmental issues; and 3) promote local fishing opportunities. Elements of strategy 2 and 3 are components of the fishery resource section, while elements of 1 and 2 are components of the coastal lands section.

### ***2.1 The Fishery Resource***

#### **Status and Trends**

The main reason for initiating this integrated assessment was the change in the Lake Huron fish community, which has resulted in massive reductions in sport and charter fishing throughout the region. Since these activities have high economic value (Lupi 2005), this change translates into a loss of revenue for businesses of the region. Unfortunately, there are no detailed analyses of the economic losses in the Thumb Area as a result of the declining fishery.

Lake Huron has changed dramatically since the end of the twentieth century, due mainly to invasive species and their increasing abundance in the lake (Dobiesz et al. 2005). Until 1990, zebra mussels and quagga mussels were at a low density throughout the lake, and there were abundant alewife and smelt populations, as well as a very dynamic salmon fishery. In the late 1900s through 2001, Chinook salmon dominated the sport fishery of Lake Huron, with up to 150,000 fish harvested annually (Figure 2.1, from MDNR 2012b). They were followed by walleye and lake trout in terms of important large predators. However, in 2002 the fishery began a serious decline so that by 2005 harvest of Chinook salmon was less than 20,000. At the same time, lake trout showed an increase until 2004, but then a decline in harvest until 2008. Meanwhile, walleye harvest, which was less than 100,000 fish per year throughout the 1900s, suddenly increased dramatically to over 300,000 fish per year in 2007.

The declining salmon population was due in large part to a collapse of the alewife forage base, which had difficulties due to both the high abundance of salmon and the abundance of mussels. Salmon abundance was high because of large stocking efforts, together with undocumented natural reproduction in Canadian waters, which accounted for over 50% of the fish in the lake. Zebra and quagga mussels fed by filtering plankton from the water, clearing the water column and reducing food abundance for benthic invertebrates (Nalepa et al. 2007) and alewife (Pothoven and Madenjian 2011). The fishery change is well summarized by a fact sheet produced for the Lake Huron integrated assessment and indicates that the expansion of native fish species, such as walleye (Fielder et al. 2007) and smallmouth bass, and the reduction of Chinook salmon and other stocked salmonids (Johnson et al. 2010) continues through today (The Changing Fishery of Lake Huron, available at project website). Since the charter fishery mainly targeted salmon, it also experienced a significant reduction and,

compared with the 1990s, there are only about half as many trips per year today. The salmon harvest by charter anglers also declined from over 12,000 Chinook salmon harvested in 2002 to only about 1,000 in 2008 (Figure 2.2, from MDNR 2012b).

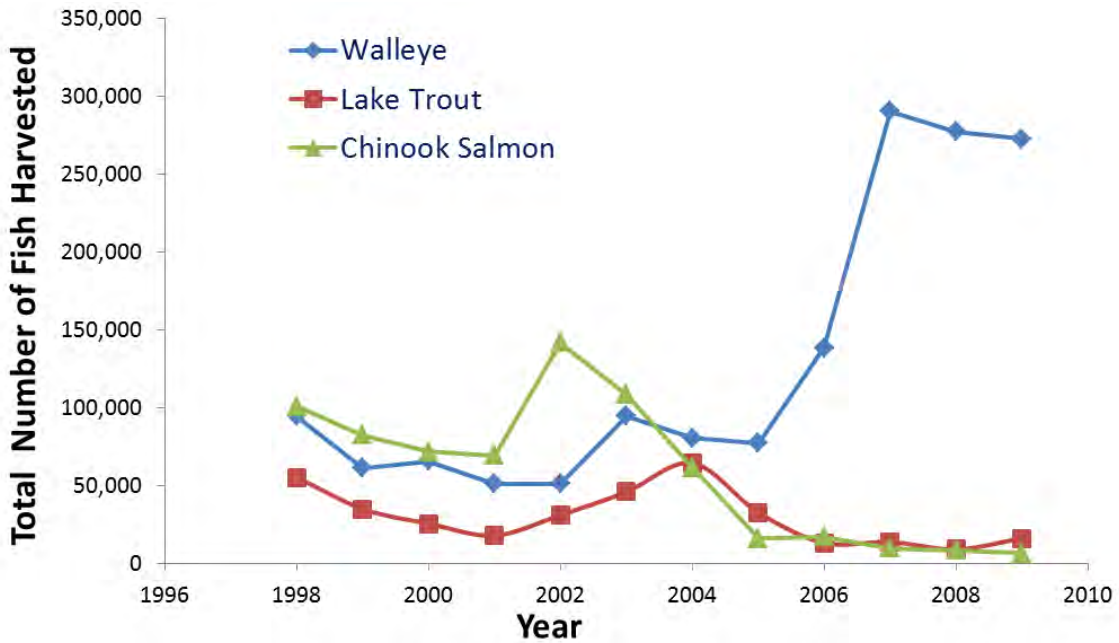


Figure 2.1 Annual numerical harvests of the major predatory fish species from Lake Huron by recreational anglers, excluding charter trips. Source of data: MDNR 2012b.

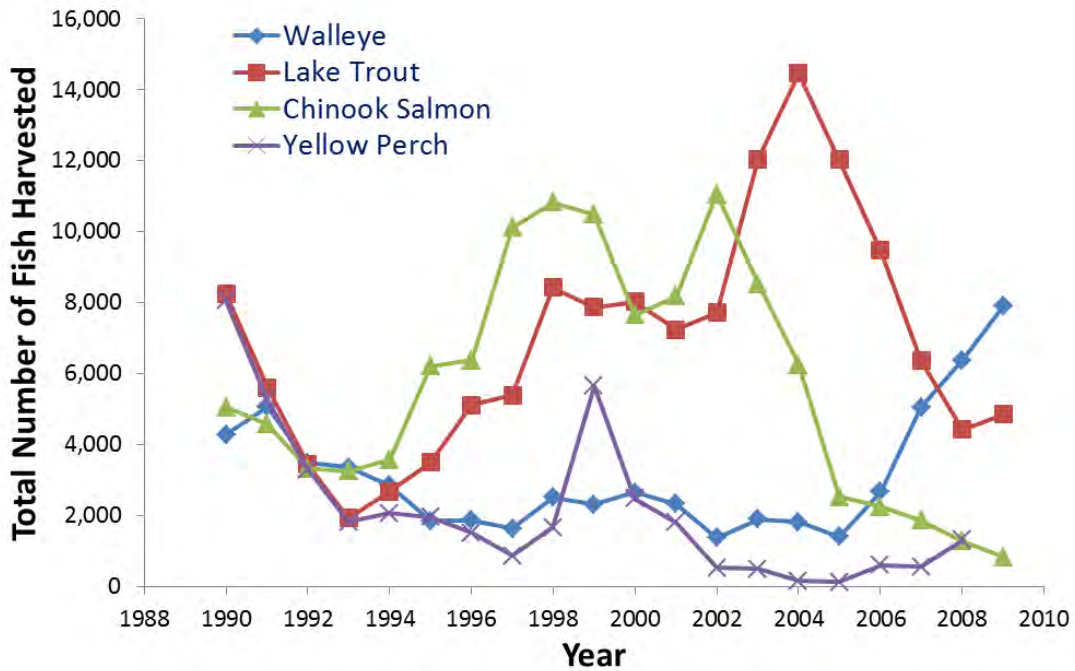
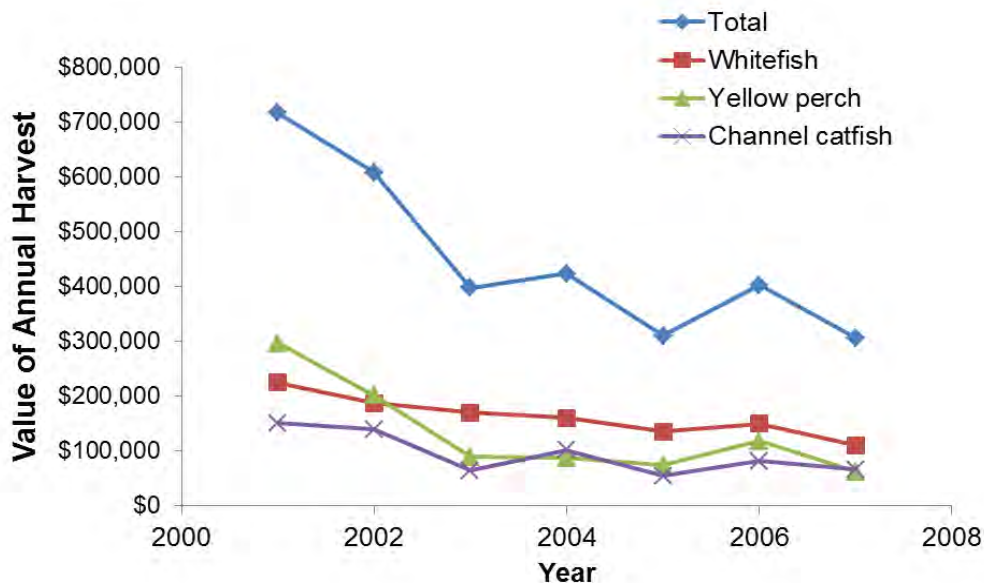


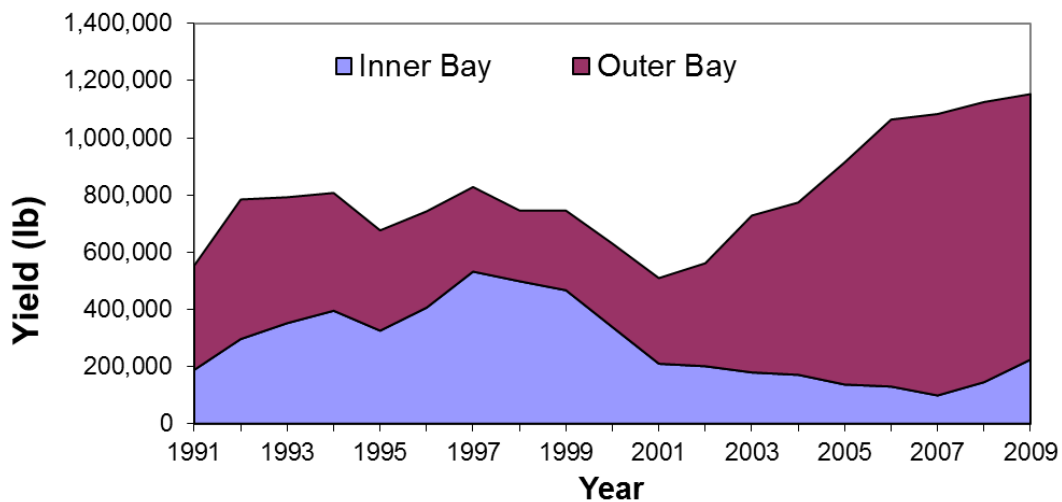
Figure 2.2 Annual numerical harvests of common fish species from Lake Huron during charter fishing trips. Source of data: MDNR 2012b.

As reflected by the fishery, other changes in the Lake Huron ecosystem have also been dramatic. Since the lake is continuous with water from Lake Michigan, for many years the two lakes were considered to be virtually identical in most aspects. However, with the large mussel biomass and the declining fish communities today, its trophic status and overall condition is more similar to Lake Superior than Lake Michigan (Barbiero et al. 2009). Changes that occurred in the early 2000s have not reversed themselves, and in fact, alewife populations remain low, mussel populations high, and Lake Huron seems to be in a relatively stable state with native fish communities rebounding and salmonids declining (Stapanian 2007). This status is largely sustained by the abundance of invasive species, such as zebra mussels, quagga mussels, and round goby as well as reductions in nutrient levels and trophic status (Barbiero et al. 2009).

Currently, commercial fishing is a large industry in Saginaw Bay and there is an opportunity to expand commercial whitefish harvests from the main basin of southern Lake Huron. The commercial fishery has declined in inner Saginaw Bay over recent years, with the annual value reduced from about \$700,000 in 2001 to \$300,000 in 2007 (Figure 2.3, from MDNR 2012a). Harvest in the outer bay has grown for whitefish from 400,000 to over 800,000 pounds during the same time period (Figure 2.4). The direct harvest produces relatively limited economic activity, but expansion of commercial fishing to open Lake Huron could still be significant to the coastal communities along the eastern side of the Thumb. Project stakeholders discussed the possibility of promoting commercial fishing as part of the region’s cultural heritage along with the region’s thriving farms, farmers markets and restaurants.



**Figure 2.3 Annual values of fish harvested in the commercial fishery in inner Saginaw Bay. Source of data: MDNR 2012a.**



**Figure 2.4 Harvest of lake whitefish by commercial operations in Saginaw Bay. Source of data: MDNR 2012a.**

### Priorities and Barriers

There are a number of barriers limiting fishing in the Thumb region, as well as high priority activities that could stimulate new tourism related to fishing. The main barrier is that preferred fish species, particularly salmon, have declined and probably will remain low for the foreseeable future (MDNR 2010). As a result, there is a poor public perception of the fishery, and anglers who desire to charter fish for salmon head for Lake Michigan instead. Coupled with this is an overall change in outdoor recreation, as young people have less interest in fishing and hunting and more interest in ecotourism and outdoor challenge sports (Dann et al. 2008). As a result, many of the fishing businesses, including charter and bait shops, have either left the area or closed, while those that remain struggle to survive. Of course, the economic downturn of recent years has also hit in the Thumb Area particularly hard, so that the overall economy is quite poor. Native sport fishes such as smallmouth bass have rebounded in several areas (Schaeffer et al. 2008), but few anglers have discovered this fishery in the near-shore environment and the smallmouth bass fishery has stimulated relatively little economic activity. Fishing for walleye has increased dramatically, mainly focused on sport fishing by boat owners rather than charter fishing. Finally, promotion of fishing currently targets different people than promotion of other tourism, so coastal communities promoting tourism seem to work separately, rather than combining fishing promotion with promotion of other activities.

### Options

A number of options for enhancing tourism and use of fishery resources were considered throughout the integrated assessment. These included the following:

1. Expansion of marinas – in particular, marinas with fish cleaning stations – to facilitate sport fishing, as well as partnerships with restaurants to provide hook-to-cook programs, where tourists take in their harvested fish and have them cooked for dinner.
2. Expansion of fishing tournaments in the Thumb Area.
3. Diversification of charter operations, which previously focused mainly on salmonids, to include sightseeing, diving, and fishing for other species.
4. Introduction of guided fishing from shore or using kayaks has much potential, as this fishery has expanded dramatically, but access to it must be developed in order for expansion to occur.

