McCargoe Cove: An Examination of Isle Royale through Space and Thyme

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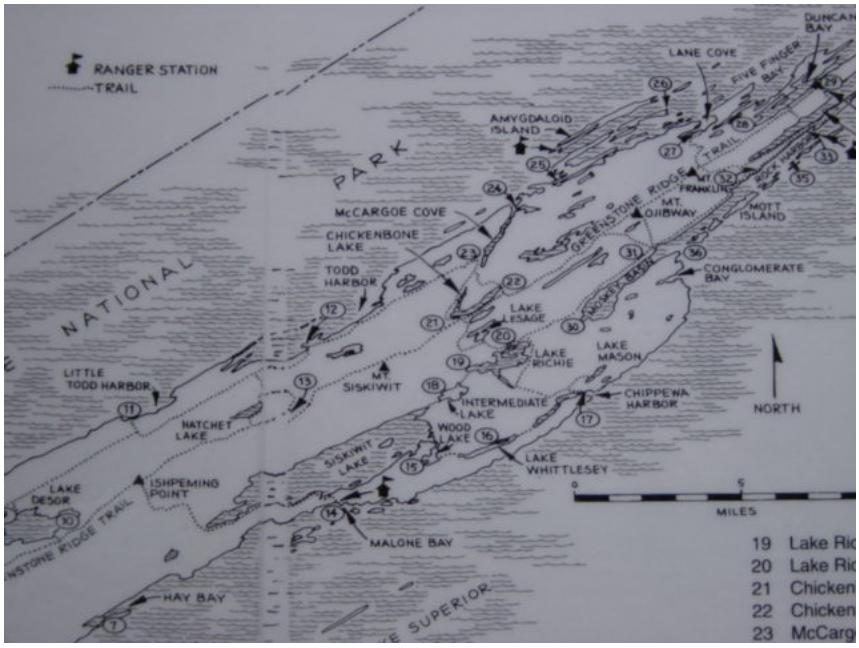
Environmental Studies 460: American Environmental History

November 28, 2005



It was the day I most anticipated. After six days in the backcountry, how couldn't I? Every two weeks I felt it. Grimy, tired, stinky, sore-footed, and hungry, I looked to Day 6 as the day when the hike once again became fun. It was the day in my backcountry patrol when I hiked to McCargoe Cove.

Many visitors felt a similar excitement as they neared McCargoe. For some, it meant the chance to swim in Lake Superior's cold water while still enjoying warmer temperatures than the typical Superior coastline. To others, it was a welcome escape from the often heavy boat traffic that marred their “wilderness experience” at most of the other lakeside camp sites. Still others were excited about exploring the nineteenth-century copper mine nearby, with its mountains of "poor rock" jutting conspicuously out of the dense balsam-fir forest, its twisted and rusted small-gauge railway, and the far more ancient mining pits, dug four millennia ago by an unknown group of Native Americans. I was looking forward to all these things as well, but that was not why I was excited. My mouth was watering for thyme.

As a wilderness ranger on Isle Royale, I spent ten out of every fourteen days on patrol, carrying all my gear and provisions on my back. I carried food that was chosen more for weight than palatability. By day five, I was tired of the usual bland, mushy, noodle-based dish. It was a glorious day that I first found the patch of thyme that grew in wide swatches over the rocks by the water at McCargoe Cove. My meal that night was happily full of flavor, and I picked enough to keep my taste buds gratified for the remainder of my patrol. I soon made it a habit that, despite what route I might take over the island, I hiked to McCargoe by mid-trip.

Freed of my growing preoccupation with food by the wonderful herb that was probably planted by a miner's wife 130 years ago, I was able to ponder its origin. Why was it there? What were the circumstances that led to the planter's presence on the spot of my future gustatorial gratefulness? Similarly, what was it about McCargoe Cove that allowed visitors with their own high hopes to be

likewise satisfied? Most interesting, why was this campsite so different from others of Isle Royale? There were many areas of the island that witnessed extensive mining. Yet they also witnessed heavy use during other periods of development, while McCargoe remained free of most other extractive uses. Why should this be the case? The answer lies in the interplay of geography and history. Natural and human-made conditions combined to form multiple layers of protection around McCargoe Cove. These layers enhanced some uses, while setting up barriers to others.

