

# Survey of Sea Kayak Owners in Minnesota:

## Kayaking the North Shore of Lake Superior

*Executive Summary*

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## **Executive Summary**



Minnesota Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Parks and Recreation  
Trails and Waterways Division  
Office of Management and Budget Services

Report prepared by:  
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World Wide Web home page: [www.dnr.state.mn.us/trails\\_and\\_waterways/state\\_canoe\\_routes/](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/trails_and_waterways/state_canoe_routes/)*

*Cover photograph by Craig Blacklock*

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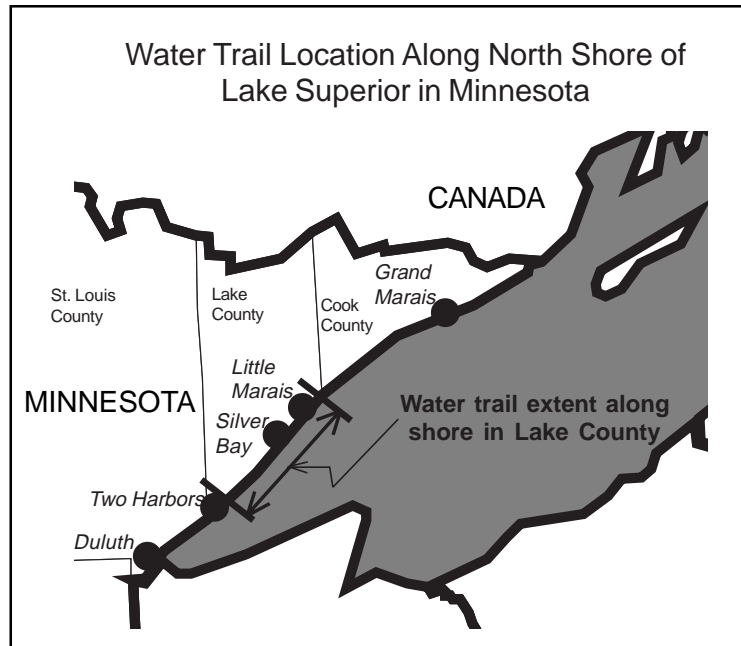
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

The Lake Superior Water Trail provides an opportunity to experience the rugged North Shore of Lake Superior from the water, a perspective few North Shore visitors are able to enjoy. It is intended primarily for sea kayaks, which are larger than their whitewater cousins (a sea kayak is at least 14 feet long). The Water Trail—as envisioned in the future—will extend the entire 150-mile length of the North Shore in Minnesota, and will connect with Canadian and other U.S. state efforts to form a loop around all of Lake Superior.

At present, a 40-mile stretch of the Water Trail has been developed in Minnesota along the North Shore (see map). Before providing additional amenities and maps for the Water Trail, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) wanted to obtain some background information about sea kayaking on the Trail and on the North Shore in general. The MN DNR wanted to know—among other things—how much the Trail and associated kayaking facilities are being used, what sea kayakers are looking for in terms of facilities/services and experiences on the Trail, and what barriers exist to the further use of Lake Superior by sea kayakers. To obtain this knowledge, two efforts were undertaken in 2000. One was a mail survey of Minnesota-registered sea kayak owners, and the other was field counts of sea-kayak campgrounds and access facilities along the Water Trail.



### SEA KAYAK USE STATEWIDE

Minnesota had 3238 sea kayaks registered for pleasure (personal, noncommercial) use in early 2000. The typical sea kayak is used about 20 times a year. Since there is not a great deal of region-to-region variation in use rates, most of the sea kayaking originates where most of the sea kayaks are registered, namely the Twin Cities metro region.

Sea kayaking—like many recreation activities—is predominately a near-home activity: 62 percent of all sea kayaking occurs within an hour's drive of home. This pattern of use makes the Twin

Cities metro region the primary use area for the largest number of sea kayakers. The metro region is closely followed by Northeast Minnesota, where the North Shore of Lake Superior is a popular destination. Other popular destinations are the border lakes in the U.S. and Canada, and the South Shore of Lake Superior in Wisconsin, which includes the Apostle Islands.

### SEA KAYAK USE ALONG THE MINNESOTA PORTION OF THE NORTH SHORE OF LAKE SUPERIOR

Based on survey results, the North Shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota is the destination for 14 percent of all sea-kayak outings from Minnesota-registered sea kayaks (8,672 of 61,007 outings), and the Water Trail is the destination for five percent of all outings (3,078 of 61,007 outings).

