State Natural Areas and the Evolution of Land Conservation in Twentieth-Century Wisconsin

Nathan Kiel

Summary

Land conservation approaches underwent rapid evolution in twentieth-century Wisconsin. Turn-of-the-century reforestation (following the widespread logging of the previous century) gave way to initiatives focused on recreation. However, over a twenty-year span starting in the 1930s, conservation increasingly prioritized protecting diverse landscapes and ecosystems as examples of Wisconsin's natural heritage, culminating in the formation of the State Board for the Preservation of Scientific Areas in 1951. Thereafter, land preservation became place-based; community members engaged with the state government to preserve natural areas in their corner of the state. Later named the State Natural Areas program, this initiative now protects nearly 700 natural areas, an example of making vernacular wilderness accessible to individuals across Wisconsin.

On the morning of 22 March 1951, readers of the *Janesville Weekly Gazette*, a Wisconsin newspaper, were met with a plea: "State should save last virgin forest." Following this circumspect title, the article did not mince words: "Lumbering has been a business of exploitation ... leaving little to posterity of the great stands of pine and hardwoods." These sentiments seem out of place for a former settler frontier region whose early economy was largely built on logging, wetland reclamation, and prairie conversion. Many "great stands" of forest and other natural features had already been protected throughout the US in some one-hundred National Parks and Monuments. These places were part of American culture, their grandeur a source of national pride. By comparison, what natural beauty could be worth conserving in heavily exploited Wisconsin? But a cultural shift was underway; a shift from protecting vast, distant landscapes to preserving local, accessible natural areas.

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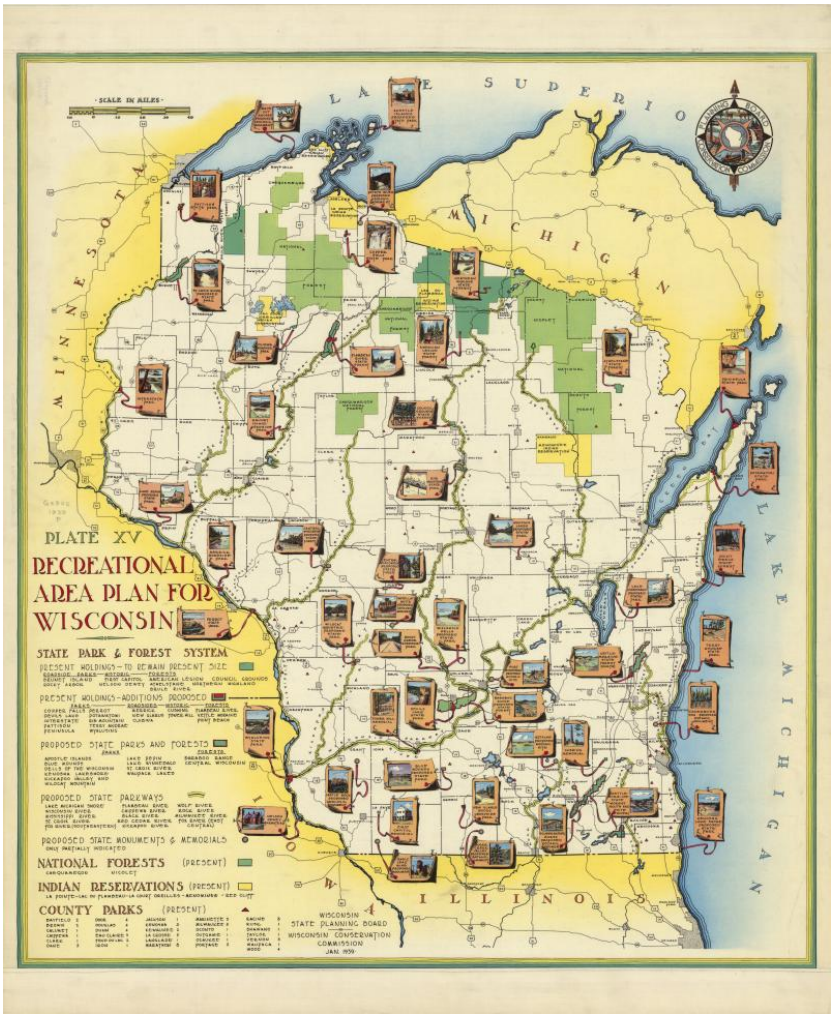

A 1939 map of existing and proposed areas of various designations for the recreational use of natural lands by the Wisconsin state government.