Isle Royale is an archipelago in the middle of Lake Superior (Figure 1). Its rock foundation was formed 1.2 billion years ago through a series of volcanic outflows interspersed with periods of sedimentation (Huber, 1983). This geologic "layer cake" faulted at the present locations of Isle Royale and Upper Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula to the south. Subsequent sinking of the rock between those two regions forced the island and peninsula to upend, exposing the edges of the layers. Isle Royale's edges faced a northwestern exposure (Figure 2). Erosion wore down the sedimentary strata in between the volcanic rock, leaving parallel rocky ridges running northeast to southwest along the island and low areas between these ridges, filled with the soil from this erosion or water (Figure 3). The orientation of the ridges is such that the northern side of the island is characterized by sheer, near-vertical cliffs, while the southern side is characterized by more gradual slopes.

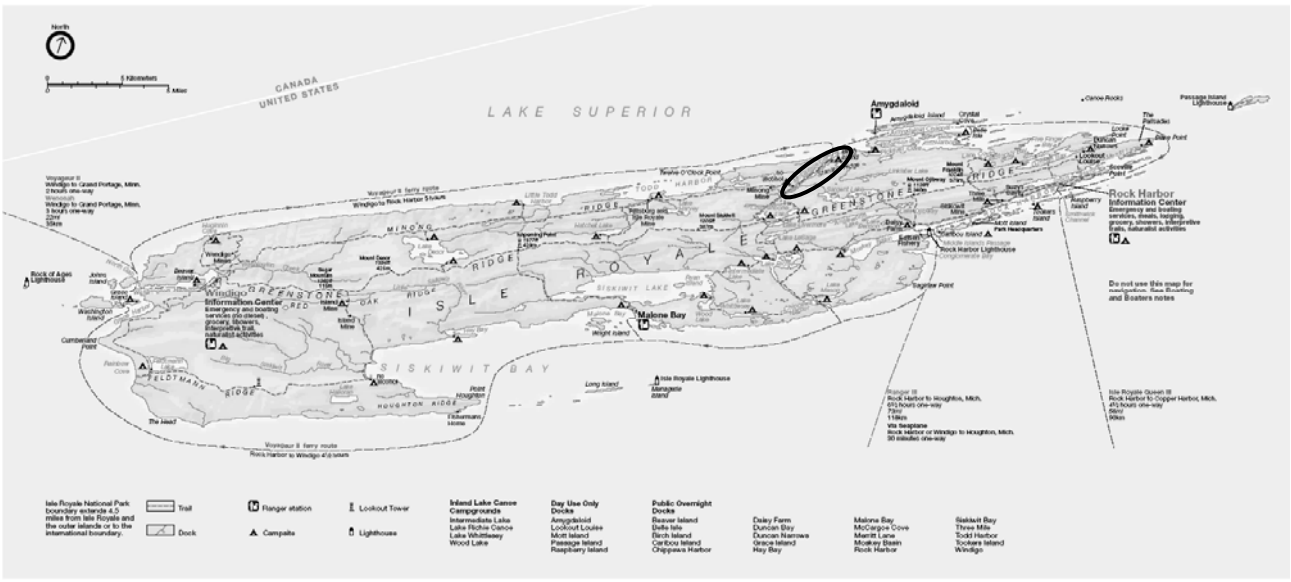


Figure 1: Isle Royale. McCargoe Cove is in the eastern half of the northern edge and is circled.