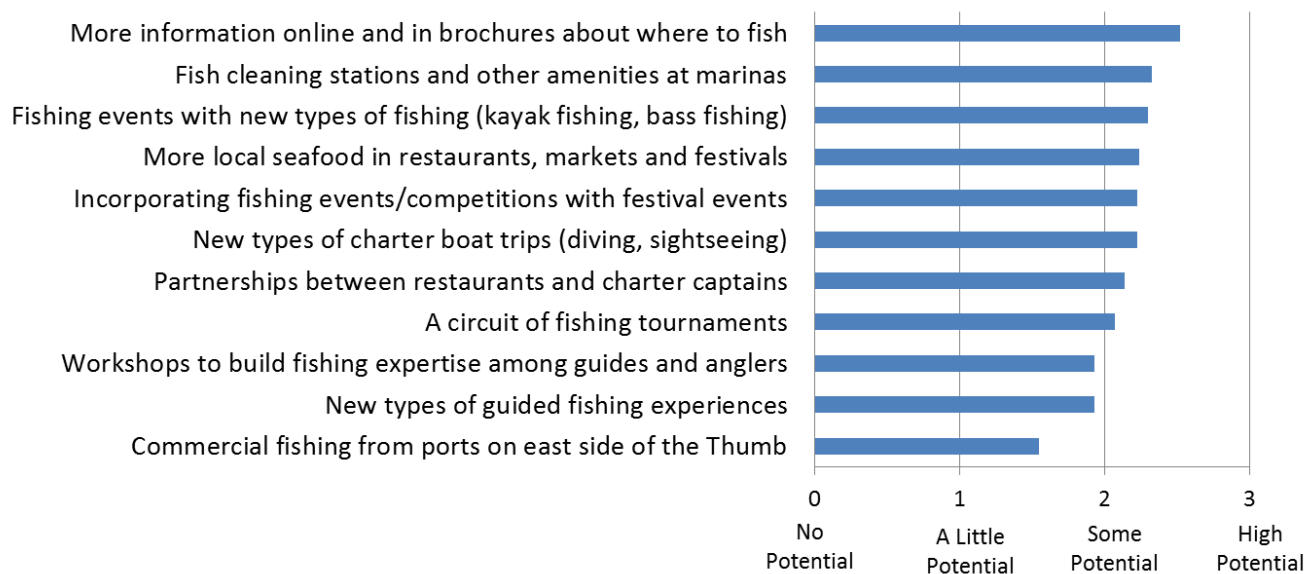
5. For all of these options to be successful, there is a need for more information on fishing opportunities and locations. These could be made available at visitor centers, on the Internet, or at local tourist events.
6. Since participation in fishing by youth has declined dramatically, some targeted youth events to stimulate interest in fishing could be important.
7. Expansion of commercial fishing and related businesses.

One special activity that stimulates fishing-related tourism has been the expansion of fishing tournaments. These are common throughout the state, although less common within the Thumb Area. Generally, tournaments are connected with local festivals, concert series, or agriculture activities such as the cherry harvest in Traverse City. The Thumb Area could consider creating a circuit of tournaments, moving throughout the region over time, to take advantage of the differences in the local culture as well as the local fishery. While most tournaments are large in size and offer large cash rewards, another avenue is to support youth fishing by developing high school or college teams. These tournaments may not only target the major species like salmon, but also diversify into alternative species. For example, the University of Michigan has a fishing team and participates in an annual walleye tournament with Michigan State University, the Big Ten bass fishing championship with all conference universities, and individuals who fish in an annual steelhead tournament coordinated by Grand Valley State University. Similar youth tournaments could be spread throughout the Thumb region to further diversify fishing.

Commercial fishing and locally caught whitefish could be further promoted as part of the Thumb Area's unique heritage. Although fishing has declined somewhat in recent years due to a variety of market factors, the presence of a commercial fishing dock can add a unique character to a town's waterfront. State fishery managers are considering opening up areas of southern Lake Huron's main basin to commercial fishing. Such a change would require careful review of whitefish stocks in the lake and discussions with towns along the eastern side of the Thumb that might host a new fishing operation. Fish Town in Leland, Michigan has been very successful in attracting tourists to view the historic gillnetting vessels and buildings there and to sample the wares that are part of that culture (Chiarappa 2005). The linkage of commercial fishing in Saginaw Bay and the Thumb with other types of tourist activities, such as historic fishing sites, fish tours, and restaurants are other ways commercial fishing could contribute more to the local economy.

Beyond the expansion of local fishing opportunities, a second strategy is expanding community involvement in the fishery. Most of the activities already listed in this section are related to community involvement. Youth stewardship projects have been developed through Michigan Sea Grant, and opportunities could be expanded. The use of web cams for both above- and below-water viewing could be an important means of attracting scuba divers or kayakers. Cameras may also promote understanding of the migration of important sport fishes. Finally, the linkage of fishing with local communities would stimulate a wider involvement in the activity and income generated by fishing throughout the region.

After the final public meeting (April 2012), researchers conducted an electronic survey of stakeholder's opinions about the options presented. Stakeholders evaluated how much potential 11 different specific strategies had for promoting Lake Huron's fish and fishing opportunities (Figure 2.5). People felt there was definitely a need for more information about fishing opportunities and more amenities, such as fish cleaning stations, to support anglers in the area. Special events such as tournaments and integrated festivals as well as promotion of local seafood were also seen as promising ideas.



**Figure 2.5 Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: How much potential do the following strategies have for promoting Lake Huron's fish and fishing opportunities? Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, N= 30.**

### Tools and Resources

A number of tools and resources have been developed to support fishing in the region, such as the fact sheet on the changing fishery in Lake Huron. In addition, this project has produced recreational profiles of charter fishing, which will be useful to communities as they make decisions on whether to expand these activities. Michigan Sea Grant has also focused on the commercial fishery by preparing [Wild Caught and Close to Home: Selecting and Preparing Great Lakes Whitefish](#) to focus on a locally and sustainably caught fish species.

A number of other organizations have also produced materials online to stimulate fishery utilization by providing information on both fishing and recreation associated with fishing. The *Tournament Trail* website and book ([Tournament Trail](#)) describes the location and timing of tournaments in Lake Michigan; something similar would be of value for Lake Huron. Leland Fish Town is a historic commercial fishing village, and something of that nature may also be a way to stimulate tourism and interest in the Saginaw Bay Region, possibly using Bayport Fish Company. The Fish Point Lodge is another type of opportunity, using hunting and fishing lodges that were common around the turn of the twentieth century to promote duck hunting, ice fishing, and other recreation. Fish Point Lodge continues that today and focuses on activities to recreate that natural resource heritage in the region.

### Current Projects

The final component of the integrated assessment is to list and summarize current projects underway in the area. Beyond the ideas and organizations already listed, Bayport Fish Company is involved in much of the commercial fishing activity throughout this region and sells products through its market as well as other local businesses. Another group focused on sport fishing – the Blue Water Sport Fishing Association – is involved in both charter and general sport fishing in an attempt to stimulate more fishing.



## ***2.2 Coastal Lands***

The various meetings of the integrated assessment resulted in two priority strategies that concern protection, access, and participation in coastal lands. These included: 1) conserve a network of shoreline, riparian, and wetland areas for water quality, public access, and recreation; and 2) expand community involvement in environmental issues. As the project progressed, we developed databases of information on shoreline and overall land use patterns throughout the Thumb.

### **Status and Trends**

There is a relatively low abundance of conservation and recreational lands in the four target counties (Kramer and Dolan 2010) and few conservation easements within this region, compared to other parts of Michigan. However, there are several areas worthy of preservation and promotion, including: unique habitats such as beach, ridge, and swale habitats; the tallest sand dunes on Lake Huron; intact forests; as well as streams and drainage corridors. In addition, these areas with high biodiversity have exceptional locations for bird sightings during migration, as well as kayaking, hiking, fishing, biking, beach access, and heritage access throughout the coast.

There are 49 acknowledged public beaches with access sites and 39 private beaches in the Thumb (Figure 2.6). About 57% of these beaches are public, compared to 72% statewide. While this region may have fewer public access sites than other parts of the state, there is still at least one park or harbor every seven miles along the coastline. In this area, there is relatively limited abundance of public access and public land for recreational purposes relative to most regions of the state.

Since public lands are limited, other options, including private land and nature conservancies, have become even more important in accessing and preserving coastal lands. Our meetings also revealed that there are currently limited opportunities for use of private lands. Some of this is due to the desire by landowners to limit foot or bike traffic near their property, as well as their desire to use farmland as efficiently as possible, rather than to allow conservation easements or access near drains and streams. Most of the coastline is privately owned, with small residential lots and occasional larger group sites owned by homeowner associations. Because of the preponderance of private lands and limited public access, there is relatively little online about the recreational and natural features of the Thumb region.



Figure 2.6 Distribution of public access sites in the Thumb Area. Source: Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail.

## Priorities and Options

Strategies for enhancing public access and conservation of shoreline areas include: 1) protect more land, 2) promote greater use of land already protected, and 3) educate and engage residents in stewardship of coastal areas. During our meetings, several unusual tactics were also considered as options that could increase public access and land conservation, including:

1. Focus on the use of outdoor camps, which are mainly utilized during summer months and may be available for seasonal access and off-season programs during other times of the year.
2. Public right-of-ways may become associated with private lands, such as bike trails.
3. Many property owners have developed an interest in encouraging the public to use components of their land, including providing picnic tables or other kinds of resources on their private land or business properties.
4. Increase signage in appropriate areas to indicate that people are welcome to use a particular location as a public access site, biking area, or kayaking area.
5. Utility line corridors and old railroad tracks may also provide public access to areas and can be used for trails and paths.

6. Access points such as road ends, road stream crossings, beaches below the high-water mark, state game and wildlife areas, and sanctuaries or lands with easements all exist throughout the region, but need consideration and recognition from the DNR/DEQ. These access points may need new signage and appropriate development and maintenance. Currently, the public may not realize they can use these locations for access.
7. More information about recreational access, particularly for birding or kayaking trails, may promote greater use of these resources and allow for better interest in preservation of natural features.

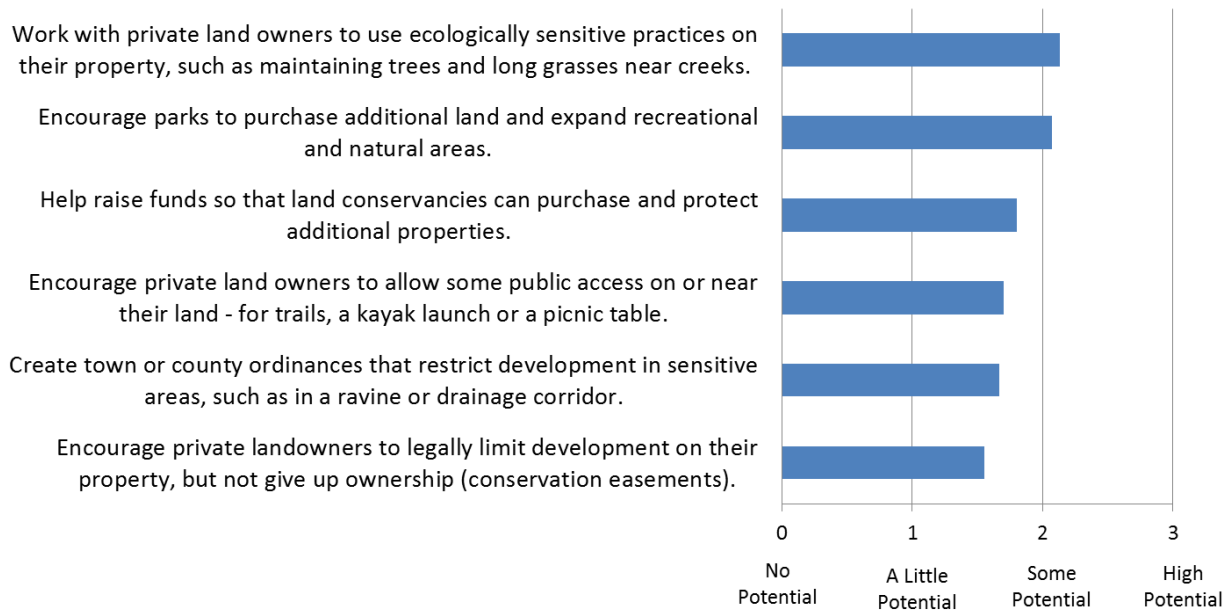
During the final stakeholder survey, we asked project participants about a number of specific ideas for encouraging greater use and appreciation of existing natural resources in the Thumb Area (Figure 2.7). Many of the ideas deemed to have the most potential are relatively easy and inexpensive, such as developing and distributing more information about parks, state game areas, outdoor activities and public access points to waterways. These ideas were generated throughout the project to expand recreational use and marketing of the region, which are discussed in the next two sections.



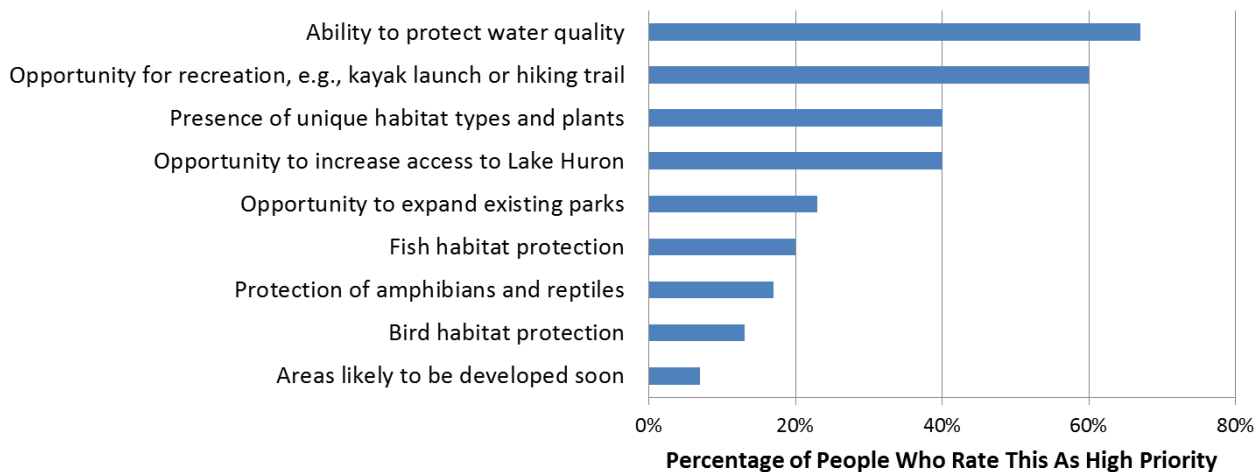
**Figure 2.7 Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: How much potential do the following strategies have for encouraging more use and appreciation of existing natural resources? Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, n= 30.**

Conserving additional lands for recreation and wildlife habitat is a more challenging and long-term goal than increasing use of existing lands. However, stakeholders elevated this strategy as a high priority during our prioritization workshop in 2011. After the final public workshop in 2012, we surveyed stakeholders about specific options for increasing land protection (Figure 2.8).