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Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, forests across Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota had been almost completely razed by logging. Concern for the health and natural beauty of this "cutover" region was already being expressed by the mid-nineteenth century. Increase A. Lapham (1811–1875), a writer and naturalist, issued an early (1867) report "on the disastrous effects of the destruction of forest trees, now going on so rapidly in the state of Wisconsin." State and federal governments soon heeded Lapham and others, initiating the US Forest Service and, later, the Civilian Conservation Corps-led tree-planting program that continued through the Great Depression. But the monocultures of even-aged timber trees planted for reforestation, site remediation, and soil stabilization were a far cry from the "great stands of pine and hardwoods" that had been there previously.

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Early conservation initiatives were primarily focused on forests, and tree planting efforts were exclusively utilitarian. However, conservationists increasingly took a broader view of which land should be protected and why. To manage the state's public and private natural resources, Wisconsin's legislature created the Conservation Commission in 1908 and passed the Forest Crop Law in 1927. By 1939, the Commission and the State Planning Board jointly published a Recreational Area Plan that proposed several "botanic" and "geologic" monuments to augment existing state and national forests. Now, bogs, marshes, and other ecological communities were just as worthy of protection as historic sites, scenic views, and second-growth forests, albeit with recreational use prioritized. But, with a growing recognition of the ecosystem services and intrinsic value such areas provide and possess, the state would soon go several steps further.

In 1942, Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), among the most influential twentieth-century American conservationists, was appointed to the Conservation Commission. That year, a Natural Areas Committee was formed to identify areas suitable for preservation. The Committee evolved into the State Board for the Preservation of Scientific Areas. Established in 1951, its purpose, as outlined in the *Wisconsin State Journal* in July of that year, was "to formulate policies for the ... management of areas necessary for scientific research, the teaching of conservation and natural history, and for the preservation of rare or valuable plant and animal species and communities." Over just a few decades, efforts to designate lands for reforestation, recreation, and other utilitarian purposes had broadened to include preservation of diverse ecosystems, showing that governments could manage landscapes not just for human use, but also for ecological research, environmental education, and species protection.

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Pasqueflower (*Anemone patens*) in bloom at Ferry Bluff State Natural Area in Sauk County, Wisconsion on 3 April 2021.

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Though the proposed Scientific Areas were intended primarily for research, Wisconsinites quickly became active participants in their preservation. For example, a western Wisconsin garden club worked with the University of Wisconsin-Madison to preserve local hilltop prairies home to the pasqueflower, a charismatic plant that is the first to bloom each spring. One individual wrote in a 1959 *The Post-Crescent* article, "I'm planning to start looking right now for a good little tamarack-spruce bog in one of our northeastern counties." An original three proposed Scientific Areas in 1952 grew to twenty-eight by 1959, still over a decade before the National Park Service established the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in northern Wisconsin (1970).