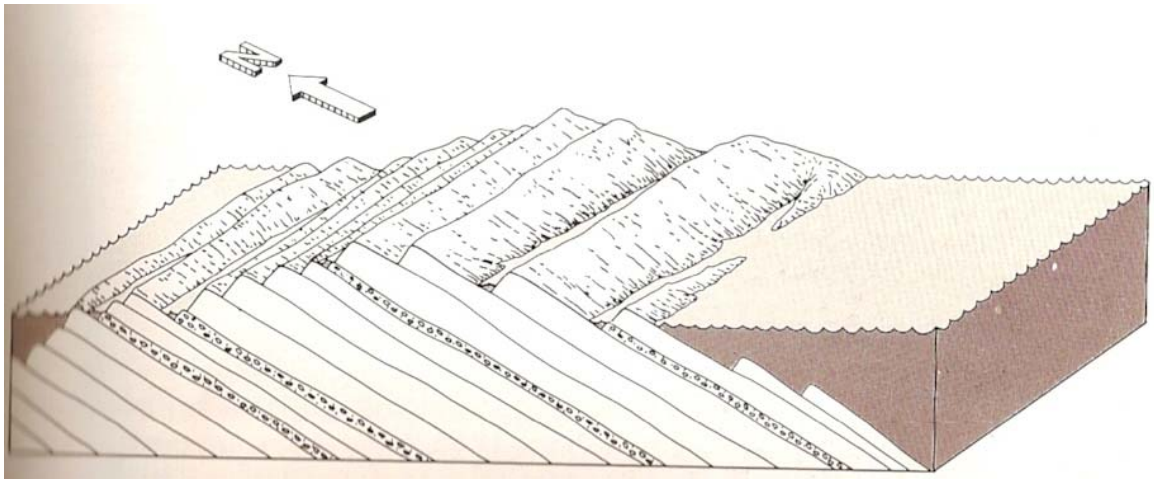


Figure 2: The uplift of volcanic rock strata interspersed with sedimentary strata underlying Isle Royale. Note the northwestern orientation of the "face" of the strata (Huber, 1983).

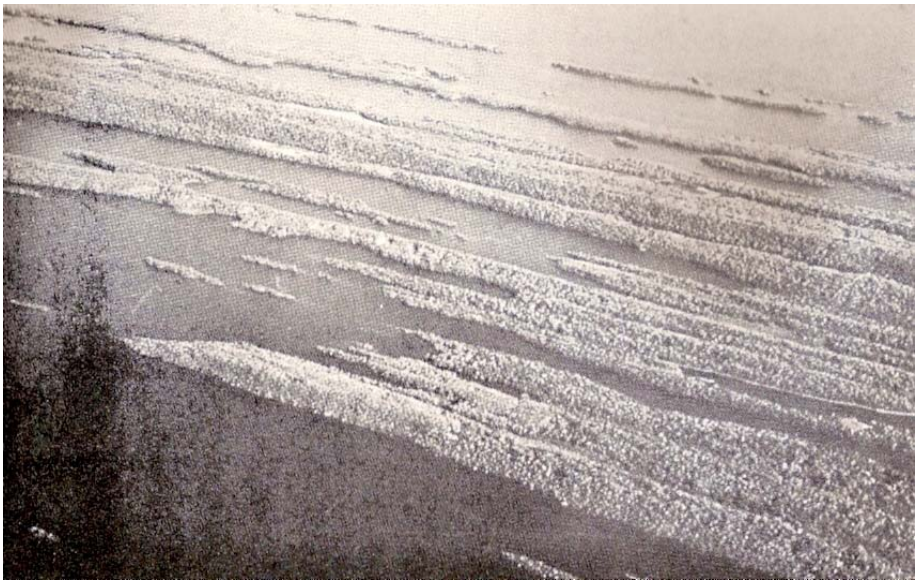


Figure 3: A picture of the alternating ridges that run in parallel along the northeast to southwest axis of the island. In this picture, the valleys are filled with water, but it is just as common for these valleys to be filled with soil (Huber, 1983).

McCargoe Cove is a very narrow channel of water stretching two miles inland from the northwestern edge of the island. It is the result of a minor fault that cuts across the upturned layers of volcanic rock. It is the only significant channel that cuts "across the grain" of the island; all others run parallel to the orientation of the ridges. This serves to isolate the southern end of McCargoe. If one were to walk from island's edge to the interior termini of the other channels and coves, one could walk along a fairly even course, choosing either a parallel ridge or valley as one's path. If, however, one tried to walk from the northwestern edge of the island to the terminus of McCargoe cove, one would have to cross no less than five ridges and five valleys.

It is obvious then that the easiest way to reach the end of McCargoe Cove is to travel by water, but this is not as simple as it might first seem. Birch Island sits in the mouth of the cove, partially blocking its entrance. Furthermore, lurking just under the surface of the water are parallel rock ridges, promising torn hulls and broken propellers to any boater who does not have the charts and skill to navigate the convoluted zees of safety between the ridges. In foul weather, which Isle Royale experiences often, and which is felt most keenly on the north side of the island, wind and waves make

navigation through this gauntlet nearly impossible for even the best captains.