As a follow-up question, we asked stakeholders about their priorities for selecting additional lands for conservation acquisitions (Figure 2.9). Water quality and recreational access were the two highest priorities. This type of information can guide both the selection as well as communication and education efforts surrounding land conservation in the Thumb Area. Michigan Sea Grant is currently developing a mini-report about habitat priorities in the Thumb and the use of conservation easements.



**Figure 2.8** Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: “How much potential do the following strategies have for promoting conservation in the Thumb?” Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, n= 30.



**Figure 2.9** Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: “Which criteria should be most important when prioritizing land for protection in the Thumb? Select up to three choices.” Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, n= 30.

## Tools and Resources

In terms of land protection, there is potential for protecting private land through a series of legal means such as conservation easements. These easements allow the landowner to maintain ownership of their land, but restrict future development to maintain the parts of their property in semi-natural states. There are tax incentives to produce conservation easements and a wide variety of ways land can be conserved under these agreements. Additional options for land protection include sale of development rights to the state, donation of lands to private or public organizations, purchase of lands by private or

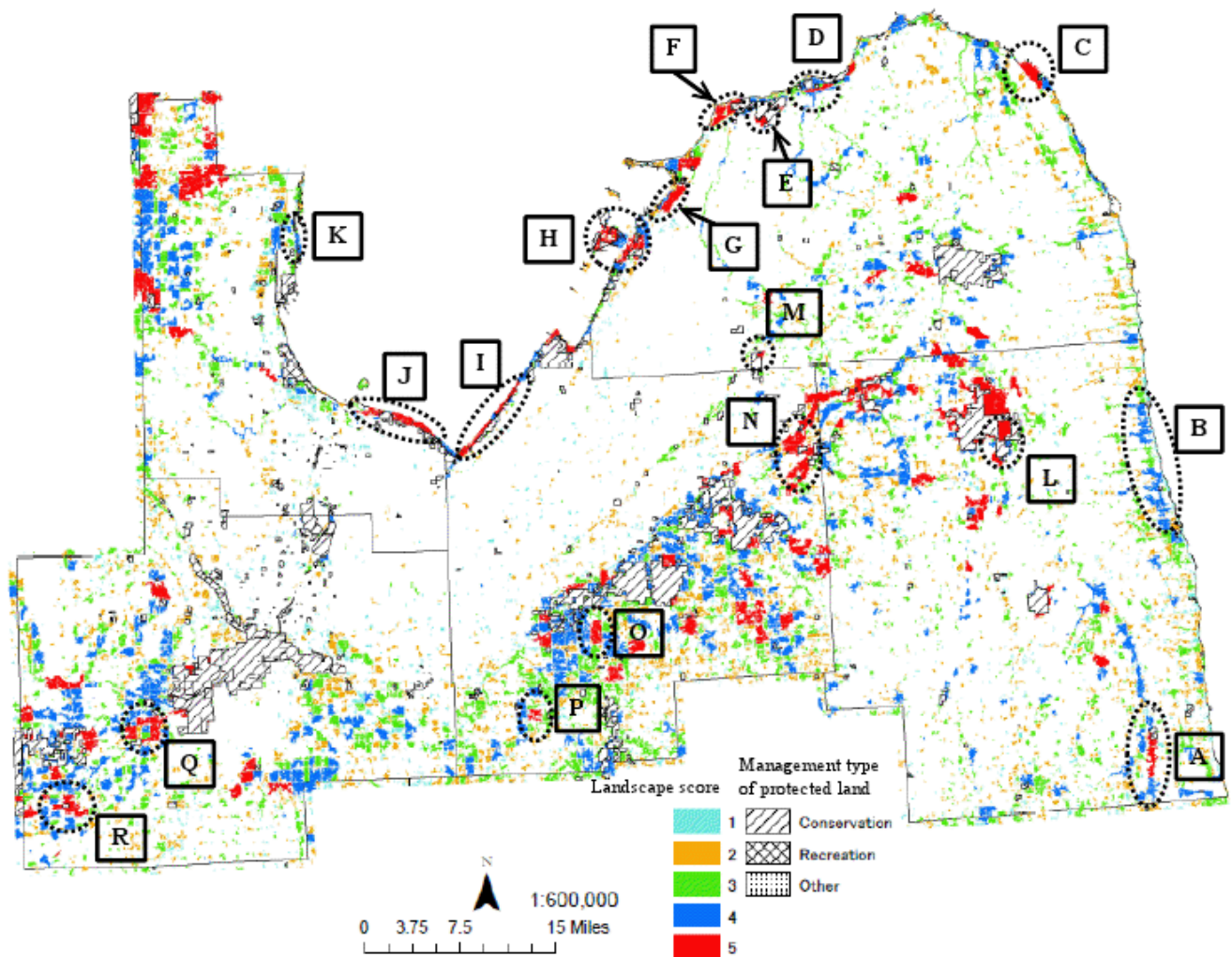
public organizations, issuing of land-to-land banks, and town or county ordinances to protect certain natural features.

Land conservancies are popular throughout the state. Most conservancy organizations provide legal advice for protection, focus on educating the public, may hold and enforce easements developed under their protocols, and may maintain land as sanctuaries. Within the Thumb region, three groups were noted as being particularly important: the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy, the Michigan Nature Association, and the Thumb Land Conservancy. The Thumb Land Conservancy probably has the highest relevance to the areas included in this integrated assessment.

Unlike the protection of lands with conservation easements, the purchase of land for conservation has to focus on extremely valuable land from a natural perspective. This requires prioritization of the coastline, as well as understanding what resources will be protected when land is purchased. Certain priorities might include: high levels of biodiversity, protection of land that promotes water quality such as wetland or riparian areas, protection of migratory routes for birds, protection of areas that provide recreational access to Lake Huron, and connection of natural areas into a larger network. There are a variety of groups and tools available to support these activities, including:

- Eastern Michigan Council of Governments produced the *Saginaw Bay Coastal Resource Guide*, which includes a series of maps and GIS layers pertinent to planning and conservation of Saginaw Bay's coastal area. (Available at: [EMCOG](#))
- The Nature Conservancy makes available a *Conservation and Recreational Land Data Base*, which identifies all areas that are already conserved or protected in some way. (Available at: [The Nature Conservancy](#))
- NOAA's *Habitat Priority Planner*, which provides GIS analysis tools for delineating and comparing areas based on land cover, size and proximity to waterways. (Available at: [NOAA's Habitat Priority Planner](#))
- *The Sweetwater Sea – an International Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Lake Huron*, is a recent report that analyzes threats and priorities for conservation for the Lake Huron basin. (Available at: [MISeaGrant-Biodiversity](#))
- Thumb Land Conservancy is a small organization that is dedicated to land protection in the Thumb Area. They can also provide permitting guidance to landowners with wetlands on their property through the *Thumb Wetland Assistance Pilot Program* ([Thumb Land](#)).

Michigan Sea Grant has been collecting some of these resources and using GIS to evaluate areas in the Thumb that are high priorities for additional conservation (Figure 2.10). These maps and resources will be made available through a companion report on the project website.



**Figure 2.10 Location of 18 high priority sites for conservation based on their biodiversity and natural characteristics. Scale from 1-5 with 5 (red) indicating highest priority. Source: Preliminary GIS analysis conducted by Michigan Sea Grant.**

Information transfer is a difficult issue. While there are a number of resources that can assist in outreach to the public, there still remains relatively little information about the Thumb region in the published and web literature. Organizations available to help develop outreach materials include the Eastern Michigan Council of Governments, Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan's Great Bay, the Thumb Area Tourism Council, the Bluewater Conservation and Visitors Bureau, and Pure Michigan.

The final priority strategy for coastal lands was to involve the community in both stewardship and recreation. There are a number of youth stewardship projects that have been developed throughout the state and in the Thumb region. These often focus on environmental science, but may also become focused on agriculture, historical preservation, or tourism and recreational development. Programs may include volunteer monitoring of environmental conditions, field trips for children and adults, and involvement of homeowners in management of their lands. Volunteer monitoring programs have been run by the Michigan Corp (MICORP), which focuses on lake and stream monitoring programs. Youth stewardship has been a major goal of the Michigan Sea Grant College Program, the MSU Extension Service, and many other programs. Homeowner education is often conducted by land conservancies that not only focus on developing conservation easements, but also on the management of private lands

for conservation purposes. Resources such as the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative and organizations such as the Audubon Society aim at education of homeowners and youth. Some new tools and resources identified as important in this project included: birding and fishing access guides, prioritization of natural features, and gap analysis or site assessment of the features already existing in the region. One project that bodes well for the future is the State Park Strategic Planning Efforts that are occurring, linking various state parks along the Thumb coastline. Instead of these parks having their own individual strategic plans, attempts are being made to link the strategic plans so each can have special functions and understand those functions in relationship to other parks in the region.

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## Chapter 3. Recreation and Tourism Product Development

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### ***3.1 Background***

The collapse of the Chinook salmon fishery contributed to such a significant decrease in overall visitation to the Thumb, which in return contributed to the socio-economic problems described in Chapter 1, thus much of the discussion during the Integrated Assessment process involved the need to diversify the recreation and tourism “product” throughout the region. In the fields of recreation and tourism, the term “product” refers to an experience rather than just a tangible good. The concept of a “recreation and tourism product” in this context involves using the region’s resources to facilitate specific leisure experiences. Facilitation of these experiences could involve public, private and non-profit provision of facilities, amenities, services and events as well as access to resources. Often this facilitation requires a coordinated approach in areas such as investments, grant applications, education, promotion and local legislation and policy. Improvement of a region’s recreation and tourism “product” can benefit the region by attracting outside spending and investment through tourism while enhancing quality of life for residents.

### ***3.2 Status and Trends***

As reported in Chapter 1, after the collapse of the Chinook salmon fishery in 2004, a time when Michigan’s economy was slumping, the Thumb region experienced sharp decreases in the number of tourism businesses and the amount of traffic and visitation at the region’s state parks. Although the economic condition throughout the state likely contributed to this drop in visitation, stakeholders felt that the drop had more to do with the decrease in people coming to the region to fish for salmon. DNR reports support this notion as the harvest rates for Chinook salmon from 2003 – 2008 decreased sharply in Lake Huron. Moreover, during that same time period, Lake Michigan saw a 5.8% annual increase in harvest rates for Chinook, suggesting that the drop in Lake Huron was not just a dip resulting from Michigan’s sagging economy.

#### **Fishing**

Although the Chinook salmon fishery showed little hope of rebounding anytime soon, other species, such as walleye, were responding well to the decrease in salmon as evidenced by a sharp increase in the harvest rate of walleye on Lake Huron between 2003 and 2008 (Wesander & Clapp, 2009). However, the increase in walleye catch rates did not substitute for the loss of salmon. As previously mentioned the loss of the salmon affected the charter boat industry, which targeted salmon. The salmon harvest by charter anglers also declined from over 12,000 Chinook salmon harvested in 2002 to only about 1,000 in 2008 (Figure 2.2, from MDNR 2012b). Part of this decrease was likely due to fewer available charter boat trips. Stakeholders informed researchers that many charter boat captains had moved from the area. The DNR Charter Boat Report (Wesander & Clapp, 2009) supports this by showing a 13.5% annual decrease in the number of charter boat trips in Lake Huron between 2003 and 2008. Although there has been an overall decline in charter boat fishing throughout the Great Lakes during that time, the decrease in Lake Huron is much more pronounced than in Lake Michigan, for example, which saw an annual decrease in charter boat trips of only 1.8%. The impact of the salmon fishery collapse on sport and charter boat fishing is clear; the fact that so many other tourism indicators decreased throughout the Thumb region suggests that the region’s tourism industry was overly reliant on one activity: salmon fishing.

## Special Events

According to Travel Michigan (2008), visiting friends and family was the most popular purpose for visits to the Thumb region in 2008, followed by special events. According to stakeholders, special events seem to be an attractive option for growing visitation, and the success of a number of festivals supports this. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the *Cheeseburger in Caseville* festival, which has grown from a three-day end-of-summer celebration with 5,000 people in 1999 to a 10-day festival that attracts over 50,000 people each year ([Cheeseburger in Caseville](#)). Other examples of successful festivals include well-established events such as the *Harbor Beach Maritime Festival*, billed in its 12<sup>th</sup> year as “one of the world’s largest personal watercraft events,” and recent events such as the *Antique Boat Show* in Port Sanilac which was created in 2009 and has successfully grown each year since.

## Farmers Markets

Another type of event, farmers markets, has also seen growth in recent years throughout the Thumb region. According to the Michigan Farmers Market Association, there has been a 200% increase in the number of farmers markets in Michigan and there are at least a dozen in the Thumb Area. Although some are small, others, like the Port Austin Farmers Market, which now has over 150 vendors despite being founded in 2005, have seen rapid growth. Given that the Thumb is largely agricultural, this growth shows development of a recreational “product” that is consistent with a growing trend and makes good use of the area’s resources. Similar to farmers markets, two wineries with tasting rooms, one near Bad Axe and one in Lexington, have opened in the region since 2006, representing another leisure experience linked to local foods.

