

BY STEPHANIE PEARSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GUTTENFELDER

RETURN TO

WILD WATERS

On Lake Superior's Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, nature has the power to create, destroy—and regenerate.

Photographer David Guttenfelder's kayak noses into the often rough waters of Lake Superior from a sea cave in Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, in Wisconsin. With some 225,000 visitors annually, the park is a sublime yet dangerous playground for kayakers, sailors, and powerboaters to explore.



A boardwalk leads to the lighthouse on Sand Island. Each of the 21 islands that make up Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is unique, but most have at least one developed campsite and many have established hiking trails.



Park ranger Fred Schlichting wears a period uniform and assumes the role of Lee Ellsworth Benton, head lighthouse keeper on Raspberry Island between 1914 and 1924. The lighthouse is one of six on the Apostle Islands listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Over the course of three decades working as an archaeologist on Lake Superior, Cooper has participated in dozens of harrowing search and rescue missions. The Apostles are “a chain of islands that attracts people to paddle long distances,” says Cooper. “In theory it offers more protection, but it also offers enticement to get people in over their heads.”

Other threats loom. With climate change, the lake is warming at an alarming rate of at least one degree Fahrenheit every decade. Storms are becoming increasingly fierce, battering infrastructure such as docks, causing shoreline erosion, and increasing the amount of sediment in the lake, which can lead to algal blooms.

But the Apostles have their devotees, such as Tom Irvine, executive director of the National Parks of Lake Superior Foundation. His great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather worked together as lighthouse keepers on Outer Island.

“The Apostles get in you and hold you,” says Irvine. “That’s what it’s done for my family. It’s part of our collective soul.”

In the summer of 2020, Irvine introduced National Geographic Explorer and photographer David Guttenfelder to the islands. Guttenfelder, an experienced kayaker, decided to test the waters on an ambitious 18-day trip, during which he planned to paddle to as many of the archipelago’s 22 islands as possible. “The lake has such incredible power,” he says. “I got hooked.”

And so in August 2021, I joined Guttenfelder for a segment of his kayaking journey and explored other islands on my own. Along the way I met with conservationists, scientists, and community members, many of whom have lived and worked here for decades. Their backgrounds were diverse, but everyone shared the same deep veneration for the Apostles.

“IT’S EASY TO BE REVERENTIAL surrounded by this,” says Neil Howk, a retired interpretive ranger who has worked in the park for 35 years. We’re in an old-growth forest on Outer Island where the towering hemlock, white pine, yellow birch, and cedar are so thick that sun streaming through the sparse understory appears like shafts of light in a cathedral.

A few hundred yards away, the waves of Lake Superior are crashing against the shore. The forest dampens the roar, and we’re enveloped in near silence.

On a lake that’s notoriously harsh to humans, the Apostle Islands are a relatively sheltered place. But that doesn’t mean they’re safe.

“This is no place for amateurs,” says Dave Cooper. He’s piloting the *Ardea*, a 25-foot aluminum landing craft typically built for the Pacific Ocean, through Lake Superior’s choppy waters on the way back from Devils Island, 14 miles offshore. Today the wind is blowing from the northeast at 20 to 25 knots and the waves are five feet high. Cooper, the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore’s cultural resource manager, is running the troughs and surfing the crests.

“It’s like riding a horse,” he says. “I’m just trying to make it a smooth ride.”



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ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MCKENDRY



A table is set at Manitou Island Fish Camp as it would have been in the 1930s when Hjalmer "Governor" Olson and his brother Ted purchased it from an old logging company to use as a base for winter fishing. Now managed by the National Park Service, the cabin contains items belonging to Hjalmer, including the knife on the table and a pair of darned socks on the floor.

Earlier that afternoon our group had landed our kayaks at the northern tip of 7,999-acre Outer, which sits 28 miles into Lake Superior and is one of the least visited of the Apostles.

Despite its remoteness, Outer was heavily logged starting around 1883. Between 1942 and 1963, lumberjacks flew in via light aircraft to cut yellow birch and sugar maple to manufacture baby cribs. When they were finished, the logging camp was left to rot.

The towering trees surrounding us right now, however, were spared. "This is probably the same as it looked 400 years ago," says Howk.