The orientation of ridges and the tricky navigation of its mouth conspire to make McCargoe Cove fairly inaccessible. This protection has served some well, most notably Robert McCargo, for whom the cove is named (Parratt & Welker, 1999). McCargo, a well-known British lake captain, did not want his ship captured by the Americans in the War of 1812. He sailed it into the cove to hide it until the end of the war. Even though Lake Superior was well traveled at this time, and Isle Royale was familiar to American lake navigators (Figure 4), the near-inaccessibility of the cove made his gamble a pretty sure bet.

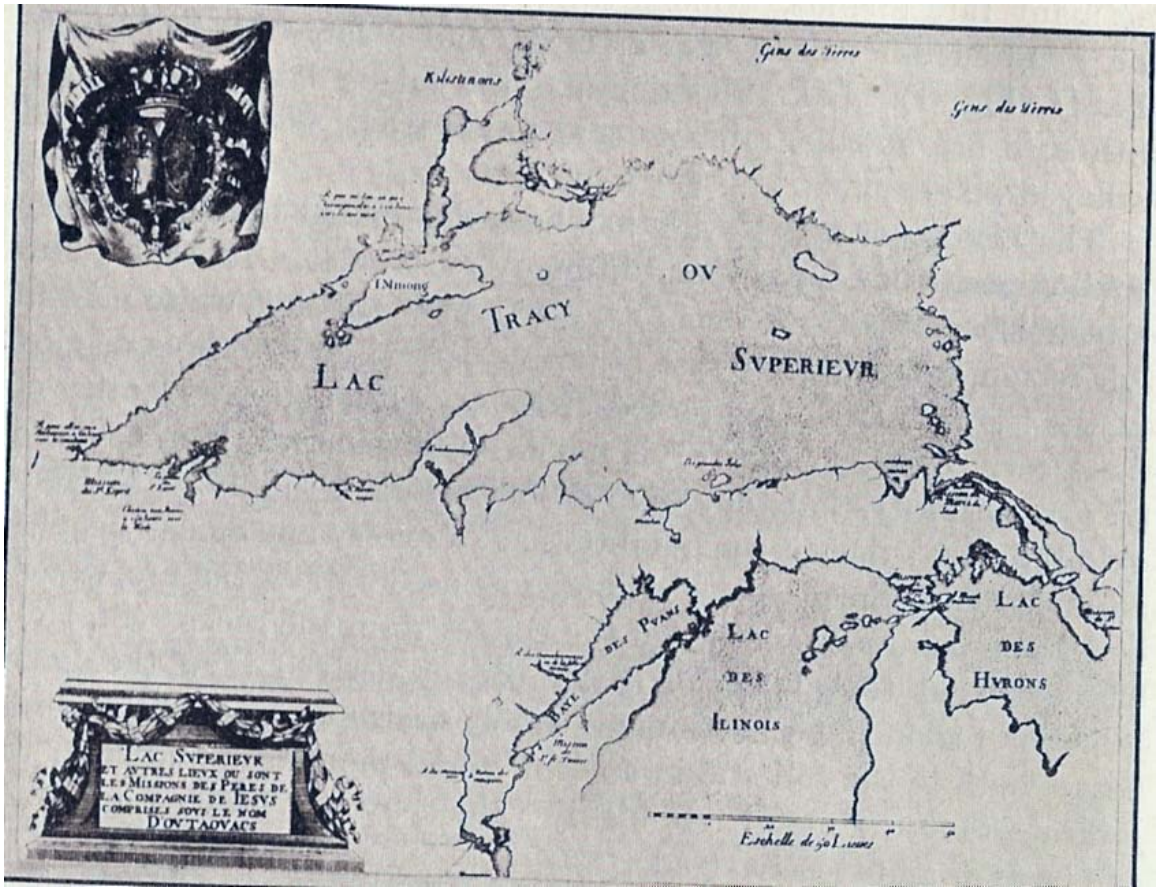


Figure 4: A map drawn by French missionaries in the Lake Superior region in the 1670's. While the shape and placement of Isle Royale (then called "Minong") is not exact, it is fairly accurate (Cooper, 1938).

If the end of McCargoe Cove is so hard to reach, why do we see any human development there?

Why was someone there to plant the patch of thyme for which my stomach growled so loudly? To understand this, it is necessary first to consider the history of mining on Isle Royale.