## Recreational Boating

Not surprisingly, recreational boating has also been a historically common activity in the Thumb region. In 2008, 20% of visitors reported that boating was a main interest of the region. A Google map analysis conducted by the researchers in 2010 estimated that the Thumb Area has 1,300 – 1,400 marina slips. However, it is unclear how many of those slips are used. There are several indications that recreational boating is experiencing a period of stagnation or even slight decline. Since 2005, new boat sales, boat ownership and boating participation have been at lower levels than highs from the late 1990s (NMMA, 2010). This downturn began when gas prices rose throughout the early 2000’s and continued during the economic crisis that began in 2008. Although boating has rebounded from other economic downturns in the past, it remains to be seen what effect the economic crisis of 2008 and the slow recovery will have on boating, but signs so far point to a trend toward small inexpensive boats. As an example, there has been an 83% decline in the annual sales of in board cruisers from 2002 to 2011 (NMMA, 2011). In addition to the challenges caused by the recession, it is possible that recreational boating was already in a state of stagnant growth even before the sharp rise in oil prices in 2005 and the economic crisis of 2008. In 2009, about 2% fewer Americans participated in boating than in 1990, despite the fact that the overall population increased by about 23% during that time. This lack of growth does not seem to be caused by the latest economic downturn, as it has been nine years (2000) since Americans last participated in boating at 1990 levels (NMMA, 2010). In the Thumb, the combination of recession (especially in Southeast Michigan), high gas prices and the collapse of the Chinook salmon fishery seem to have formed a “perfect storm” causing a 50% decrease in the number of marina business between 2004 and 2008 (US Census County Business Patterns). Despite a decline in recreational boating, at least in larger powerboats, many people still participate in boating on the Great Lakes and a \$6.5 million renovation of Port Austin’s state harbor and waterfront will likely present an opportunity to attract additional visitors to that community.

Although not the traditional type of boating that the Thumb has been known for, one bright spot has been the growth of kayaking in the Thumb. Stakeholders reported seeing an increase in cars with

kayaks in recent years, which is consistent with a national trend. According to the Outdoor Industry Association (2009), there was a 15.2 percent increase from 2007-2008 in 25-44 year olds who chose kayaking as a leisure time activity. In recent years, the opening of a kayak shop in Port Austin, the creation of the Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail, and the increased use in promotional materials of photos of a unique coastal rock feature, Turnip Rock (Figure 3.1), demonstrate efforts to attract visitors to the region to participate in kayaking.



**Figure 3.1 Turnip Rock in Port Austin, MI**

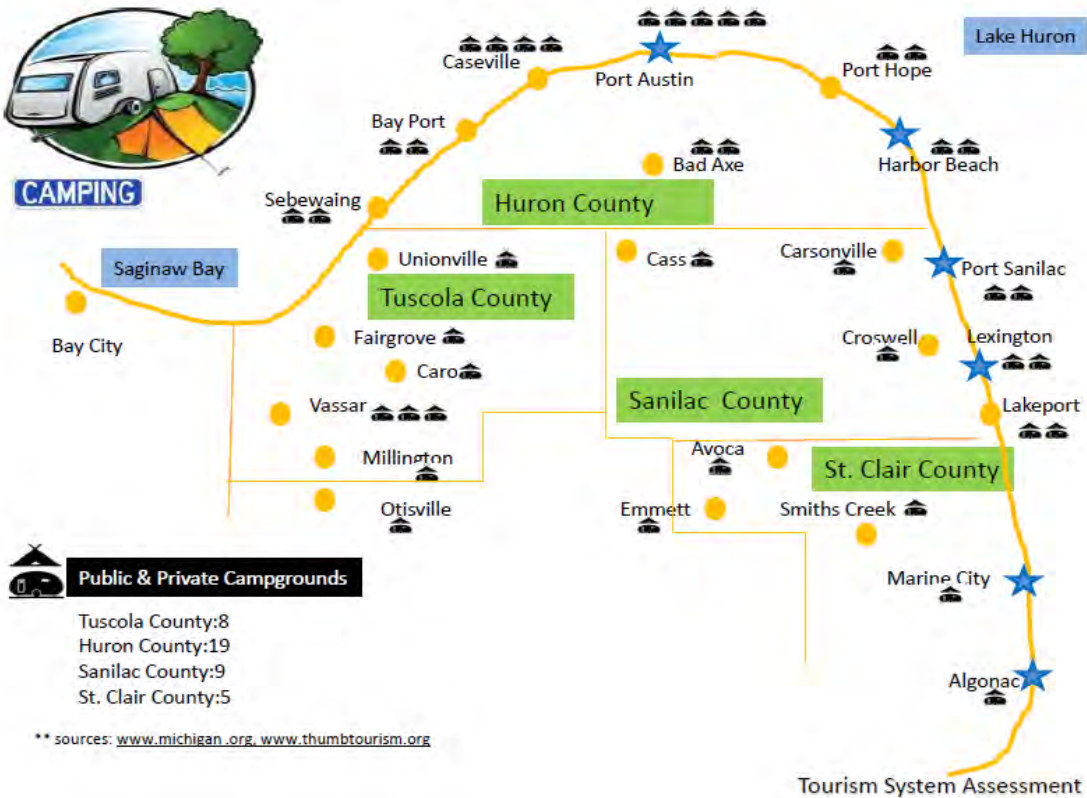
### **Lodging and Accommodations**

Lodging in the Thumb region presents a challenge as few year round motels in the area exist. Although this Integrated Assessment did not have the resources to conduct an inventory of lodging and no existing inventory was available, it is clear that most of the motels are not only seasonal, but are also non-franchised “mom and pop” businesses. This suggests that most have likely not been recently renovated to modern lodging standards and might not have a strong presence on the Internet or on mobile applications, which makes them difficult to identify during travel planning. Project stakeholders confirmed this situation and had identified lodging as a barrier that will need to be overcome. Camping is also quite popular in the Thumb and there is a large selection of private, county and state operated campgrounds throughout the region (See Figure 3.2).

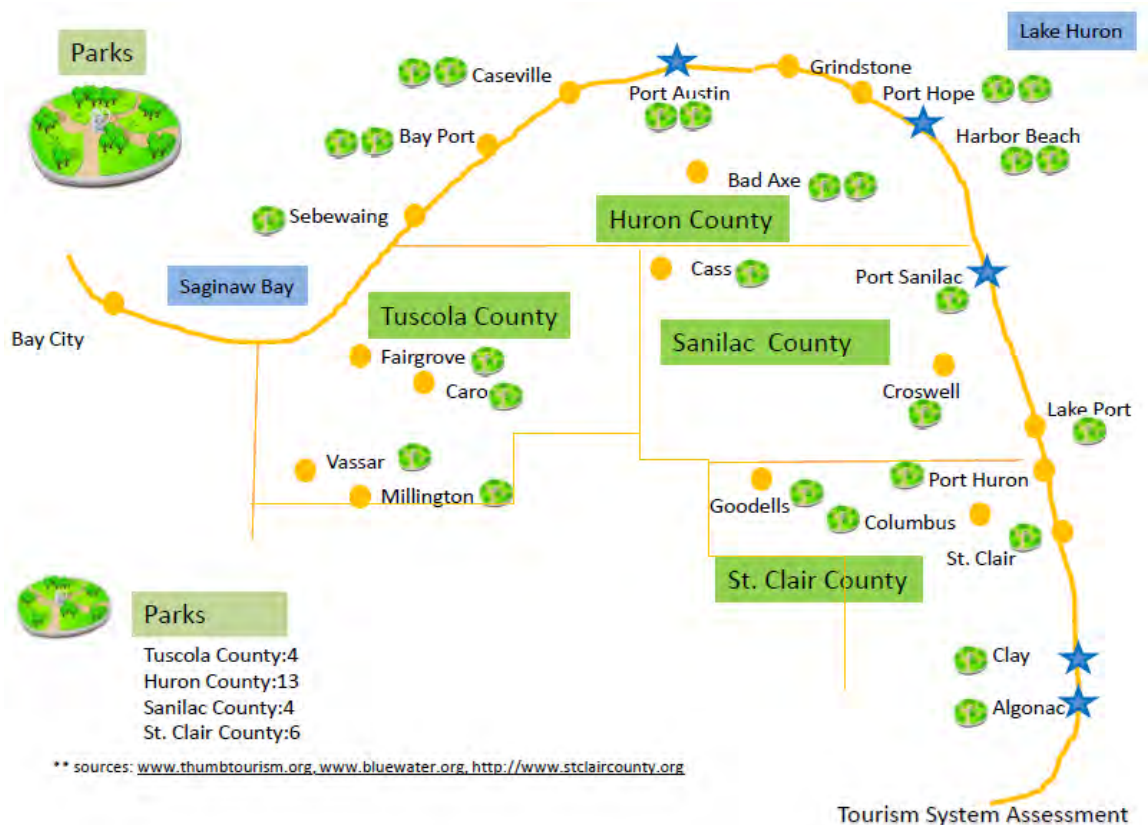
### **Parks**

Many of the campgrounds in the Thumb are operated by county park systems. There are 18 county parks in the study area, and 14 of them are located on the coast. These parks operate 9 campgrounds offering a total of 981 campsites. In addition to the camping facilities, the Thumb’s county parks are a valued resource for both residents and visitors, offering public green space and access to Lake Huron. In addition to county parks, four state parks can be found in the study area. Petroglyphs State Park (Sanilac County) is inland, but the other three, Lakeport State Park (St. Clair County), Port Crescent State Park (Huron County), and Sleeper State Park (Huron County) are all located on the coast. The

three coastal parks have beaches, cabins for rent and camping, and all four state parks have trails that offer opportunities for hiking, wildlife viewing and cross country skiing in the winter. Researchers conducted a basic inventory of all of the parks in the Thumb (Figure 3.3).



**Figure 3.2** Number and distribution of camping facilities in the Thumb. The camper symbols indicate the location of a single public or private campground.



**Figure 3.3 Number and distribution of parks in the Thumb. The park symbol indicates the location of a single municipal, county or state park.**

The discussion that took place throughout the assessment regarding the development and diversification of the region’s recreation and tourism “product” came at a time when significant attention was being given to Michigan’s tourism industry. In 2006, Michigan’s tourism industry developed its first strategic plan, which identified a number of objectives for achieving improved organizational support, product delivery support and fiscal support for tourism throughout the state (Michigan Tourism Industry Planning Council, 2006). Shortly after, Travel Michigan, the state’s tourism promotion organization, developed a new marketing campaign and slogan called “Pure Michigan”. This campaign has been well received among the state’s tourism industry, as well as nationally by industry experts. In 2009, Forbes magazine named the campaign the 6<sup>th</sup> best travel campaign worldwide, ever (Galliher, 2009). Shortly after coming into office in 2011, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed a bill that established a higher and more secure source of promotional funding for the Pure Michigan campaign. In 2011 public funding for Pure Michigan was \$25.4 million compared to \$5.7 million for tourism promotion in 2005. The focus of the campaign has been to introduce people who do not live in the Great Lakes region to Michigan and aims to establish a positive image in the minds of potential travelers who might not know much about the state beyond Detroit and the auto industry. The focus on attracting new tourists to Michigan provides a potential opportunity for the Thumb to attract new tourists to the region. However, new tourism “products” will play an important role if the region hopes to capitalize on this potential.

### **3.3 Priorities**

#### **Approach to Identifying Priorities**

Because the decrease in tourism to the area was primarily the result of the collapse of the Chinook salmon, the most commonly targeted species of fish among anglers, a large amount of discussion during the Integrated Assessment focused on the need to develop a more diversified tourism “product”. Ultimately, a number of priorities were identified during the project to guide actions and decisions related to the development of the region as a tourism destination.

Discussions were held with stakeholders to identify possible resources in the region that could be further developed and promoted. The technical experts then conducted a review of studies and secondary data sources to help better understand the attractiveness of pursuing the options. Additionally, all parties worked together to develop a list of current and recent projects and initiatives throughout the region that were relevant to some of the ideas to further develop the region’s tourism product. Together the lists of ideas and ongoing initiatives informed a prioritization process that included a survey and facilitated focus groups at a regional meeting dedicated to identifying priorities. Results of the final survey showed three distinct levels of potential for activities to attract people to the area. Among the activities identified by the most people as having potential to attract visitors were, festivals and events, kayaking and beaches. At a lower level of potential were lighthouses and cultural/historical sites, biking, parks, and sport fishing. Activities identified with an even lower level of potential included agritourism, and bird/wildlife watching. Activities such as scuba diving and charter boats were identified by the fewest number of people as having the potential to attract visitors.

As a result of the process described above, a number of priorities were identified related to the improvement and diversification of the region’s tourism product. The priorities include: 1) identify and develop new tourism and recreational opportunities; 2) engage in thoughtful and coordinated “place making” activities; 3) pursue “Heritage Route” designation from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT); and 4) strengthen regional collaboration with regard to tourism activities.

#### **New Tourism and Recreational Opportunities**

Over the course of the first 18 months of the project, the discussion at meetings often focused on promoting sport fishing for species other than salmon, such as walleye, which responded well in the absence of the salmon. These efforts are described in more detail in the Natural Resources section. In addition to diversifying the fishing opportunities, discussion often focused on identifying other activities, besides fishing, that the region has resources for and could be known for as a destination. As an example, many stakeholders responded that they had been seeing an increase in the number of cars carrying kayaks, driving through the region. One regular stakeholder involved in the IA owns a kayak shop in Port Austin and reported that his business had grown in the few years since he opened the shop. Additionally, a water trail, the *Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail*, was in the process of being developed to build on this trend and to help promote the area as a kayaking destination. Stakeholders were also interested in capitalizing on a new 8-foot wide paved shoulder that was developed along M-25, providing adequate space for cyclists to comfortably share the road with cars. Other ideas for improving recreational opportunities included, scuba diving (there are two shipwreck sanctuaries in the region), bird/wildlife watching, festivals and events, and beaches.

In an effort to better inform decisions made about the extent to which the region should invest in developing some of these recreational activities, the technical team developed profiles for each activity. Although each profile was customized for the specific activity, they generally included: information

for the community on the types of people who most commonly participate in the activity, the economic impact of the activity, the amenities needed in the area in order to best facilitate the activities and unique features in the region that are relevant to the activities and might be worth promoting to potential participants. Each of these profiles was developed after analyzing secondary data derived, primarily from academic studies, industry and government reports and interviews. Experts in the area of each profile's subject matter also independently reviewed the profiles. These Recreation Profiles are available at the project website ([MiSeaGrant-Recreation Profiles](#)).



As a result of the success of festivals and events throughout the region, and in light of data from Travel Michigan that suggested that special events were attracting people to the Thumb, stakeholders also identified the continued development of themed festivals and events as a high priority for the region. Much of the discussion of events focused on the use of events to promote some of the activities the region is trying to develop, such as a kayaking festival or race. Other ideas focused on events that reinforce the connection to the region's agriculture and other local foods such as fish. There was also discussion around working with former charter boat captains to see if, in the absence of salmon, they could find success by adapting their services to target other species of fish or even by offering other non-fishing activities such as sunset or dinner cruises.