These use figures—based on Minnesota sea kayaks registered for pleasure (personal, noncommercial) use—represent the large majority of sea kayaking at these locations, but they do not include two additional sources of sea kayaks: outfitters and kayaks registered in another state. Estimates for the former source were obtained directly from the outfitters for both the Water Trail and North Shore, and estimates for the latter were obtained from access counts for the Water Trail only. Together, the two additional sources would raise Water Trail use into the 3,500 to 4,000 outing range. The outfitters for the North Shore would raise Minnesota North Shore use into the 12,000 to 12,500 outing range. Most of the outfitter-related outings come from Duluth and Grand Marais.

Kayakers from Northeast Minnesota, who live near the North Shore, have a two to three times higher use rate of Lake Superior and the Water Trail than other Minnesota sea kayakers. Because of these high use rates, Northeast kayakers comprise a significant share of North Shore and Water Trail kayaking, but Metro kayakers—because of their sheer number—comprise a significant share as well.

Some 20 percent (19% to 21%) of the sea kayaking along the Water Trail and along the North Shore is associated with kayak-camping, while the remaining 80 percent is day use. This translates into about 590 Water Trail outings associated with kayak-camping, and about 1820 North Shore outings.

### INTEREST IN, AND BARRIERS TO, USING A SEA KAYAK ON THE MINNESOTA PORTION OF THE NORTH SHORE OF LAKE SUPERIOR

Owners who have kayaked in the last year on the Minnesota waters of Lake Superior have a high interest in kayaking more (90+%), and the large majority (80+%) have plans to do so. In contrast, owners who have *not* kayaked on these waters in the last year have a lower, but still sizable interest in kayaking there (73%), but only 30 percent have plans to do so.

Perceived barriers to further use of the North Shore for kayaking are strongly associated with a kayaker's current use of these waters, except for one universal barrier: time. Beyond time constraints, the major barriers for kayakers who have *not* used the North Shore in the last 12 months

have to do with intervening opportunities (good opportunities closer to home) and lack of knowledge of what kayaking is like on this part of Lake Superior.

A different set of barriers becomes evident for the owners who have kayaked these waters in the last year, and these barriers become larger with heavier use. The barriers are of two types: one has to do with the social setting kayakers desire (namely, an undeveloped Lake Superior shoreline), and the other involves the lack of specific facilities provided for kayakers. The facilities in the survey that were regularly found lacking were all of those listed (kayak campgrounds, safe landing places in case of bad weather, and good water access) so other facilities should be considered barrier candidates as well. In short, existing users want more amenities for their outing, and they want the outing to occur in a less developed setting.

A number of items did not show up as major barriers to any user or nonuser group, and they are noteworthy for that reason. Money is not a major barrier, nor is the current amount of kayaking on the North Shore, lack of overnight accommodations in the area, lack of additional leisure opportunities in the area, expecting interference from motorized watercraft, or expecting to encounter too many people.

#### INTEREST IN, AND BARRIERS TO, KAYAK-CAMPING ON THE MINNESOTA PORTION OF THE NORTH SHORE OF LAKE SUPERIOR

Consistent with the previous topic, an owner's participation in kayak-camping on the North Shore is strongly associated with their desire and plans to participate more, as well as with perceived barriers to further participation. Owners who have kayak-camped in the last year along the Minnesota waters of Lake Superior have a high interest in kayak-camping more (95%), and the large majority (83%) have plans to do so. Kayak owners who have *not* kayak-camped in the last year along Lake Superior have a lower, but still sizable interest in kayak-camping there (70+%), but far fewer have plans to do so.

For kayakers who have *not* kayak-camped on the North Shore in the last 12 months, the major perceived barrier to participation is lack of personal knowledge about this activity on the North Shore. In contrast, for those who have kayak-camped in the last year, the major barriers are a shortage of campsites (too few and too full), a related barrier on lack of guarantee of a campsite, and the need for more remote campsites with less human development around. Consistent with the need for more remoteness, the existing rustic nature of these campgrounds (no running water or toilets) is not a significant barrier. Weather is a moderate barrier to all kayak-camping user groups; all groups have some concern about getting stranded by bad weather.

These kayak-camping barriers are similar to the kayaking barriers reported earlier. Kayakers who are users identify a lack of amenities (facilities and services) and remote/less-developed settings as major barriers, while nonusers identify lack of personal knowledge as a major barrier.

