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Contact: [Martin Jannereth](#) 517-335-3458

Environmental Areas

Sensitive fish and wildlife habitat along the shorelands of the Great Lakes, connecting waterways and river mouths has historically been destroyed for intensive residential and commercial development. The continued loss of these necessary habitats will have serious effects on fish and wildlife throughout the Great Lakes region. Under this program, environmental areas are regulated to protect habitat necessary for the preservation and maintenance of fish and wildlife. Many environmental areas contain coastal wetlands but other important habitats, such as upland ridges and islands are also included. In several instances, upland areas are involved in habitat protection for shore birds.

Environmental area designation sets up a review program where the affected property owner must make application to the Department for any dredging, filling, grading or other alteration of the soil, natural drainage or vegetation, or placement of permanent structures.

Part 323 provides for the designation of environmental areas up to 1000 feet landward of the ordinary high water mark of a Great Lake or 1000 landward of the ordinary high water mark of lands adjacent to waters affected by levels of the Great Lakes. If the environmental area boundary encompasses an entire parcel, a 12,000 square foot structure zone is identified where construction can be permitted.

Approximately 275 linear miles of essential habitat exists along Michigan's Great Lakes shorelands representing about 8.5% of the Great Lakes shoreline. About 607 parcels of land were designated as environmental areas from 1976 to 1985.

Of the approximately 118 environmental areas, each containing one to several parcels of land, less than 6 percent utilize the full 1,000 foot setback. Most of the parcels containing environmental areas extending inland 1,000 feet are State and/or federally owned.

The statute identifies uses which require the Department's review. These include dredging, filling, grading, other alterations of the soil, alterations of the natural drainage, alteration of vegetation utilized by fish or wildlife, or both, including timber harvest in identified colonial bird nesting areas and the placement of permanent structures. Activities which do not require a permit include maintenance of existing dikes, farming if specific provision are complied with and timber harvest if outside a colonial bird nesting area.

Designation of these sensitive coastal shorelands assures an increased level of protection over these valuable resources. Studies and surveys conducted by the Department and others have recorded over 25 fish species, 12 mammal species, and 131 bird species utilizing these valuable coastal habitats. In addition, typically unseen and overlooked species which are equally essential for maintaining health fish and wildlife populations are also provided protection under this coastal designation.

Private owners of designated environmental area lands are eligible to apply for enrollment in Part 361, Farmland and Open Space Preservation, 1994 PA 451 (formerly know as PA 116 of 1974). This statute provides for property tax reduction and exemption from some types of assessments if the property owner enrolls under an open space easement. Under the easement, these habitat rich lands can still continue to be utilized by the property owner for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, and other non-developmental activities.

Townships with designated environmental areas are displayed in a [statewide map](#) and listed in a [PDF document](#). All available maps of designated environmental areas are available [here](#).

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