People have mined copper from Isle Royale at five different periods in the last 4,000 years (Gale & Gale, 1995). The first miners were prehistoric Native Americans that extracted copper seasonally from the island for over 1,000 years. While it is unknown who these groups were, it is clear that their mining was extensive and its products highly valued. There are over 1,000 mining pits on the island from this period, and copper artifacts originating from the Lake Superior region were traded as far away as the southeastern United States and the Great Plains. More recently, Ojibwa from present-day Minnesota and Ontario mined copper from the island from the sixteenth century to 1843, when they relinquished rights to Michigan (Cooper, 1938). Mining pits from this time are found all around the exterior of the island, but like the earlier groups' pits, they are concentrated in an area close to the southern end of McCargoe Cove.

European-American interest in the copper of Isle Royale has a long history. According to one legend, Benjamin Franklin had heard rumors of immense stores of copper on the island and so pushed to have it included in American territory in the Treaty of Paris in 1783, even though it is far closer to Canada than to the United States. The assumed inaccuracy of this legend does not diminish the fact that the island and its presumed wealth of copper were looked upon with desirous eyes by those wishing to exploit that wealth; immediately after the Ojibwa ceased their mining operations, European-Americans started theirs.

The island witnessed three periods of modern mining: the 1840's-1850's, the 1870's, and the 1890's. These periods followed the boom/bust cycle of copper's prices during that time (Rakestraw, 1965). Despite high optimism, no one became rich from Isle Royale copper. This was due to attributes of the island more than lack of effort. Notwithstanding initial reports, the island possessed far less copper than the Keweenaw Peninsula to the south. This lesser wealth was exacerbated by the

higher costs of shipping supplies and copper to and from the island, and the greater investment required to establish and maintain a wilderness mining operation on an island in the middle of an often inhospitable lake. By 1893, only fifty years after mining operations started, the last mine closed.

Life was difficult for those who worked the Isle Royale mines. The two worst burdens were isolation and exposure. Miners and their families were cut off from the rest of the world, often for months at a time, especially if they spent the very long winters on the island. They were also exposed to the storms that frequently tear across Lake Superior. Ruth Edgerton Douglas, the wife of a mining agent on the island, felt the isolation and exposure keenly, as is obvious from her journal:

> [The winters] are very long, averaging about seven months, while Spring, Summer, and Autumn are compelled to fulfill their duties in the remaining five.
>
> The view [I] obtained of the Island was anything but a favorable one, as there was nothing to be seen but barren rocks and a small growth of evergreen and birch timber, as my eyes had not the gift of magnifying every little seam in the rocks into a large vein of Copper.
>
> It is very rainy To Day. I think if stormy weather affects business matters in every place as much as it does in this small city, it must leave many blanks in the course of the year.
>
> (Root, 1998)

Even though the risks and costs were well-known, and each phase of modern mining on the island was undertaken with knowledge of the poor returns of the preceding one, investment and development at the beginning of each phase was high. At the early stages of the second phase of mining (1870's), Isle Royale was suddenly home to a burgeoning community of 300 to 600 people. Over 150 of these lived and worked at the Minong mine at McCargoe Cove. Presumably, one of them was the person who planted the herb that so deliciously flavored my freeze-dried spaghetti dinner. The mine site was determined by using prehistoric workings as guides to promising spots. As this area had the highest concentration of such sites, it was assumed that it had the best lodes of copper.

The town of Cove at the mine contained over two dozen buildings, including a boarding house, a school, a store, a doctor's office, an office, and houses for the workers and their families.

Even though it eventually played out, the Minong mine was the most prosperous on the island, producing more than twice as much as any other of the island's mines, and staying in operation for over nine years, longer than any other (Rakestraw, 1965). Although no sources state it, it is possible that the long life of the Minong mine was responsible for its greater output of copper, rather than vice versa. An examination of the average yearly output of the leading Isle Royale mines supports this contention. While the Minong mine's average yearly output was slightly higher than most others, it was not significantly so; and, its average yearly output was less than Island Mine, which was in operation only four years. If output was the only factor in locating and operating a mine, then the Minong mine would not have had the relatively long life it did.

