

DEVELOPING A PROCESS AND CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING WISCONSIN'S LAKE SUPERIOR FRESHWATER ESTUARIES' ECOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS, RESEARCH POTENTIAL, AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

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The Wisconsin Coastal Management Program and University of Wisconsin-Extension collaborated with a diverse array of partners, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, tribal and local governments, and other state agencies, to evaluate 35 candidate sites on Lake Superior for nomination as a National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR). The evaluation process was designed to consider and assess the ecological characteristics, research and monitoring potential, and educational opportunities associated with the candidate sites. Wisconsin adapted federal marine estuary evaluation criteria to be used in the Lake Superior freshwater estuary evaluation process. This effort represented the first time that freshwater estuary evaluation criteria have been developed for a NERR site selection process.

Great Lakes freshwater estuaries are characterized by unique geomorphic and ecological characteristics. The NERR site selection process required the development of modified criteria to evaluate those characteristics, as well as freshwater estuary structure and function. In addition, the site selection process utilized a methodology to concurrently evaluate potential research and education values of the sites. The process involved input from a team of over thirty individuals with expertise related to freshwater estuary ecology, education, and outreach. The team of experts met 10 times over a 15-month period to complete the evaluation process. The results of this effort are lessons regarding stakeholder input to complex public policy decision processes, and a model for evaluating Great Lakes freshwater estuaries for potential National Estuarine Research Reserve designation.

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