Similar to the idea of short cruises from a single port, representatives from a number of communities have had discussions about the feasibility of offering port-to-port cruises throughout the Thumb. Such short trips might not only be interesting excursions in and of themselves, but they might offer an interesting complementary service to other activities such as a return shuttle for biking or kayaking trips. The concept of port-to-port cruises has even been discussed with other communities outside of the Thumb Area. In August 2010, a boat tour was conducted by community members in East Tawas to gather feasibility information. Two Integrated Assessment researchers joined thirty people for a 25-mile journey across Saginaw Bay to Caseville. During the ride, presentations were conducted on tourism related topics and upon arrival in Caseville, during that community's *Cheeseburger in Caseville* festival, additional presentations were given by the accompanying researchers, a Huron County Commissioner and the owner of the Bay Port Fish Company. Participants in the excursion then enjoyed a fish-fry picnic, featuring Saginaw Bay whitefish, and then explored Caseville and the cheeseburger festival before the return journey back across the bay to East Tawas.

## Place Making

Another priority for the stakeholders involved a number of initiatives related to placemaking. On a number of occasions, stakeholders mentioned the importance of maintaining the rural heritage in the Thumb. In fact, the top choice selected during the session on priority setting was: “Preserve and promote rural character through agricultural and food-related festivals, tours, progressive farmers markets, pick your own, farm stands, restaurants that feature local fish, wine and crops, develop partnerships with Farm Bureau and Michigan Rural Network.” Other priorities related to place making included the development of vibrant downtowns. To stakeholders, vibrant downtowns were described as places that facilitate energy, with shops accessible at the times visitors walk the streets, thriving arts and culture, and attractive gateways. Examples include the *Music at the Harbor* program in Port Sanilac, which attracts people downtown for free concerts every Saturday night throughout the summer. The Project for Public Spaces ([Project for Public Spaces](#)) has a number of excellent free resources on placemaking, as well as information about additional training and consulting services for communities and organizations. Additionally, the following link offers a guidebook for communities interested in placemaking: [Placemaking: Tools for Community Action](#).

## Heritage Route Designation

Early in the Integrated Assessment process, the researchers asked the stakeholders for help in identifying any projects or initiatives related to the topics covered in the IA that are being, or have recently been, pursued. One recent initiative that often came up during meetings was the pursuit of a Recreational *Heritage Route* designation for M-25, the highway that follows the Thumb’s coast. Several of the steps toward the designation had recently been pursued, but the initiative had stalled.

In addition to being a potentially strong promotional vehicle for recreation in the region, stakeholders were attracted by the benefits of going through the process of attaining the designation, especially after hearing success stories from other communities that had gone through the designation process. US 23 in Northeast Michigan, which is located in a region that shares many similarities with the Thumb, is a designated heritage route. At the same time, there was acknowledgement among stakeholders of the reason for the stalled effort, which is the requirement for a significant amount of volunteer work from all of the communities along the route. Some stakeholders viewed the Integrated Assessment, since it was focused in part on recreation and tourism and included people from throughout the region, as an opportunity to reignite the efforts to have M-25 designated as a Recreational Heritage Route. Others wondered if many of the same benefits of the Heritage Route designation could be achieved without going through the extensive, and perceived bureaucratic, process required of the designation.

In the final survey, 70% of stakeholders indicated that pursuing heritage route status is important while only 7% indicated that such efforts is not a high priority at this time. Another 7% indicated that the region could obtain many of the benefits of heritage route status without going through the process of pursuing the designation. Despite the wide support for pursuing heritage route designation, only 37 % of respondents indicated that they would be willing participate in the process. Although this represents fewer stakeholders than who indicated support for pursuing heritage route designation, it is still likely to restart efforts toward the M-25 application. In the summer of 2012, one stakeholder, Chad Gainor, took the initiative to work on a draft of the heritage route management plan. This work is a good sign that the region could once again make progress on the heritage route status, though wider participation from a greater number of stakeholders throughout the region will be necessary to ensure the buy-in, regional representation and overall quality of the plan. Mr. Gainor’s work, as well as past efforts, can serve as a starting point for future efforts and his initiative and leadership could be important in sparking other stakeholders to become involved in the significant amount of work that will be needed to obtain the designation.



## **Regional Collaboration**

One final priority for the region involved the improvement of collaboration among the communities throughout the region. Although the need for collaboration was seen as an important goal from the beginning of the Integrated Assessment, it became even more important when more of the focus turned toward tourism. As the researchers reminded the stakeholders, although destinations often view themselves in terms of municipal boundaries, tourists often view destinations in broader terms and often consider the experience that can be obtained over a wider geographic area when making travel decisions. An identifiable example of this in the region is the *Antique Yard Sale Trail* (See: [Blue Water Area Yard Sale Trail](#)), which happens on one weekend every summer and attracts antique hunters to a number of communities all along the Thumb's coast. Much of the conversation on tourism product focused on activities that have, or can have, a linear element to them, i.e., bike trails, water trails, scenic drives, and visiting farmers markets, produce stands or wineries. During one stakeholder meeting, researchers facilitated an exercise to identify attractions that are pride points for stakeholders. Specifically stakeholders were asked to identify places they would bring visitors to show off the region. This exercise generated a number of different ideas, all of which involved the region's existing resources. Later, researchers analyzed the data, organized them into themes and created three sample itinerary titles, "Sightseeing Drives", "Foodie Tour" and "Adventurer/Active Recreation" (See project website). Although the exercise to create the itineraries served a purpose in and of itself, the itineraries were actually used. In some cases they were distributed by stakeholders directly to visitors and in one case they helped inform sample itineraries that were made available on a county's website for potential tourists. Each itinerary included attractions in a mix of communities throughout the Thumb and therefore provided support for the notion of regional destinations and the potential benefits of collaboration.

### **3.4 Barriers**

There are a number of barriers to developing the tourism product in the Thumb region. One previously mentioned barrier is that of modern hospitality facilities. In recent years, many lodging properties throughout the United States and around the world have refurbished their facilities in significant ways including the addition of flat screen televisions, wireless internet access, contemporary furniture, new styles of bedding, and representation on web-based travel sites such as Travelocity, Hotwire, Tripadvisor, Hotels.com, and on mobile smartphone apps. Moreover, most lodging properties have adapted to the changing ways in which tourists plan and purchase travel, specifically through the Internet and increasingly through mobile applications. For the most part, lodging properties in the Thumb have not kept up with these changes, and although their "retro" offerings will certainly appeal to some, many other visitors will be disappointed with lodging and restaurant choices that do not meet their technological expectations. Similarly, the way people experience travel has changed in recent years with the advent of social networks and smart phones. It is quite common today for tourists to share their travel experiences instantly with friends and loved ones on such sites as Facebook where they can describe their activities and post photos and videos they have just taken with their phones before anxiously awaiting near instantaneous feedback in the form of comments and "likes". The lack of broadband and 3G (or even basic cell phone coverage) throughout the Thumb presents a problem to those who have become accustomed to staying wired in.

Another barrier is the lack of cross community cooperation. Although this project has helped to improve collaboration, issues of community or county collaboration still exist even among regular stakeholders, not to mention business owners and policy makers who have not been involved in the Integrated Assessment. In recent times, there have been few regional efforts in the Thumb, so it will

take some time for stakeholders to adjust to the new way of regional thinking because each community is accustomed to working independently.

A final barrier to the development of the region's tourism product is that of available resources. A number of socio-economic indicators such as a decreasing and aging population, regional "brain drain", decreased property values and high unemployment have created a shortage of the human and financial resources that are required to implement the identified priorities. Improving the region's tourism "product" will require investment in coordinated activities such as setting policies, applying for grants, investing in amenities and facilities, and promoting the region. Given the region's limited resources, each of these pursuits will mean other initiatives receive less, or no, attention. The open ended responses in the final survey to the question about what challenges the region will face in attracting visitors show that stakeholders are well aware of how their lack of resources will add to the challenge. However, this Integrated Assessment was meant to inform the important decisions policy makers, government officials, business owners, and even volunteers will have to make on how to invest their limited time and money. In addition to bringing people together, facilitating discussion and providing analysis of secondary data related to the region's challenges, the priority setting activities of the assessment are important resources to informing the difficult decisions about the allocation of limited resources.

The final survey offers some insights into what activities stakeholders would like to see further developed for residents and tourists. Kayaking and Biking received the most votes, followed closely by festivals and events, lighthouses and cultural/historical sites, agritourism and beaches. Receiving the fewest number of votes were bird/wildlife watching, sport fishing, scuba diving and charter fishing (which received no votes). Proper context must be given to these results, as well as the results to the question about which activities offer the most potential for attracting tourists. All of the choices that were listed on the survey are activities that have been identified through the Integrated Assessment process as having some potential to help the area. It also should be noted that one of the goals toward improving the region's tourism product was to offer a more diverse set of "products" that were not so heavily dependent on one activity, which had been the case in the past with salmon fishing. Bird watching offers a good example. The fact that this activity did not score highly in either survey question does not mean it is not worth pursuing. Rather it could be an indication that it will require fewer of the region's resources. During discussions, stakeholders seemed to think that this activity offered great potential for the region since bird watchers are a desirable group of tourists to attract based on their demographics and spending. The results could reflect that few people thought bird watching, as an activity, would be one of the top draws for the region and/or that it did not require as much development in order to offer a quality "product" for birdwatchers. It's possible that bird watching could still be worthy of promotional efforts.

### ***3.5 Options***

1. Continued encouragement of charter and sport fishing, through tournaments and other events as well as through the encouragement of targeting for different species of fish. More will be explained about this option in the Natural Resource Protection and access section.
2. Actively pursue diversification of recreational activities that utilize existing regional resources, will attract tourists, and will ultimately improve quality of life for local and seasonal residents. In all cases, other priorities should be taken into consideration in the pursuit of these activities. For example, an activity such as kayaking, which is consistent with the rural and coastal heritage of the region, can be the focus of special events that will reinforce the psychological connection visitors make between the activity and the region. Packages and recommended

itineraries can be put together for kayakers that highlight the best features of multiple communities in order to improve the overall attractiveness of the region as a destination. Similarly, a collaborative approach can assist the development of desired amenities along the water trail in different communities. Other ideas that can help to improve the efforts to offer a more diverse array of recreational experiences include:

- a. Use recreational profiles to help inform the decisions made by policy makers and entrepreneurs
  - b. Investment of public funds in supporting amenities and infrastructure
  - c. Application of funding from grants or programs such as the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund which can be used for supporting amenities and infrastructure
  - d. Collaborate with other communities for “linear excursions” that showcase the best features of multiple communities in order to improve the overall attractiveness of the region as a destination
  - e. Local government and public support and facilitation of initiatives that support these efforts
3. Pursue Heritage Route designation as a Recreational Heritage Route
- a. Continue to build on previous efforts
  - b. Obtain funding support for EMCOG (or another entity) to facilitate the process
  - c. Identify a strong leader and dedicated support team comprised of “task-masters” who will hold each other accountable and drive the process forward
4. Continue to develop and promote festivals and events and connect more with associations throughout the region and the state such as the Michigan Festivals and Events Association which offers a number of different opportunities to network, share best practices and cross promote.
5. Institute local government policies that will facilitate the accomplishment of the above priorities. These could include:
- a. Zoning that encourages above priorities while maintaining rural heritage
  - b. Develop guide for DDA/chambers of commerce on the importance of the above priorities and suggestions on how to support them
  - c. Assistance for small businesses. This assistance could involve entrepreneurial education, suggestions for obtaining access to credit, programs that use students to develop websites for existing businesses, development of broadband infrastructure, and mobile applications for area businesses
  - d. Grant applications for funds that support above priorities
  - e. Matching funds and/or letters of support for non-government efforts to obtain funds that support above priorities
  - f. Facilitation of community efforts (e.g., hosting and helping to promote meetings to pursue heritage route status)

### ***3.6 References***

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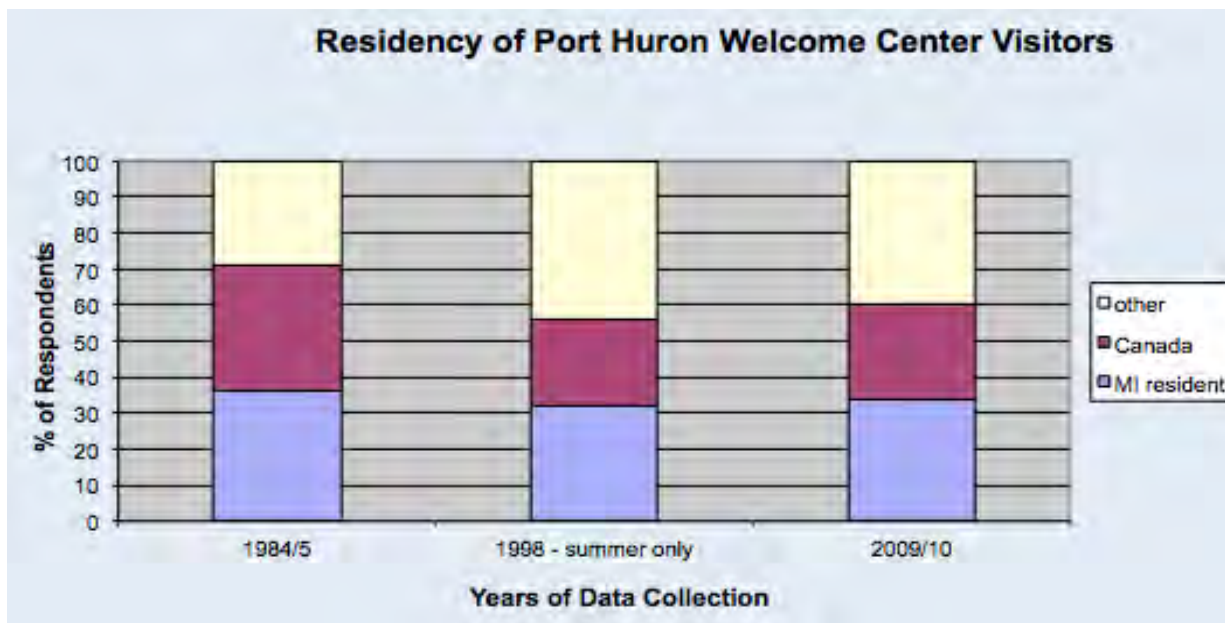
## Chapter 4. Branding and Marketing

The goals of attracting tourists and recreationists to the Thumb Area and sustaining year-round business environments create a need for a Thumb Area brand and marketing campaign. Over the course of the Integrated Assessment, the tourism industry has been highlighted as an important part of the quality of life and vibrancy of southern Lake Huron's coast. The communities along the coast are comprised of mostly hospitality businesses that service motorized boaters, anglers, beachgoers, campers, cyclists and paddlers. With two recent recessions in the region, state and country, tourism activities have been heavily impacted.

