



# Leaving a Legacy

By Chris Lamphere

*“We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” - Aldo Leopold*

## VOTE YES FOR MI WATER, WILDLIFE & PARKS

**O**f all the public policy ideas that have ever been proposed in the state of Michigan, it's safe to say that few rival the scope and significance of the Natural Resources Trust Fund.

“It will go down in Michigan history,” said Department of Natural Resources Director Daniel Eichinger. “It's one of the best ideas our state's ever generated. It's a totally novel concept that is elegant and brilliant.”

Since its legislative inception in 1976, the trust fund has contributed nearly \$2 billion toward land purchases and recreational development projects throughout Michigan.

Perusing the laundry list of investments made by the trust fund, it's easy to forget where the money comes from and how it came to be used for acquiring, improving and protecting lands for public use.

The idea of setting up a trust fund to capture revenue generated through oil, gas and mineral activities on state lands was envisioned as an answer to a contentious question that raged in the 1970s and still rages today: how do we mitigate the damage that exploitation of natural resources inevitably causes to the environment?

Consolidating ownership of large swaths of land has a tremendous impact in terms of expanding public accessibility, improving recreational opportunities and

managing the ecological continuity of the land, Eichinger said.

“Opportunities to secure these types of acquisitions don't come up very often,” Eichinger said. “If we didn't have the trust fund — and having it available at a moment's notice to jump on opportunities — what would be required to pull something like that off? Hundreds of large and small areas wouldn't necessarily be available to the public like they are today.”

In November, voters will be asked to approve some changes to the trust fund that will ensure its viability into the foreseeable future.

### History of the trust fund

As former DNR Deputy Director Don Inman tells it, in 1970, they were between a rock and a hard place.

Shell Oil Company announced they had discovered a promising oil deposit beneath environmentally-sensitive (and beautiful) land within the Pigeon River Country State Forest in northern lower Michigan.

Since the state had already leased the mineral rights to the company before the deposit was found, if they denied drilling out of concern about the impact it would have on the environment, they would have been taken to court and probably would have lost, Inman said.

On the other hand, if they

agreed to allow oil extraction without conditions, they likely would have faced severe backlash from environmental groups.

“We started scratching our heads,” said Inman, who at the time worked in the Office of Environmental Review as a wildlife biologist but was tasked with brainstorming solutions to the impasse with Jack Bails, assistant to then-Gov. William Milliken.

As author Dave Dempsey describes in his seminal book *Ruin and Recovery*: “Since the task force concluded that even the limited drilling the DNR was willing to accept would have unavoidable, harmful effects on the forest, Inman turned his thoughts to the idea of what might mitigate the damage ... He suggested to Bails that the estimated \$200 million in state revenue that would be derived from drilling in the forest should be deposited in a separate fund earmarked for the purchase of other recreational lands in the area for public benefit. As Bails put it, the idea was to ‘take the assets of oil, and turn them into assets of land.’”

Inman said his goal was to imagine a process by which any damage done by oil, gas or mineral exploration would be overshadowed by the benefits created through consolidating wild lands and preserving them for future generations.

“These lands are like a