A number of items did not show up as major barriers to any user or nonuser group, and they are noteworthy for that reason. Dislike of camping is not a major barrier, nor is the rustic nature of the



campgrounds (noted above), the current amount of kayak-camping on the North Shore, or concerns about campground safety.

## KAYAKING ON THE WATER TRAIL OF LAKE SUPERIOR

Statewide, some 20 percent of owners report kayaking on the Water Trail in the last 12 months.

When owners were asked if they would kayak the Water Trail more if it was longer than its current length of 40 miles, current users of the Trail were far more likely to respond ‘yes’. This response pattern is probably another reflection of the desire for more amenities among the current users.

Owners were queried about their level of knowledge of the Water Trail, and results indicate that self-described knowledge is not particularly high. Kayak owners—who know at least ‘a few things’ about the Water Trail—are most likely to have first heard about the Trail from the Lake Superior Water Trail Association. ‘Family or friends’ (a typically large information source) is the next most frequently indicated source, followed by ‘special events’ and the ‘Minnesota DNR’.

The sea-kayak owners who have used the Water Trail sometime in the past (28% of all owners) were asked to describe their most recent outing. Outing characteristics include:

The vast majority of outings on the Water Trail (89%) are loop trips that start and stop at the same place. The most frequent launching sites are state parks along the Trail and Two Harbors.

The typical Water Trail trip is 10 miles in length.

Typical party size is two to three people in the same number of kayaks.

Kayaking along the Water Trail is almost entirely an adult pursuit; few teens and children are part of the outings.

Nearly three-fourths of Water Trail outings involve an overnight somewhere, typically 2 nights in length.

Camping is the most frequent type of overnight accommodation; 23 percent of overnights are at water-accessible kayak-campgrounds, and another 35 percent are at other types of campgrounds. Resorts are the next most common type of overnight accommodation (17%).

There are four campgrounds along the Water Trail that are provided for sea kayakers: Thompson Beach, Palisade Head, Gooseberry River and Crazy Bay. Field counts at these sites indicate that they are little used. This means that kayakers—in their survey responses—are considering other campgrounds as water accessible sites where they kayak-camp.

When engaging in day trips or overnight trips involving kayak-camping, kayakers participate in a range of activities, the most common of which are passive visual pursuits: a majority of kayakers participate in nature observation and sightseeing, while over one-third participate in photography and birdwatching. Kayak-campers, as opposed to day users, are far more likely to do park-type activities, including hiking, a self-guided nature walk, rock climbing, visiting historic sites, and photography.

Kayakers attain a host of beneficial experiences from kayaking on the Water Trail. Most frequently attained are those related to getting away to a natural, peaceful setting. Next most frequent are those involving sensual enjoyment: enjoying the smells/sounds of nature and the fresh clean air, and working the body to attain physical fitness. Also of high importance is experiencing adventure and taking risks, which are not the types of experiences recreators get from more routine outings, such as visiting state parks or using state trails. Many kayakers view their trail outing as a chance to connect to nature, feel a sense of wildness and attain spiritual renewal, all of which are facilitated by more primitive, less developed settings. As noted above, kayakers are sensitive to the development along the North Shore and want kayak-campgrounds to be more remote.

Associated with the use of the Water Trail by Minnesota-registered sea kayakers is trip spending, which contributes to the local economy. Trip spending totals just over \$100,000 annually. The typical kayaker spends \$34.53 per day. Most spending is on the essentials: food, transportation and lodging. Kayakers who spend the night away from home spend more each day than day users, mainly because of overnight accommodation costs.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SEA KAYAK OWNERS

Most sea kayak owners are in households with one or two kayaks; the mean number per household is 1.8. In addition to sea kayaks, owners possess and use a distinctive mix of household recreational equipment. The most common types of equipment are associated with non-motorized physical activity, just like sea-kayaking. Over 60 percent of owners use their household's cross-country skiing equipment, backpacking equipment, mountain bike, fishing gear, and canoe.

The demographic characteristics of sea kayak owners include:

- Sea kayak owners are mostly middle-aged, in the 40 to 60 age range.

- Males account for three-fourths of owners, females one-fourth.

- The educational attainment of sea kayakers is quite high: 78 percent have completed college, which includes 38 percent who have completed a postgraduate degree. Another 6 percent have completed vocational or technical school.

- Nearly half of households (46%) are in middle income ranges of \$30,000 to \$80,000, while another 32 percent are over \$100,000. Overall, the incomes are high, with a median in the \$70,000 to \$80,000 range, well above the Minnesota household median which is probably near \$50,000 today.