### 4.1 Status and Trends

#### Where are the visitors coming from?

Data provided by primarily Travel Michigan assisted in answering these market questions. Market research by the state is sometimes limited to just U.S. residents, but data from a Michigan welcome center study provides some estimates of tourists who traveled into the U.S. from Canada at Port Huron and stopped at the former welcome center (Figure 4.1). The largest segment of tourists is "other," which includes overseas tourists and U.S. residents not from Michigan. The Michigan resident segment is the next largest segment, followed by the Canadian segment, which has declined slightly since the mid 1980's.



**Figure 4.1 Percentage of people passing through a Port Huron welcome center that came from Michigan, Canada and other areas during three different time periods. Source: C. Vogt, data collected for Travel Michigan. Note: Sampling in 2009/2010 was conducted by Travel Counselors and may have biased information collection levels.**

When analyzing tourism specifically within the state of Michigan, it is evident that a higher percentage of visitors to the Thumb are Michigan residents in comparison with other Michigan tourist destinations (Table 4.1). Thumb Area tourists primarily come from the Detroit metropolitan area (Tables 4.2 and 4.3). For Huron, Tuscola and Sanilac counties, most visitors are from Wayne and Oakland counties. St. Clair County shows a somewhat different composition of visitors, with more people coming from

Macomb County, because Port Huron is a strong shopping and recreation area. Relatively few visitors come from out-of-state to visit the Thumb.

Residency of Tourists	Thumb Area, not including St. Clair	Thumb Area, including St. Clair	All Michigan Tourists
Michigan	91%	89%	71%
<i>Detroit Area</i>	58% <i>(primarily Wayne and Oakland co.)</i>	63% <i>(primarily Oakland and Macomb co.)</i>	27%
<i>Flint-Saginaw-Bay City</i>	30%	21%	11%
<i>Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo</i>	1%	1%	15%
<i>Lansing</i>	0%	1%	5%
Ohio	1%	2%	5%
New York	0.5%	0.2%	0.9%
Pennsylvania	1%	0.6%	0.8%

**Table 4.1 Percentage of U.S. visitors to the Thumb Area and Michigan that come from different areas within and beyond Michigan. Source of data: Travel Michigan, DK Shifflet. Leisure travel only; 2008-2010 trips.**

Residency of Tourists	Thumb Area, not including St. Clair		Thumb Area, including St. Clair		All Michigan Tourists	
	Day Trip	Overnight Trip	Day Trip	Overnight Trip	Day Trip	Overnight Trip
Michigan	94%	91%	98%	79%	84%	55%
<i>Flint-Saginaw-Bay City</i>	67%	9%	41%	6%	--	--
<i>Detroit Area</i>	26%	79%	55%	67%	--	--

**Table 4.2 Percentage of U.S. day and overnight visitors to the Thumb Area and Michigan that come from Michigan. Source of data: Travel Michigan, DK Shifflet. Leisure travel only; 2008-2010 trips.**

### Why do tourists visit the Thumb?

The dominant purpose of a leisure trip to the Thumb Area is to visit a friend or relative (approximately one-third of trips), which actually lags the state rate of 4 of 10 trips in Michigan (Table 4.3). In the three-county section of the coastline, a special event is the next most popular type of trip and when St. Clair County is added, “other” personal purposes ranks in second place. The three-counties over perform the state on the level of getaway leisure trips and special events.

By examining the main interests of leisure trips, researchers find that beach and waterfront activities clearly dominate the Thumb Area’s tourism economy. For the three-county area, touring/sightseeing and festivals/craft fairs are the distant 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> most popular interests. Boating and sailing take second place when St. Clair County is factored in.

Main Purpose of Leisure Trip	Thumb Area, not including St. Clair	Thumb Area, including St. Clair	All Michigan Tourists
Getaway	19%	11%	13%
General Vacation	4	9	8
Visit Friend/Relative	35	33	40
Special Event	28	19	18
Other Personal	15	28	21
<b>Main Interests (Top 3)</b>	Beach/Waterfront 54%	Beach/Waterfront 38%	Touring/Sightseeing 22%
	Touring/Sightseeing 14%	Boat/Sail 20%	Beach/Waterfront 18%
	Festival/Craft Fair 12%	Festival/Craft Fair 15%	Gamble 9%

**Table 4.3 Main purpose of leisure trips to the Thumb Area and all of Michigan. Source of data: Travel Michigan, DK Shifflet. Leisure travel only; 2008-2010 trips.**

### What economic impact does tourism bring to the Thumb?

Using data provided by the state tourism office, Travel Michigan, the Thumb Area’s tourism economy is estimated at \$372 million, which is 3% of the state’s total leisure spending (business travel is excluded). The Thumb Area has a very small business travel market. Within this regional estimate, St. Clair’s portion is very large and Tuscola’s portion is quite small. This is explained by the supply of hospitality services in the respective counties and also can be attributed to access to the area and type of transportation in each specific county. St. Clair is one of few international gateways to Canada and garners destination and en route travelers. The Thumb Area is 3.5% of leisure tourist demand in Michigan (leisure person-days) and totals 5.4 million person-days (Table 4.4). The spending profile was compared to state averages and in almost all categories of spending the Thumb counties lag the state averages. Accommodation is the segment that is most off the state average. Overall, leisure travel spending by tourists is 45% lower than state averages (Table 4.5).

	Number of Person-Days	Spending by Tourists
Huron	2.4 million	\$88 million
Sanilac	633,000	\$30 million
Tuscola	163,000	\$6 million
St. Clair	<u>2.2 million</u>	<u>\$248 million</u>
Total 4-county	5.4 million (3.5%)	\$372 million (3%)
<b>Total MI Tourism</b>	<b>154 million</b>	<b>\$12.6 billion</b>

**Table 4.4 Number of leisure visitor days and amount of leisure spending. Source of data: Travel Michigan, DK Shifflet. Leisure travel only; 2008-2010 trips.**





## ***4.2 Priorities and Barriers***

Branding and marketing for the region is a top priority identified in the IA. The workshop held in late 2011 placed this theme as the most important, as 21 people selected this strategy as one of the five most important strategies. A branding and marketing strategy was rated as highly achievable (1.66 mean with “2” as highly achievable) and a great number of people (21 out of 40) indicated they support helping implementing branding and marketing.

Approximately six months later in another poll of stakeholders, branding and marketing continued to be considered as an important priority but was not rated as high as some other strategies such as natural resource conservation as well as recreation and tourism product development. Out of 32 stakeholders, 13 rated marketing and branding as “highly relevant” and another 13 rated it is “somewhat relevant.” At this stage of the IA process three marketing areas were being tested: brand images, use of newer technologies, and marketing organizations. On brand images, the January 2012 workshop included brainstorming words and images that represent the coast of Lake Huron and a presentation of branding campaigns by other parts of the state. From these inputs, a local Thumb marketing firm was asked to graphically represent some of the ideas for presentation to the group in May 2012. On technologies, work was completed to draft some designs and applications of mobile applications. On marketing organizations, efforts were made to include all representing marketing organizations. Bluewater CVB attended the meetings where marketing was discussed; the Thumb Area Tourism Council was more active during the beginning of the project.

Some issues that influence branding and marketing include funding a brand, marketing plan and campaign; staffing a dedicated marketing person/staff to represent the Thumb Area; and working collaboratively across counties and communities to agree on a new brand and then use the brand in print and electronic placements. Another related issue is supporting partnerships across nearby regions (Bluewater CVB, Great Lakes region in Saginaw area, and City of Flint-Chamber of Commerce) and the state (Travel Michigan). In 2012, 40 communities took advantage of Travel Michigan’s matching program for promotional dollars, allowing these areas to reach more out-of-state markets.

Currently each community in the Thumb Area has tourism activities (e.g., festivals, events) with some level of branding and marketing that is funded by cities, chambers or counties. The counties also have parks departments that are primarily dependent on camping fees or general property taxes to support operations and capital improvements. Port Austin, Harbor Beach, Port Sanilac and Lexington have paid a \$5,000 annual payment to the Bluewater CVB for being a member of the marketing campaign (includes print and webpage presence). The Thumb Area Tourism Council has relied on grants or businesses paying for a web listing. Overall, this funding is a minimal level and not allowing the area to gain a greater proportion of the tourism economy. As other areas gain greater levels of funding and partner with Travel Michigan, the Thumb Area stands to drop further in market share of the tourism and recreation economy.

## ***4.3 Goals***

Before options on how to brand or market are described, marketing goals are provided that represent what a region is trying to accomplish.

### *Demand*

- Attract more Michigan residents to area
- Attract more out-of-state tourists, including nearby Canadians

### *Economics*

- Increase tourism consumer spending in the area

- Increase recreation and tourism investment – public and private

#### *Supply - Product Development and Enhancements*

- Host popular and unique regional, state and national festival and events
- Offer more new recreation and tourism products that are popular with Michigan residents and out-of-state visitors
- Improve existing recreation and tourism products that are attractive to Michigan residents and out-of-state visitors
- Expand tourism services (lodging, restaurants, commercial recreation, information centers)
- Develop regional park system identity (including land and water trails, camping, boating)
- Link recreation, parks and tourism to other regional areas (northern Detroit, Flint, Saginaw-Bay City), particularly for out-of-state tourists interested in Great Lakes itineraries like Circle Michigan ([Circle Michigan](#))

#### *Policy*

- Lobby for state’s policy on outdoor recreation to benefit the area’s natural resources and outdoor recreationists
- Develop a room tax structure that will provide tax revenues for counties with low levels of hotel-motel properties

## **4.4 Options**

To achieve the goals, branding and marketing activities are framed along three topics: branding image, use of new technologies, and marketing organizations. All three areas were presented in the final workshop and were a main part of the final stakeholder poll.

### **Branding Image**

The southern shoreline of Lake Huron currently uses a few brands. These include the popular and longstanding reference to the area as “The Thumb”, The Bluewater Area, which is a newer brand and marketing campaign managed by the Port Huron Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Thumb Area Tourism Council, primarily a web-site for promoting the entire Thumb and its businesses. Huron and Sanilac (Simply Sanilac) counties have maintained a destination marketing campaign through various groups in their areas and produced websites and visitor promotional materials. Travel Michigan, the state destination marketing agency, also promotes all areas of the state with a website and printed materials that use “Pure Michigan” as the brand icon. The brand is maintained by an in-house marketing department (MEDC) and an external communications firm (McCann Erickson). Michigan Department of Transportation operates Welcome Centers with a new center opening in 2013 on westbound 69 in Port Huron and the centers feature “Pure Michigan” branding.

For the final workshop, several brand concepts were provided to Business Soil, a local small business that does graphic design among other online services, to create some brand identities. “Port Towns of Lake Huron” and “Lake Huron’s Port Towns” came about as a result of stakeholder meetings to brand the Thumb communities. “East Ports” came from an existing effort by a third party (H.G. Manos & Co.).

Carl Osentoski, head of the Huron County EDC, initially suggested the concept of “Life on the Edge”. For “Life on the Edge” a color pallet of blue and green was selected by Business Soil to represent the “green economy” featuring sustainable practices and “blue economy” featuring water, both industrial and recreational (Figure 4.7). The “blue economy” is significant especially in Michigan where lakes and other water resources are abundant. Geographically, this place name will always be timeless and

appropriate, becoming more appropriate as technology and coastline recreation develops further. Creating an image of the region being environmentally responsible will pull tourists to the region.

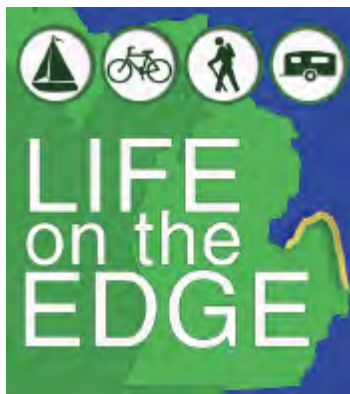
The final poll of workshop attendees and broader stakeholders rated the version of “Life on the Edge” shown below as the clear favorite logo (14 of 25 people selected as #1). A distant second place was given to “Lake Huron Port Towns” (9 of 25 people selected as #2 favorite).

Some open-ended comments about the logos include:

*“Life on the Edge” shows the coastline of the Thumb. Color is bold and still easy on the eyes. I like the name “Life on the Edge” and all that it implies, even beyond just living or playing in a coastal region. I feel this logo is most versatile and fits the communities of the area better than the some of the other logo options.*

*“Life of the Edge” has a minimalist tone to it—it is easy to picture it in modern marketing materials.*

*A fresh perspective and completely new identity. Not the same old, same old.*



**Figure 4.7 Two regional logos developed by Business Soil and presented at the final stakeholder workshop. These two logos were highly rated by participants. Both images and slogans were developed to spark discussion and gauge public opinion. These are not final products ready for adoption.**

