

## TF18-0203 Garden Island Land Acquisition Initiative

### **Justification and Support:**

**Need:** The Garden Island Land Acquisition Initiative is an excellent fit with the MNRTF Program, and is relevant to the Trail, Wildlife Buffer, and Great Lakes Frontage priorities. Acquisition of the Welter tract will improve access for outdoor recreation and protect an environmentally and culturally sensitive area.

The Welter property has the only dry ground for an existing trail that connects the northern and southern parts of the Garden Island's 12-mile trail network. It abuts state land on three sides and has Lake Michigan frontage on the fourth. The tract encompasses 3 rare natural communities, has records of 4 rare species in the immediate vicinity of the tract and another 10 species within 2.5 miles. The project will preserve viewscapes, protect land from development, and provide public ownership for the largest of the island's three remaining private inholdings.

**Planning:** DNR plans specifically identify island priorities. DNR Policy & Procedure 29.20-05 – Management of State Owned Island Properties: “the department shall place a high priority on the acquisition of island properties.” The Northern Lower Peninsula's 2013 Regional State Forest Management Plan establishes the Great Lakes Islands Management Area (4.2 MA 1): to “address habitat needs of featured species” and specifically identifies Garden Island as a priority. The 2017 Management Plan for Northern Lake Michigan Islands: “protect ecological & cultural resources” and identifies Garden Island as a priority island.

The acquisition of inholdings aligns with other DNR planning efforts. The Land Consolidation Strategy: “acquire land for wildlife & recreation areas within their dedicated project boundaries” (Priority 2) and the Wildlife Division Land Acquisition Strategy - Northern Lower Peninsula Region: focuses on “private land inholdings”. The Welter tract is a high priority inholding within the DNR approved 2004 & 2012 project boundary.

Other plans emphasize the need to protect both natural & cultural resources. The 2018 SCORP: “natural and cultural resources are protected” (Objective 1) and “create opportunities for natural and cultural resources protection and management” (Key action 1.5). The 2013 Managed Public Lands Strategy: “protect natural and cultural resources” (Goal 3).

**Public Input & Support:** The property was nominated by the Little Traverse Conservancy for a MNRTF acquisition. The DNR is initiating contact with the tribes, township, county, planning commission, and conservation organizations. Meeting agendas, minutes, and letters of support will be added later as supplemental materials.

### **Project Description:**

**Project:** This project is a fee simple acquisition on Garden Island, a 5,000-acre island in the Beaver Island Archipelago. The DNR owns 98% of the land on the island and, except for two historic cabins and remnants of a small ghost town, is undeveloped and has been uninhabited for the past 75 years. The island is accessible only by private boat.

The 58-acre Welter tract is within the DNR approved project boundary and would be managed as part of the Beaver Island State Wildlife Research Area (SWRA). The intended purpose of the

SWRA is for the study of wildlife & ecological processes, the support of game & at-risk species, and wildlife-related recreation. If acquired, this property will be open for all legal hunting, fishing and trapping seasons.

**Natural Features:** The Welter property includes 3,000 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline. The tract includes 3 rare natural communities: Great Lakes marsh; limestone cobble beach; and boreal forest. The highest point on the property is 15 ft above the water line but the National Wetlands Inventory classifies most of the property as forest/shrub wetlands. There is an unnamed 2-acre lake at the north end of the parcel. If purchased, this parcel will enlarge the wildlife area, block-in ownership, protect the shoreline, and buffer the existing SWRA from the negative impacts of potential development.

**Development and Maintenance:** The intent is to do as little development as possible to minimize environmental impacts. When needed, habitat management will focus on the needs of featured game and at-risk species. If rare species are observed or if records indicate their presence, management activities will be adapted to avoid harming those species.

The Garden Island portion of the SWRA is managed for 2 featured species: white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse. Both species are already found on the island, along with the high-quality habitat needed to support them. Management on this property will focus on preserving the natural Great Lakes shoreline, maintaining healthy Great Lakes marshes, and perpetuating the lowland conifer forest which provides winter thermal cover for deer.

**Publicity and Promotion:** The Department will issue a press release following the purchase of the parcel. Because of the property's isolation, a program recognition plaque will be posted off site at the Gaylord CSC. That signage will be installed within a year of taking possession. Project area and public hunting access maps will be updated to include the acquired parcel. The property will also be added to the GIS state hunting land layer for the DNR's interactive MiHunt map. All of these maps are printable and can be found on the DNR's internet website under Places-to-Go.

**Grant History:** The DNR is a past recipient of acquisition grants, has no known unresolved conversions, and has an excellent record for completing these land transactions.

### **Natural Resource Access and Protection:**

**Vegetation:** Except for the marsh and beach, the Welter tract is nearly entirely forested in lowland conifer species, dominated by cedar and spruce. Most of the old-growth timber on Garden Island was cut and sawn by a short-lived sawmill that operated on the island between 1912 and 1913.

**Fish:** The lake frontage and associated emergent wetlands on the property are valuable fish rearing areas for pike & perch. The marsh also provides essential habitat for many of the 15 amphibian & reptile species found on the island.

**Wildlife:** The Welter tract already serves as quality wildlife habitat. Acquisition of this parcel will provide habitat for a wide range of game species such as deer, woodcock, ruffed grouse, cottontail, waterfowl, and an assortment of furbearers. If acquired, the property will be open for public use and will provide opportunities for hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife viewing.

**Rare Species:** Because of its isolation and minimal human impacts, Garden Island is a diverse, species-rich landscape. MNFI records indicate 14 at-risk species have been found within 2.5 miles of the Welter tract.

**Land Consolidation:** The Welter tract is within the 2004 & 2012 DNR approved SWRA boundaries for land acquisition and will block in SGA land within the SGA boundary,

**Access:** Michigan state wildlife areas are open to the public 24 hour/day, 7 days/week, 365 days/year. Persons can enter any state wildlife area free of charge regardless of residency. Because much of the Island was acquired with State Game Fund & US Government exchange, the intended purpose of those lands is for wildlife-related recreation activities.

**Population Service Area:** The closest Michigan population centers to the project include Mackinaw City, Petoskey, Gaylord, Charlevoix, and Traverse City. Most people access Garden Island by boat from Beaver Island which is two miles away. Access to Beaver Island from the mainland is a 32-mile ride via ferry or airplane. While Garden Island is not easily accessible, the very difficulty in getting there is what attracts visitors. The island is well used by hunters, hikers, and backpackers; a December 2000 news article of a hunting fatality on Garden Island notes that 39 hunters (5 per square mile) were on the island at the time of the accident.

### **Other Information:**

**Cultural Resources:** Historically, Garden Island was the home of the Anishinaabe and is one of two islands within the Beaver Island Archipelago which are part of the 1855 Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa (LTBB) Reservation. The Ojibwe name for the island is Minis Gitigaan, which was translated directly into English as "Garden Island". Some of the Anishinaabe lived on the island year-round, and others lived there only during the warmer months. An increasing number of Anishinaabe from the mainland and Beaver Island owned farms on the Garden Island after the treaties of 1836 and 1847, planting corn and squash. Other Anishinaabe worked from the island as fishermen. This Native American settlement shrank during the early 1900s as its residents moved away. Property tax law was not fully understood by the islanders and large portions of the land reverted to the state of Michigan because of nonpayment of property taxes. Other parcels of land were simply abandoned. The last Garden Island resident, Peter Monatou, died in 1940. Because of its cultural significance the island is listed in National Register of Historic Places.