Additionally, while the Minong mine eventually produced more copper than any other Isle Royale mine, it also faced higher shipping costs. The long narrow channel and the tricky entrance of McCargoe Cove would not allow large, ore-bearing ships. A large dock and warehouse had to be built at the mouth of the cove to accommodate ships. The copper was ferried from the mines to this dock and then loaded onto the ships that took it to market. The extra capital investment and labor of such a system must have added greatly to the operation's expenses.

Why, then, would the Minong mine be so extensive and long-lived? Furthermore, why would Native Americans mine this area more intensely than others? The answer lies in the unique placement of McCargoe Cove. Isle Royale is seventeen miles from the northern shore of Lake Superior, while it is over fifty from the southern shore. Therefore, Native Americans who mined seasonally at Isle Royale probably came from present-day Minnesota and Ontario. And while prehistoric mining pits are scattered across the island, it is likely that mines close to home were preferable to those farther away. McCargoe Cove, on the north shore of the island, was ideally placed.

Furthermore, climatic conditions at McCargoe were preferable to those at other places along the north shore. Anyone who has spent time on Isle Royale knows that the weather is much more stable in the interior of the island than on the shoreline. In the interior, the air is drier and warmer, and the lake's thick chilling fog is rarely present. Wind and waves, and their damage to structures, are not nearly so violent. Vegetation is more abundant and is able to grow taller. Soil is also thicker, allowing for better cultivation of vegetables and grains.

McCargoe Cove was the easiest route to the interior. Although the channel was tricky to navigate, it was a far easier route than a land one, even if the ridges that run perpendicular to such a walk did not exist. Due to the relatively young and thin soils that do not hold mature trees well, much of Isle Royale remains in an early state of succession. Vegetation is young and nearly impenetrable in places. According to early geologists John Foster and Josiah Whitney, "the physical obstructions to a successful exploration of the island are greater than we encountered in any other portion of the mineral district...the shores are lined with dense but dwarfed forests of cedar and spruce with their branches interlocking..." (Huber, 1983). If one were trying to reach the northern interior of the island, McCargoe Cove is the best way to get deep inside.

In following the prehistoric miners to the southern terminus of McCargoe, the founders of the Minong mine and Cove town reaped the unforeseen benefits of its placement. The long narrow water access of the channel allowed the mine to thrive in a more protected environment than others, while still allowing relatively easy (albeit complicated) transport of goods. The alternative is demonstrated in the Pittsburgh and Isle Royale mine of Todd Harbor, also a north shore mine. Although the mine produced relatively well, it closed operations because of "the northerly gales" (Rakestraw, 1965). While Ruth Douglas felt the effects of climatic exposure at her home located on the island's shore, her contemporaries at Cove did not feel these effects so sharply.

While the climate affected people less dramatically at the Minong mine, the miners responded

by altering the landscape here more than anywhere else. The mine is relatively hidden from the thousands of backpackers and boaters who hike near it every year, but to those who leave the trail to look for it, it presents a startling break from the surrounding landscape. It looks more like an artillery testing ground than a wilderness area. Huge piles of utterly bare gray "poor rock" - rock removed from shafts so that miners could reach the vein - tower over pits and quarries in the sides of ridges (Figure 5). Rusted tracks on grassy beds direct their missing carts to nowhere. This is all readily obvious to anyone who ventures there. What is not so obvious are the changes wrought on the surrounding vegetation. In an effort to identify promising copper sources, miners burnt all the vegetation surrounding the mine down to the bedrock. Those trees that escaped this fate were subsequently used as building materials or charcoal for smelters. The result is that the proximate forest is in an earlier stage of succession than it would have been without this disturbance.

Figure 5: Piles of “poor rock” at the site of the Minong mine (Author’s photograph).

This destructive process served as another level of protection for the McCargoe area. But

while the previously discussed protections set a stage for development and extraction, this human-created protection ironically cleared that stage. Due to its remote location, lumbering pressure on Isle Royale was not nearly as extensive as in the north woods of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Still, there were two periods of logging on the island - the 1890's and the early 1930's; and, during these times, the choices of where to cut trees, or rather, *not* to cut trees, was significant. The companies financing the logging were based in Minnesota. As such, it is logical that they would cut timber on the north shore of the island, as this was closer to their mills. Trees grow larger and more quickly on the interior of the island. Therefore, the ideal lumbering spot, purely based on location, would be an easily accessible area in the interior of the north side of the island. Despite the problems of navigating the channel, McCargoe Cove fits this description. Because of the logging and burn-over of the mining period, however, the young trees of the McCargoe area were not ready for harvest (Valencia, 2005). In this way, history, manifested as past use, protected the land from future use.

