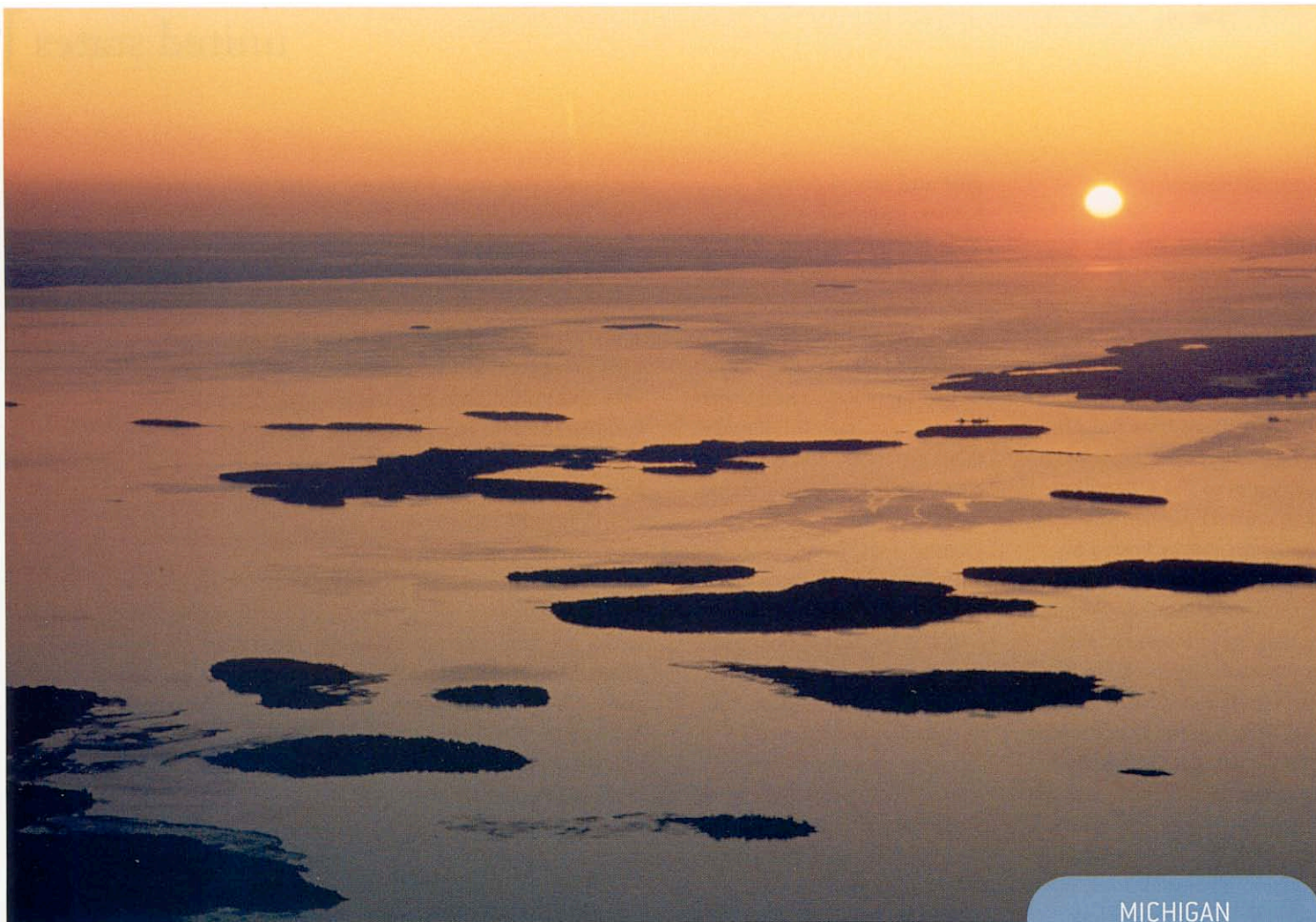




MICHIGAN

Helping a Local Community Strike the Balance Between Protection and Ecotourism

THE LES CHENEAUX ISLANDS, a 36-island chain on the east end of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, has drawn visitors dating back to the French explorers that named the region. Ecological diversity here translates to unparalleled beauty: Marshes, white-cedar swamps and tamarack bogs dot the islands, along with stands of white birch and quaking aspen, sugar maple and beech. Now, with help from The Nature Conservancy, island residents are set to preserve both the ecology and the tourism industry of the region.

A century ago, prominent people began to summer on the islands. When they left in the fall, fishermen arrived to enjoy the bounty of perch. The spectacular scenery and biological bounty have changed little since then, leading the Conservancy to identify the region as one of the Last Great Places. It opened an office in the town of Cedarville in the Les Cheneaux region in 1993; the timing was fortuitous.

When the local perch fishery collapsed, the economy went down with it. Residents wanted to stave off development, but that was no mean feat when waterfront property had jumped from a hundred dollars a square foot to a thousand in just 10 years. Islanders knew high-rises and chain restaurants were not the way to draw tourists; instead, locals imagined visitors seeking out a rare Pitcher's thistle or thrilling to the sight of some of the 250 species of birds found here, including 15 types of warbler.

The Conservancy's experts became partners in developing a sound plan to balance ecotourism with protection. "We participated in an economic forum, served on committees with townspeople and got \$300,000 in grants," explains Tina Hall, the Conservancy's conservation director in the Upper Peninsula. The final plan included a water trail for kayak tours and new paths through nature preserves. Though the Conservancy still has an interest in Les Cheneaux, the office in Cedarville closed in 2002 with much of the job done. "We were there for nine years as a daily presence, and then the community took over to carry on," says Hall. "We put on the training wheels; now they're zooming along, and we can take our training wheels someplace else!" —CATHERINE FOX

An ecotourism plan for the Les Cheneaux Islands (above) includes a water trail for kayak tours and new paths through nature preserves. The community plan stands to preserve the tourism industry—and the region's ecology.

