

A B S T R A C T

DEVELOPMENT OF MICHIGAN PUBLIC LAND POLICY

by

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The purpose of this dissertation is to examine development of public land policy which has led to twenty per cent of Michigan land (7,300,000 acres), being publicly owned, sixty per cent by the State and the remainder mostly by the federal government. The principal thrust of the study is to identify the goals and objectives sought, the factors influencing the shaping of public land policy, the extent to which goals were attained, and the unforeseen consequences of governmental land actions.

Because of forest devastation, land abuse and tax-reverted lands, the State became a land manager in 1903 with a 35,000-acre forest. From this the land legacy has increased to 4½ million acres with goals changing from an initial emphasis on reforestation and fire control to one of greater diversification of uses. In recent years, recreational use has become predominant on state-owned lands, especially in southern Michigan.

With public domain lands as a nucleus, federal land ownership has, since 1905, increased to 3¼ million acres, consisting primarily of national forest with some national park, wildlife refuge and other lands. This federal land system developed under the broad objectives for each category of land; its growth was stimulated by the desire to terminate land abuse and forest devastation and by the availability of tax-delinquent lands.

The Northwest Territory, including Michigan, became American Territory in 1783. Upon Maryland's insistence, the several states, by 1786, ceded the land that was to become Michigan to the federal government. It in turn acquired Indian rights in the land through treaty and purchase by 1842.

Basic land policy was formulated by 1800 in a climate beclouded with knotty problems of preservation of the union, indebtedness, settlement, commerce, desire for land ownership, and interstate rivalries. Policy provided for the new territory to become states on an equal basis with the original states and for disposal of land in small parcels to settlers.

The major era of land disposal in Michigan extended from 1820 to about 1890. The federal government granted twelve million acres to Michigan while disposing of twenty-two million acres to private owners by cash sales, military bounties and homesteading. During this period the State disposed of its granted lands under a policy of getting lands into private ownership and onto the tax rolls as rapidly as possible and on the premise that all forested lands could be farmed upon removal of the timber.

Disposal and settlement were attained but not entirely in the manner envisioned by the Congress. Poorly-structured land laws and the infertile soils of northern Michigan combined with speculation, fraud, mismanagement and inefficiency produced unforeseen consequences of forest destruction, soil depletion, land monopoly, wasted human resources, tax-reverted lands, and eventually depressed areas.

Geographical features and harvesting of natural resources--especially timber, iron and copper--played a significant role in the drama of Michigan public lands. In the disposal period, there was no concern for the condition of the land; and not until the 1890's was any serious consideration given to retention of land in public ownership.

Subjective evaluation of legislative land actions and factors relating to public land policy reveals that many

low-quality lands, mostly with a history of tax reversion, best serve the public interest when in public ownership. Inasmuch as some water-front lands have also been acquired to help meet the demands of outdoor recreation, future acquisition of such lands, made difficult in recent years by competitive uses and price escalation, should be made only if case-by-case consideration indicates that public ownership will best serve the public interest. Alternatives to fee simple acquisition are suggested.

*Dr. R. J. Graffenus  
with love  
Dad*

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