

Visit Michigan's Sunrise Side: Get Out and Explore Area's Natural Beauty

By Sue Latuszek

Northeast Michigan offers a variety of ecotourism activities for visitors to enjoy. "We have a lot of beautiful natural areas and lots of ways to enjoy them," said Deborah Pardike, director of the Alpena Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

A variety of opportunities exist, including trails for hiking, biking, snowshoeing and skiing, parks, canoeing, kayaking, scuba diving and snorkeling tours, elk viewing tours, morel mushroom hunting and even geo-caching.

"The majority are no cost or low cost and affordable for every family," Pardike said. One area of particular interest right within the city of Alpena is Island Park, where visitors can view a variety of animals and plant life.

"The great thing about Island Park is they have brochures for self-guided tours," Pardike said.

"People simply follow the designated paths along the island, located in the Thunder Bay River, and learn about the flora, foliage and other interesting aspects of the area along the way.

Plans are in the works to create an interpretive River Center at the location, which Pardike said will be a great addition to Island Park because visitors can learn about the science of the river as well.

Snorkeling tours of shallow water shipwrecks in Thunder Bay provide visitors a unique view of the areas' maritime heritage. The unique geology of Rockport Harbor offers sinkholes to explore and fossils to hunt.

Geo-caching also is growing in the area. This modernized version of treasure hunting uses the internet and GPS to lead the hunter to the cache, which is usually just a logbook to enter your name and the date. "Most (caches) are located in natural areas," Pardike said.

Pardike said there also are several interesting agri-tourism opportunities available throughout the region, where farmers or other locals have agreed to share some of their time with visitors for a fun and educational experience.

Knaebbe's Munchee Krunchee Apple Farm in Rogers City doesn't just sell apples in the fall; it offers apple picking, hayrides and other fun activities for families.

Another such example she gave is Green Road Gold Maple Syrup, where from mid-March to mid-April the public is invited to come and watch as maple syrup is made.

"In all of these opportunities, the visitor has a hand to guide them," Pardike said.

The amount of ecotourism opportunities has risen in recent years, and Pardike believes that is in direct response to today's consumers whose expectations are higher and are looking for interesting experiences. "People are responding to the fact that today's consumer is very savvy," she said of the growing industry.