Far more significant to the island than logging was the emergence and skyrocketing increase of tourism. Ships started bringing "pleasure seekers" to the island as soon as 1860 (Cochrane, 1992). By the end of the nineteenth century, and coincident with an increase of national pride in distinctly American natural landscapes, visitation had increased dramatically, and the island saw its first groups of people who camped on the island merely for the sake of doing so. Boat service to the island increased to accommodate demand, and tourism increased to fill extra capacity. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a few cabins were erected as simple accommodations for tourists. By the 1920's, the stream of tourists had broadened to a deluge; a growing class of wealthy people gave more thought to increasing their exercise of leisure. Following the edicts of the times, and the proclamation of one Isle Royale resort owner's advertising pamphlet, they sought to "[listen to] that inexorable higher law which demands change and recreation" and "...escape for a time from the cares and

worries of the daily grind imposed upon them by our complex civilization to commune with nature and enjoy the life that only such surroundings can afford" (Schofield, 1920).

While mining brought development to the island at an unprecedented scale, the tourism industry surpassed that many times over. In only thirty years, Isle Royale had changed from a remote mining and fishing area to a fully developed tourist attraction. Four major resorts sprang up on the island, offering the privileged classes unheard-of luxuries at such a remote location. The resorts boasted dance halls, bowling alleys, telegraph service to the mainland, tennis courts, swimming pools, and even a nine-hole golf course (Figure 6), all within a glorious natural setting where one could escape the cares and degrading influence of the urban world (Figure 7). Furthermore, the climate of the island offered an escape from asthma and hay fever, often associated at the time with the dirtiness of life in the city. Tourism continued to increase on the island, and was soon followed by more permanent summer residents, who bought the many tracts of land for sale by resort owners.

Figure 6: The putting green of hole #1 on the golf course on Belle Isle, a popular resort of the early twentieth century (Gale & Gale, 1995).

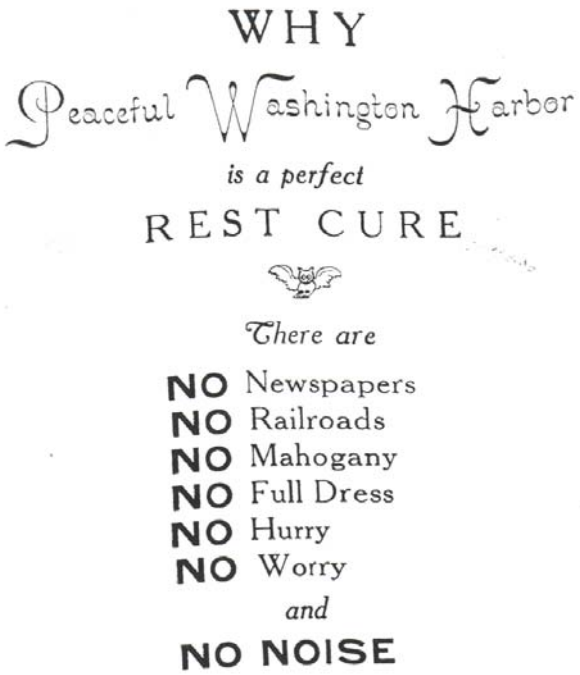


Figure 7: The opening statement of a brochure advertising the merits of vacation at Washington Harbor, a resort area on Isle Royale in the early twentieth century. The brochure later states that "no asthma or hay fever" is yet another reason why the resort is a "perfect rest cure" (Singer, 1910).

The lifeblood of the tourist and summer-home population was the boats. As the conduits for the people who traveled there, and for the supplies to support them, boats and their schedules decreed where people could go and when they could get there. Boat service to the island was daily, but only during summer and early autumn. This meant that vacationers and residents were on the island only during the warm months. Consequently, protection from the elements was not foremost on their minds, as it must have been to the miners trying to stay warm in late November. What was important was for large boats to be able to dock and unload supplies and passengers. Therefore, easily navigable waterways were needed.