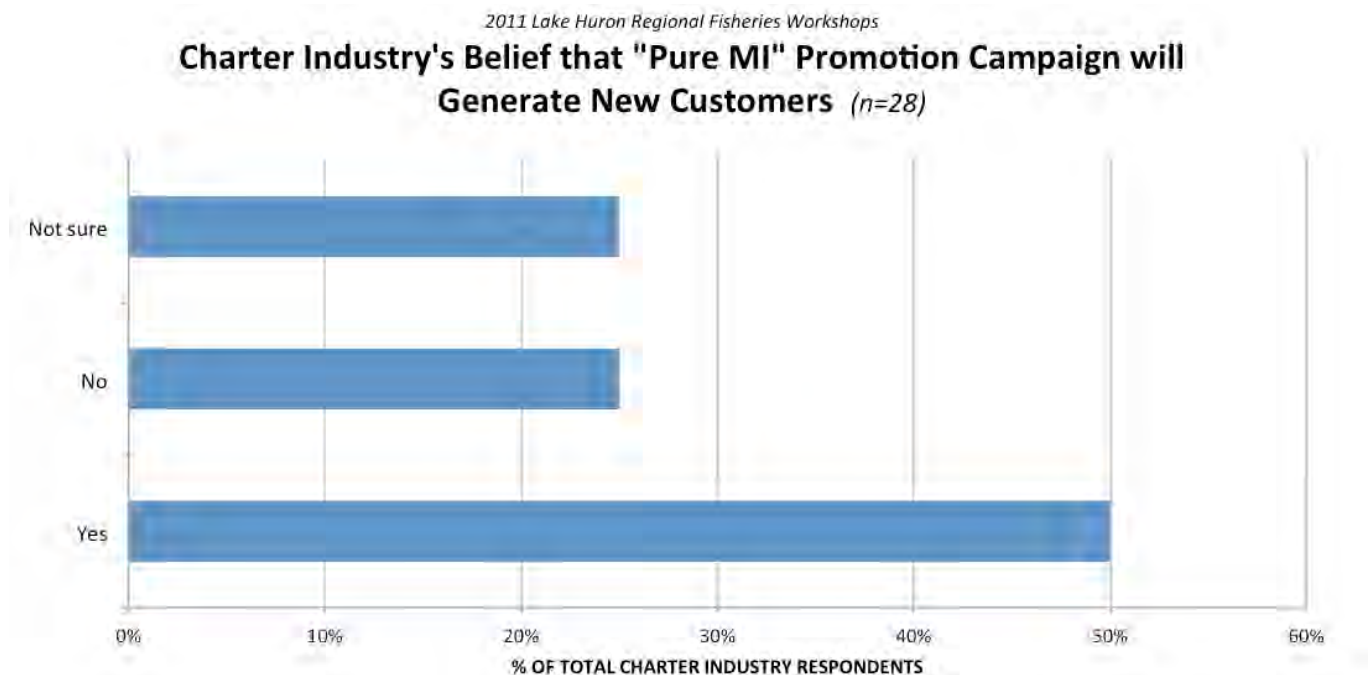
If a logo is selected and developed for actual use a couple of items should be considered (offered by Business Soil). The purpose of a logo is to represent a business, government or community with a simple image that is easily recognized and remembered. The most successful logos align cleanly and simply with the goals of the entity it promotes and are used in all marketing of that entity. They are simple, memorable, timeless, versatile, appropriate and most importantly, unique to some degree. A simple logo design allows for easy, quick recognition, which aids in the logo being versatile and memorable. An effective logo should also be memorable, which is achieved by using a simple, yet, appropriate design. Effective logos are timeless and are still effective 10, 20 or even 50 years after their debut (e.g., McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, Nike). An effective logo should also be versatile, meaning it should be able to work across a variety of mediums and applications, both horizontal and vertical formats, and a multitude of sizes. Finally, the logo should be appropriate for its intended purpose and intended audience. For example, a law firm should not design a logo with a childish font or color scheme, while a toy store would be better off to use something more playful. It is also important to note that a logo does not need to show what a business sells or what services it offers, a logo is purely for identification. Think about the Harley Davidson logo, it isn’t a motorcycle nor does it have a motorcycle anywhere in the logo; same goes for retailers like Target or Kmart.

## New Marketing Technologies

Travel decision-making has changed drastically in the past 10 to 15 years with the increased use of the Internet. Travel was one of the first industries to adapt the web to a search and purchase marketplace. Destination organizations such as state tourism offices were early adopters of the web, as were hotel companies, airlines, and rental cars. Over time, third party “bundlers” (Expedia, Travelocity, and Kayak) became prominent. More recently mobile applications have come into the mainstream and web applications are being re-developed for mobile devices, like smart phones and electronic tablets, with a growing segment of travelers bringing them on vacation.

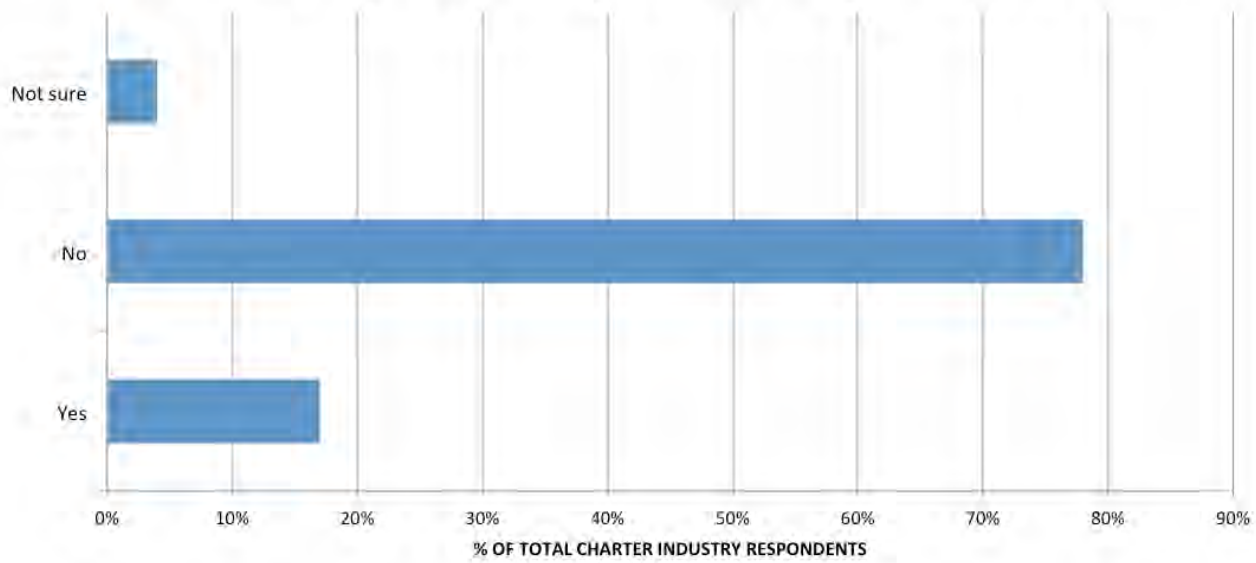
Any destination marketing programs should attempt to create “new” information sources like mobile applications over “old” forms of sources like brochures and vacation guides. Destinations need to look closely at budgets and marketing expertise and attempt to have a mix of Internet-based and site-based marketing materials.

We examined marketing attitudes and practices at two points in the Integrated Assessment. As part of the Lake Huron Regional Fisheries Workshop, we asked charter industry operators if they believed the “Pure Michigan” campaign could generate customers. Fifty percent of charter industry operators agreed that the campaign could attract customers (Figure 4.8). Few charter companies (less than 20% of respondents) were listed on Travel Michigan’s website, which is a free service that any tourism business can access (Figure 4.9).



**Figure 4.8 Percentage of charter customers that believed the Pure Michigan campaign would generate new customers. Source: Polling conducted at regional fishery workshops in 2011, n = 28.**

### Charter Industry Who Have Page on 'Pure Michigan' Website (n=23)



**Figure 4.9 Percentage of charter captains that have a page on the Pure Michigan website. Source: Polling conducted at regional fishery workshops in 2011, n = 23.**

Another opportunity to test marketing technology was in the final stakeholder poll. Less than three-quarters of the respondents used mobile applications to promote the area or to provide information to the public. Seven businesses or organizations did use mobile applications with Yelp, Yellow Pages (YP), and Google maps mentioned. Fifty-six percent of respondents to the poll “agreed” and 26% “strongly agreed” that a new mobile application for smart phones and tablets would promote the Thumb Area to tourists. Over half (53%) said their business or organization would contribute money or other resources to hire someone to create a mobile application. Some expressed a concern that the M-25 corridor does not have 3G capabilities so at the current time a mobile application is not likely to work. Stakeholders expressed the greatest support for marketing recreation activities and access, events, and beaches (27 rated as high importance out of 29 responses for all three), which are rated slightly higher than other hospitality services such as campsites (23/29), hotels and motels (21/29).

## Marketing Organization

A final option within branding and marketing is organization and coordination. The Thumb Area currently has several marketing destination organizations, but not necessarily one organization that works well for everyone (referring to all coastal communities or inland communities within each of the counties). Many destination-marketing organizations rely on a “bed tax” to receive funding, which occurs when lodging and accommodation businesses charge an extra tax on rooms sold and that extra tax revenue goes to the marketing organization. There is a minimum number of rooms required to establish a bed tax in an area. The low level of accommodations in the Thumb prevents the counties from charging a bed tax and makes receiving funding more challenging. Throughout the IA, efforts were made to involve all destination-marketing organizations and to promote involvement by businesses, communities and counties in these organizations. A final polling on this topic yielded the following results: greater use of the “Pure Michigan” brand should be used (22 of 30 rated as high potential); A distant second place was with “Discover the Blue” (10 rated as high potential); Next were the new “Life on the Edge” (5 rated as high potential), which has no existing marketing organization supporting this brand, nor does “Port Towns” (2 high potential); Finally, the brand and

marketing team of “East Ports” received 4 high potential votes. Stakeholders were also asked what approach for marketing the Thumb Area should be taken. The top response was a new regional Thumb Convention and Visitors Bureau (17 of 30 rated high potential), followed closely by continuing the partnership of the larger communities and the Bluewater CVB (15 rated high potential) and the Thumb Area Tourism Council (15 rated high potential). The final two options studied were to let individual communities take care of tourism marketing through Chambers of Commerce (11 rated high potential) and through some county department (6 rated high potential).

In summary, the IA has explored various options in the area of branding and marketing. While there are some options that are clearly supported by stakeholders, future meetings and discussions are needed to continue to explore possibilities. Nearby regional marketing organizations are suggested as resources to help make a decision on branding and marketing for the Thumb Area.

#### 4.5 Tools and Resources

Travel Michigan, part of Michigan Economic Development Corporation, is a resource for market research, promotional advice, and partnering on “Pure Michigan” branded promotional material.

Michigan Department of Transportation is a resource for the new Port Huron welcome center on I-69 and other welcome centers that distribute tourism promotional materials. MDOT also manages the heritage route program and funds non-motorized transportation projects.

#### Tourism Bureaus

- Sunrise Side. A broad coalition of counties, Chambers of Commerce and Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs) have been working together to promote the northern shores of Lake Huron, from Cheboygan to Arenac counties.
- The Bluewater Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. This CVB is based in Port Huron and represents communities along St. Clair River and southern Lake Huron. It is primarily funded from St. Clair’s bed tax fund. In recent years, they expanded to include paying communities along the shoreline both north and south of Port Huron.
- Mi Great Bay (Saginaw Bay). This collaboration is new and is focused on natural resource recreation and tourism. The new website and other materials were funded by the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative network (WIN), Bay County Community Foundation, and Saginaw Bay Resource, Conservation and Development.



#### Current Marketing Efforts

- Thumb Area Tourism Council - Destination Marketing – basic website, newsletter for coastal and non-coastal businesses/organizations, working on farm-food tourism.
- Bluewater CVB - Destination Marketing – Tourism marketing to independent travelers, group tours. Advertising outside of state; links/partner to Pure Michigan; coastal communities only. New video promotions, working on wayfinding.

- Pure Michigan state marketing campaign has high level of funding \$25 to \$30 million in current and coming years.
- State Park Passport allows for “free” entry for those who buy “P” with license renewal. Michigan State Parks has added a marketing staff person (Mai Stephens) who is providing some new promotional programs across the system, but could also be a resource of a regional promotion.
- The East Ports effort in Port Sanilac and Lexington to rebrand shore communities through a private-public partnership. A long-time seasonal homeowner (H.G. Manos) is leading this effort.
- Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail has produced maps, guides and wayfinding signs to promote paddling along Lake Huron’s and Saginaw Bay’s coastline. This is an example of a recreation group creating a new product and producing promotional and education materials to reach a new and growing market.

## Chapter 5. Implications and Next Steps

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The Southern Lake Huron Integrated Assessment (IA) examined the effects of a changing fishery on regional and community prosperity. In order to assist in growing a stronger regional economy, the assessment closely examined and considered the possible development of other water-based outdoor recreation, as well as land-based recreation and tourism. A healthy and sustainable recreation and tourism economy is dependent on resource stewardship of the coast, so the assessment examined resource conservation priorities and improved public access to coastal sites. The process of the assessment included:

- Data analyses on the fishery and fishing supply and demand,
- Data analyses on socio-economic statistics and recreation and tourism trends,
- Scenario exercise with decision makers and community leaders to garner a vision of the region's assets and liabilities today and into the future,
- Polls of stakeholders at several stages of the project in an effort to provide community supported innovations and best practices, and
- Two and a half years of workshops where science presentations were met with stakeholder discussions.

During the assessment process, barriers or challenges were identified which may have a bearing on the implementation of prioritized options and the ability to maintain a regional collaboration around coastal interests and issues. The barriers expressed have been:

- A lack of capital for implementing projects,
- An ongoing struggle to attract and build new larger overnight accommodations that would benefit leisure and business travelers,
- Limited cooperation within the Thumb government entities and civic groups (tend to work within jurisdictions), and
- Tensions between inland agricultural interests and the interests of coastal natural resources.

Every poll taken during the IA has shown that funding is a major barrier to moving forward on projects that range from infrastructure to business development. The Thumb Area is falling further behind other areas of the state on tourism marketing because of the low number of accommodation properties that prevents the implementation of local or regional bed tax assessments that could fund a tourism initiative. Given the large inventory of campgrounds, condominiums, bed and breakfasts homes, and rental cabins in the Thumb Area, a change in policy at the state level may allow for some type of assessment on non-hotel-motel properties, which would aid in tourism expansion in the Thumb.

Despite years of challenges with the recessions (2001, again in 2008) that have hit the U.S. and Michigan particularly hard, there are many examples of progress in the area and instances of regional collaborations. Huron and Sanilac counties are working together on several projects – for example, economic development and M-25 non-motorized planning. Moreover, this IA has enabled regional discussions about a variety of coastal opportunities and issues over a period of almost three years.