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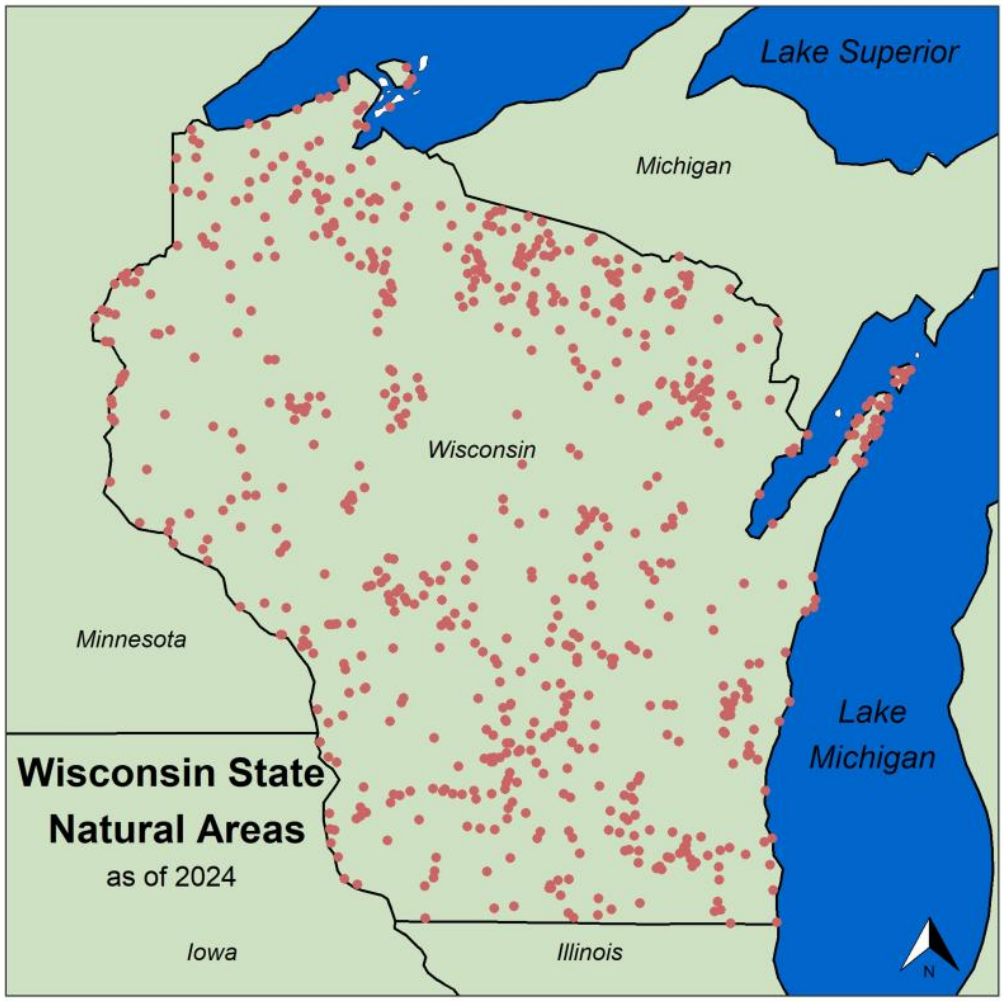

Wisconsin State Natural Area locations (burgundy dots) as of 2024.

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The preservation of "wilderness" in US National Parks, though flawed in its separation of humans from nature and exclusion of Indigenous inhabitants, constitutes a core component of American identity. At a smaller scale, Scientific Areas quickly became integral to the Wisconsin identity. "Your children ... will appreciate the growing number of living outdoor museums gathered in your name by the Conservation Commission," promised one piece published in the *Wausau Daily Herald* in 1953: "All these are yours, for study or for remembrance." Thus, the Scientific Areas program rapidly grew from its utilitarian roots into a means of protecting natural heritage, a vernacular and locally valued wilderness for the people of Wisconsin. In doing so, it traced the same course that many local land preservation movements would take, following the Massachusetts' Trustees of Public Reservations initiative (1891) and preceding Illinois' Nature Preserves Commission (1963) and Minnesota's Natural Heritage Advisory Committee (1965). As Richard Judd outlines in his book, *Democratic Spaces*, this power to protect parochial landscapes comes from local people and the social values embodied in land preservation, including "a love of place, a faith in collective action, and a commitment to democratic process."

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The *Wausau Daily Herald* contributor demonstrated great prescience: today, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the successor to the Conservation Commission, manages nearly 700 State Natural Areas (as they are now called) across Wisconsin. Protected prairies, wetlands, and woods, as core parts of Wisconsin's natural heritage, are easily accessible to every individual in the state.

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Related links:

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