The location of the resorts and summer homes shows the importance of these two characteristics. They were all located in moderately protected harbors with easy access to the lake. Without the need for substantial protection from the north shore's inclement weather (in fact, my own

experience is that McCargoe Cove can be uncomfortably hot during the summer, while the air is more refreshing closer to the edge of the island), and with its water passage all but inaccessible to large boat traffic, McCargoe was virtually untouched during this period by tourists. One resort offered boat trips to "McCargo's Cove, which is without equal on Isle Royale for scenic beauty" (Schofield, 1920), but none offered landings for picnics or fishing or any type of activity other than small boat-based sightseeing. Once again, we see the same geographical characteristics serving as a protection for McCargoe. The different natures of human use lead to different forms of protection: while these characteristics protected the cove *for* human use during the periods of mining, they protected it *from* use during the resort-era tourism explosion.

It is necessary finally to examine commercial fishing on Isle Royale, as that industry has had the longest continuous modern history there. Large-scale commercial fishing began on the island in the 1830's and continues, although at a greatly reduced level, to this day. In terms of duration, it is the most successful industry on the island. Once again, the same geological characteristics emerge: the narrow channel of the cove provides very little underwater structure for good fishing grounds, and the tricky navigation of the mouth makes it an unfavorable homesite for the fishermen who must steer their boats in all manners of weather throughout the course of the fishing season. For those reasons, while "nearly every inlet, island, and sound of the archipelago has had its cluster of weatherbeaten shanties, wharves and fish houses, [and while] the clearings made in the wilderness by fishermen for gardens, pasture, or buildings have changed the ecology of the area through modification in vegetation types and the introduction of plants and flowers from the mainland" (Rakestraw, 1968), McCargoe Cove escaped this.

The most recent layer of protection for McCargoe Cove came with the creation of Isle Royale National Park. Largely in response to summer residents' and resort owners' fears of widespread logging on the island, and following the impassioned writings of Albert Stoll, an editor of the *Detroit*

News, Congress declared the island a national park in 1936 (Gale & Gale, 1995). It was further protected by being designated a wilderness park in 1976. One might think that these levels of protection would serve McCargoe Cove as increased protection from human use, but this has not been the case.

Following designation as a park, tourism shifted from boat-based to foot-based. The perceived pristine nature of the park and its location within the "wild" Lake Superior has attracted backpackers from around the world. And McCargoe Cove, virtually unnoticed by the resort crowd, finds itself one of the most heavily used areas on the island. Once again, the reasons are nested in the human and non-human world. Like the miners, backpackers see McCargoe as a sheltered place on the north shore. But in addition to the protection from the elements that the miners enjoyed, the cove protects the hikers from the ever-present boat traffic found at most other lakeside sites on the island. To those looking for a "wilderness experience," this is very important. Also similar to the miners' experience, the cove serves as a road to the outside world. One boat comes into the cove every other day, dropping off and picking up hikers, and re-supplying those who are staying on the trails for an extended time. In contrast to the protection from logging that was given to McCargoe by past human use, this same use now attracts more visitors to McCargoe. Because of the long-term and highly visible effects of mining activities, the former Minong mine has become the most popular archaeological site on the island. The result of all these factors is that visitation to McCargoe Cove has reached a level where long-term effects of overuse, and the consequent campground degradation and erosion, are serious concerns for park managers.

As I bite into the thyme, I am biting through a history of protection. The thyme would not be there if the cove had not protected a struggling mining community. It might not have been planted if the person who did so lived on the mainland, and within easy reach of store-bought herbs. It might have been wiped out if past degradation of timber stock had not prevented a lumber company from

piling tons of trees on top of it. It might have been overrun by flowers and golf courses if the tricky navigation of the cove did not prevent a large resort from establishing there. Without the protection of national park status, I would not have been hired to go to the cove to eat the thyme. Finally, without the protection from heavy boat traffic and the attraction of a large archaeological site, there would not be a large enough guest presence at McCargoe Cove to warrant my visitation to the area once every two weeks.

The history of McCargoe Cove has been buffered and shaped by the layers around it. While the ultimate sources of these protections are the natural conditions of the cove, the manifestations of them, and their ability to protect McCargoe from or for exploitation, differ based on the particular resource people are trying to exploit. Some of these protections stem from the geological and climatic characteristics of the cove. Other protections stem from past exploitation. They are intertwined; McCargoe Cove would not look like it does today without the interplay of each, and I would have finished my patrols much more hungry.

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