### ***5.1 Examples of Regional Collaborations***

- Saginaw Bay Coastal Resource Guide (EMCOG). Collaborative effort across the counties along the bay to showcase conservation, land use and tourism and recreation. East Michigan



Council of Governments (EMCOG) led the project with funding from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Coastal Zone Management (MDEQ-CZM) Program. The scope of the project covers five shoreline counties of Iosco, Arenac, Bay, Tuscola and Huron. Detailed maps were created to help local decision makers and planning staff to better manage their coastal communities through informed decision making on land use, planning and zoning issues. See [EMCOG](#)

- Thumb Area Tourism Council (TATC). This council was formed by Chuck Frost and assisted by Kris McCardle. With economic development grants, the council created a web portal and assisted selected businesses place marketing programs on to the Internet. Coupons, newsletters, and calendars are some of the futures of the tourism website. The site represents the entire Thumb Area, giving coastal communities like Port Austin, Harbor Beach, Port Sanilac and Lexington marketing coverage by both TATC and Bluewater CVB in Port Huron. See: [Thumb Area Tourism Council](#)
- Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (Huron County, lead). Under the current Presidential administration, a call for projects to improve the quality of the Great Lakes basin occurred during the IA period. Several proposals were submitted but not selected covering issues such as phragmites control, septic tank repair and replacement at shoreline houses, and storm water run-off management.
- State Park Planning. Two of the Huron County state parks (Sleeper and Port Crescent) were scheduled for new comprehensive management plans during the IA period. A number of park staff and consultants leading the planning effort attended IA workshops. Science-based information was shared between the DNR and IA projects. See: [MDNR Park Management Plans](#)

## ***5.2 Examples of Coastal Development***

Port-to-Port cruises as an excursion and mode of transportation for kayakers, hikers, or cyclists to return to the origin. Midnight stargazing trips are popular, as are excursions to see the many lighthouses. “Girl” themed experiences or bachelorette parties are also popular and are easily linked to bed and breakfast stays. Efforts are needed to retain boats and captains in the Thumb Area marinas and invite back charter boats that left for other areas like Lake Michigan. The image and reputation of the area will improve and grow if more of the non-boat owning public see the Lake Huron shoreline.

Comment from an IA participant on growing collaborations:

*The Sea Grant provided a small grant for Port Sanilac and Lexington to research the feasibility of small cruises between our two towns. This has resulted in a bonding of our Villages for more collaboration including a shared bike path, shared destination marketing ("shop in Lexington; dine in Port Sanilac"), and the possibility of our 11 miles of coast being the seed for the concept of becoming The East Ports (a Midwest version of The Hamptons). The research from the Sea Grant is also being integrated into the short-term and long-term strategic planning for Port Sanilac. This research, along with the Blue Print Project results, is very integral and important for our future economy. We are treating the plans, recommendations, and studies as living documents while we roll out our economic development, organizational, promotional, and design strategies.*

Water trails for kayakers have grown significantly with the increase in gas prices and the strong merchandising of kayaks. Port Austin has a rental business owned by Chris Boyle, Thumb Area

resident, and he has expanded his business to other areas along the coast. The Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail has also expanded in geography and now includes a signed trail from Tuscola to Sanilac counties. St. Clair County has also promoted the Lake St. Clair Coastal Water Trail ([Tour Lake St. Clair](#)). This extensive water trail is ready to host international kayakers from nearby metropolitan areas like Detroit and Toronto.

Comment from an IA participant on networking and business expansion:

*I own a kayak rental business. I have attended Sea Grant meetings in the Thumb. At these meetings I have been able to network with other stakeholders from around the Thumb. I have also been able to consult with experts in outdoor recreation tourism and the folks at Sea Grant. As a result of these meetings and consultations I have totally decided to expand my business. I bought an old run down marina that was in foreclosure in Port Austin. I am moving my kayak business to the marina. I am working on a contract with the Huron County Parks along the shore to rent kayaks, paddleboards and bikes from the County Parks. I intend to make a \$50,000 investment to expand my business to the parks. My goal is to provide more opportunities for outdoor recreation in the Thumb, support and promote the Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail and promote tourism in the area. I believe my new business ventures (which I would not have come up with but for Sea Grant meetings) will turn the Thumb into a destination for outdoor enthusiasts.*

Non-motorized transportation is positioned well given the recently completed plan (The Greenway Collaborative, Inc.). Efforts are underway by local and county governments to seek and secure funding for implementation. Kiosks and wayfinding are some of the lower cost elements of the plan that can make a big impact in attracting residents to use the extended shoulder of M-25. This shoulder can be used as a trail for cycling, running, or walking, as well as the circuit routes in communities that link to M-25.

Comment from an IA participant on growing fishing opportunities in the Thumb Area:

*In the past 2 years at Harbor Beach, the Thumb Chapter of the Michigan Steelhead and Salmon Fishermen's Association (MSSFA) has had a very successful net pen program raising Michigan Steelhead to acclimate to Lake Huron water and releasing them into the Lake. This the first time steelhead have been successfully raised in a harbor setting. All steelhead up to this time have been net penned in a river with steady flow. The success of this program started with Michigan Sea Grant [Chuck Pistis and Ron Kinnune] directing us to research literature and data plus contacts with New York Sea Grant who put us in contact with NYDEC who introduced us to the people who did the work. We worked with MDNR who supplied the fish, food, and biologist and have been net penning steelhead for the last 2 years and will continue for 4 more years. The Thumb Chapter of MSSFA has worked with Sea Grant to put on Workshops regarding fishing research, MDNR fisheries biologist and others to the interested people of the Thumb of Michigan. We are working together to establish a lake herring restoration program for Lake Huron, which can be adapted to all the Great Lakes. This was a native fish and could sometime in the future result in another game fish. **The one guiding principle that connects us to the Sea Grant Program is that "you're" are a full partner in every endeavor.***

With the aforementioned efforts, a regional marketing plan and renewed partnership is well timed to be able to attract tourists to visit and stay longer in the Thumb Area. Coastal and inland communities with chamber of commerce involvement, businesses, and municipal recreation agencies should attempt a decision of how to proceed with the Thumb Area Tourism Council, Bluewater CVB, and/or something new. Travel Michigan is most supportive of regional collaborations over individual community tourism marketing.

In addition to the above-mentioned examples of progress, a final evaluation survey done in June 2012 gave some indicators and guidance of what comes next for this regional collaboration of stakeholders interested in coastal conservation and increased recreation and tourism opportunities. Many stakeholders agreed they had already seen some changes and benefits of the Integrated Assessment, although all agree that efforts need to continue in order to create lasting change (Figure 5.1)

The top next action by stakeholders is to read the final report (22 of 30 respondents), followed by contacting someone they met at a project meeting (16 respondents), and reading the research summaries provided at earlier meetings or posted on the Michigan Sea Grant website (15 respondents). Additionally, 9 respondents are willing to use project information to guide marketing efforts, 8 respondents are willing to be involved in recreation or natural resource planning, and 6 respondents are likely to talk to partners, boards or public officials (Figure 5.2).

Twelve of the 30 respondents said they would participate in a next “broad summit-style” meeting and 9 respondents will help organize. Only two people said they would probably not participate. Respondents were slightly more likely to participate in a specialized meeting of one of the themed areas –natural resource protection and access, recreation and tourism development, or branding and marketing.

Another way respondents commented was in open-ended responses to the question “What changes are you hoping to see in the future as a result of this project?” Eight people provided comments:

*I'm hoping to see an app developed; everything is going in that direction, websites are even going by the wayside in favor of mobile applications, though, ideally they'd work together, from a common database.*

*Collaboration between our port towns will be easier now that we have attended these project meetings. The growth of The East Ports branding will continue and be better utilized. More promotion of our events, better marketing of our area, more energy infused into such activities as fishing, kayaking, and other outdoor activities.*

*More outreach to the public 'selling' the Thumb. More entrepreneurial recreation opportunities in the Thumb. Also, a specific brand for the Thumb.*

*More regional planning and cooperation between towns in planning, particularly those with similar or have common elements.*

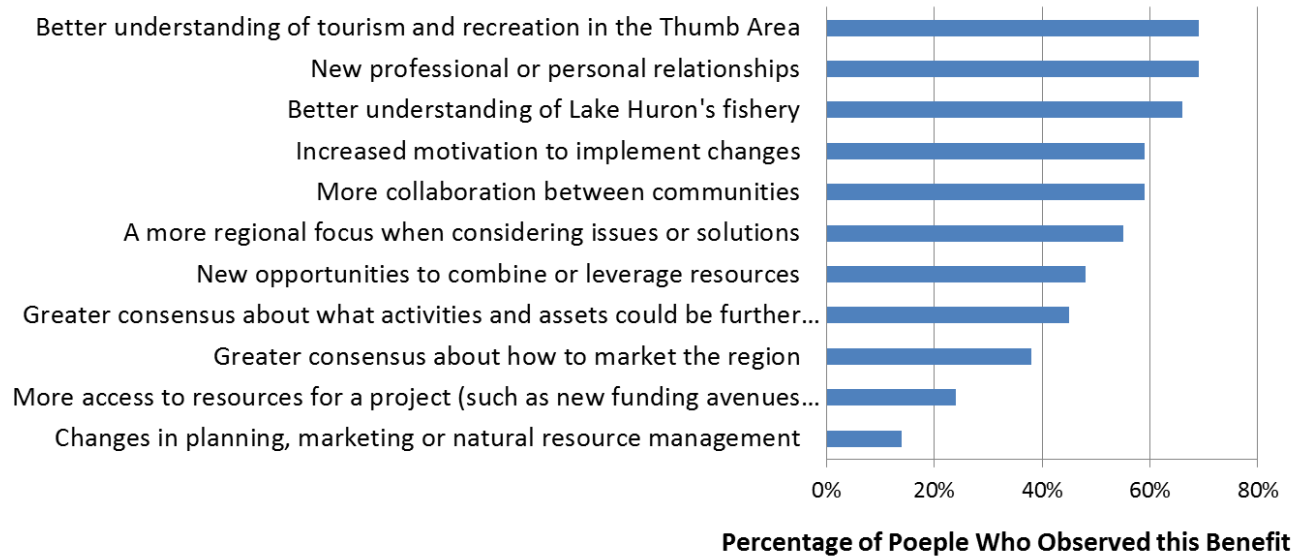
*Begin the think, plan, act, and implement based on regional goals.*

*Goal #4 (to promote collaboration and coordination) has yet to be seen. I have noticed many studies are being government funded by MDOT, ACOE, MDEQ, MDNR, and SEA Grant and most of said studies end there. Most say the same thing, most never get implemented, and most end up being a waste of taxpayer-funded paper. In the end, without implementation, they are not worth the paper consumed. I hope this does not happen AGAIN!*

*Hoping to continue the interest and collaboration of the various communities to enhance and promote the whole area (Thumb) by some coming together at periodic times and continuing the good work led by the professional leaders. Maybe continuing some of this leadership? Maybe find funding or grant/s to continue this leadership so the communities can implement some of the ideas that have come from this 3-year study, i.e. help with the Heritage Route (M-25) to*

completion!

*For everyone to come together and play nice in the sandbox. If we all work together for the greater good it will be of greater benefit to everyone in the Thumb Area.*



**Figure 5.1** Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: “What types of benefits or changes have you seen develop over the last three years as a result of this project? Select all that apply.”  
Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, n= 30.

### 5.3 Final Thoughts

Throughout this report many ideas have been presented and are supported by the stakeholders. Here are few additional best practices and tools to foster sustainable growth in the region surrounded by southern Lake Huron.

- Create a multi-county umbrella organization focused on coastal issues. This may require a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between government levels and interested organizations. Further discussion and selection of specific initiatives could keep government, business and nonprofit organizations interested and involved.
- Share project findings with county board of commissioners and other levels of government to grow support for implementing high priority strategies. Make presentations to civic groups to reach a mix of government and business leaders (Figure 5.2).
- Share project results with the MI Department of Natural Resources, particularly the fisheries and parks units so that Sleeper and Port Crescent State Parks Management Plans can incorporate project findings. Also share findings with other government agencies such as the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Corps of Engineers. Stakeholder priorities could influence future restoration and natural resource management decisions.

- Increase awareness of the Thumb Area coastal resources with non-profit conservation groups like the Nature Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Michigan Audubon Society. Discussions may lead to new collaborations and projects.
- Get involved in recreation and tourism statewide groups. For instance, local and regional policy makers, business owners or others who are active in marketing the Thumb Area should attend the annual Governor’s tourism conference.
- Identify funding opportunities and solicit support, potentially from MI Sea Grant, in developing grant applications.



**Figure 5.2 Final survey results indicating stakeholder response to this question: “How likely are you to do the following things?” Source: Final stakeholder survey, June 2012, n= 30.**

Coastal regions in the U.S. will encounter many promising opportunities but also face issues and challenges. NOAA’s Michigan Sea Grant program brings practical scientific information to coastal communities to capture the economic and social benefits of an environmentally rich Great Lakes shoreline. We have identified opportunities and attempted to problem solve issues in a collaboratively-led regional effort focused on Lake Huron’s southern U.S. coastline. We aimed our science and community-based approaches toward creating and preserving jobs that will keep and attract residents and businesses to the area. We specifically focused on outdoor recreation with an emphasis on fishing and boating, tourism and community initiatives that can take hold across the four counties and over a dozen coastal communities. The efforts of the team of researchers and stakeholders will be successful if ten years from now recreation and tourism opportunities and businesses have grown, greater levels of environmental protection have occurred, and a more engaged citizenry of residents will have been developed and become active in resource conservation. These accomplishments fall in line with NOAA’s coastal priorities of a healthy ecosystem, sustainable development, safe and sustainable food supply, and hazard resilience.

Integrated Assessment (IA) brings together natural, social, and economic information to assist analysis of policy options for decision makers. The IA process also brings together scientists, policy makers, citizens, NGO, and industry representatives to evaluate options for particularly challenging – or wicked – problems. Since IA builds partnerships and a framework to share knowledge, problems that

have both arguable definitions and solutions are best suited to this process. The process does not end with a report, but instead the report and supporting tools are to be shared with policy makers, funders, and other interested audiences to draw attention to issues and possible options for addressing and solving issues. To that end, this report could be useful to following initiatives, plans and entities:

- State Parks (MDNR)
- MI Coastal Management Program (MDEQ)
- U.S. Corps of Engineers
- Great Lakes Commission
- Great Lakes Restoration Initiative
- State representatives
- Local elected officials
- Master Plans – local, county, regional (EMCOG)
- MSU Extension
- Community foundations
- Conservation and recreation clubs
- Homeowner associations
- Land conservancies
- The Conservation Fund, e.g., Great Lakes Revolving Loan Fund
- Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN)
- Grant writers at many organizations

## ***5.4 Tools Available Online***

### **Research Products**

A number of other tools were developed as a result of this project. These are available on the project website: [www.miseagrant.umich.edu/thumb](http://www.miseagrant.umich.edu/thumb)

- Recreation profiles, including profiles about kayaking, biking and bird watching in the Thumb
- Summary presentations about each project theme
- Stakeholder survey summaries
- Priorities and strategies, master list
- Complementary projects
- Marketing checklist
- Grant lists

### **Additional Resources**

- [Thumb Region Non-motorized Transportation Plan](#)
- [Discover Heritage Route 23](#)
- [Discover Northeast Michigan](#)
- [Lake Huron Regional Fisheries Workshops](#)
- [MDOT Average Daily Traffic Maps](#)
- [Lake Invaders Video](#)
- [Michigan Sea Grant Bookstore](#)