WILDERNESS, AS DEFINED BY the 1964 Wilderness Act, is "an area where the earth and its

community of life are untrammelled by man." The reality in the Apostles, though, is that humans have nurtured, utilized, and domesticated these islands for centuries. The result is a postmodern wilderness, one of the rare places that, with time and proper management, have reclaimed much of their original splendor.

But if we view the Apostles only as a now pristine wilderness in which to recreate, we miss pondering how the Ojibwe thrived in this rugged terrain for centuries; how European settlers tried, oftentimes unsuccessfully, to tame it, and later, how they extracted resources that built great cities.

The layers of human history here started with nomadic hunter-gatherers who followed

caribou around the Lake Superior Basin 11,000 years ago. The earliest archaeological evidence of seasonal camps within the Apostle Islands is 5,000 years old. More than 400 years ago, following a prophecy, the Ojibwe moved west from the St. Lawrence River Valley and settled on Mooningwanekaaning-minis, or "Home of the yellow-breasted woodpecker," which is now Madeline Island.

"Madeline Island is our homeland," says Christopher D. Boyd, chairman of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (the anglicized word for Ojibwe), whose 14,541-acre reservation sits adjacent to the park's mainland shoreline. "That's the hub of our nation, but all of the islands are our home."

The largest island in the archipelago, 15,359-acre Madeline is the only Apostle not included in the national lakeshore. In the late 1600s, French fur traders established a trading post on Madeline, which grew to become an important commercial hub on Lake Superior.

It's also where the Ojibwe leader Kechewaishe (Chief Buffalo) was born around 1759. In 1852, when he was in his 90s, he set off in a birchbark canoe for Washington, D.C., where he met with President Millard Fillmore to protest the removal of the Ojibwe to reservations farther west by the U.S. government. At that time, the journey was deemed a "success": Fillmore allowed the Ojibwe to remain on Lake Superior.

In 1855, a wave of European immigrants began arriving in the Apostles when the Soo Locks opened the Great Lakes to shipping and westward expansion. To guide the ships through the treacherous Superior waters, the U.S. Lighthouse Service built nine lighthouses in the Apostles region over the course of six decades. All had intricate Fresnel lenses; the only one still in its tower is on display at the Devils Island lighthouse.

By the late 19th century, the fertile waters surrounding the islands had become one of the largest commercial-fishery sources for lake herring and whitefish on the western end of Lake Superior, while the islands' interiors were being slashed by timber companies, quarried for Lake Superior sandstone, and farmed.

With the arrival of railways, northwestern Wisconsin had also become a popular tourist destination. In the 1920s, President Calvin Coolidge set up his summer White House on the Brule River near the Apostles.

Despite their appeal as a haven from the big

After the heaviest logging ceased, around 1930, a surprising thing happened. When left alone by humans, the isolated forests started to regenerate.

cities, the Apostles did not meet the exacting standards of the National Park Service.

In 1930, landscape architect Harlan Kelsey arrived to evaluate the archipelago for potential protection. During his visit, fires raged on some islands, and he predicted the whole area would soon become “a smoldering, desolate waste.” His report declared that “the hand of man has mercilessly and in a measure irrevocably destroyed [the islands’] virgin beauty.”

After the heaviest logging ceased, around 1930, a surprising thing happened. When left alone by humans, the isolated forests started to regenerate. It would take three more decades of regrowth and tireless advocacy by Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson to convince Congress that these islands were worthy of protection. In 1970, President Richard Nixon finally signed the legislation that declared the Apostle Islands a national lakeshore.

Today the archipelago is a thriving habitat for more than 800 plant species, including bird’s-eye primrose, elegant groundsel, and the forest-loving coralroot orchid. Many of the islands’ forests have a soft, lush understory of Canada yew, a green shrub with tubular red cones nicknamed “deer candy” that has all but disappeared on the adjacent mainland.

The islands’ deer population has been kept in close check by the National Park Service, and the resulting abundance of Canada yew contributes to an ideal habitat for the American marten, a state-endangered mammal that had all but disappeared from the islands before making a slow recovery; it’s now found on 11 islands. Given their complex biogeography, the islands also support a diverse population of other predators, such as black bear, bobcat, coyote, and gray wolf.

Avian life thrives as well. The islands are home to around 140 species of breeding birds and 200 species of migratory birds. In the summer of 2021, the gravelly sandspits of Long and Outer Islands were nesting sites for five of the 74 known nesting pairs of the vulnerable but growing Great Lakes population of piping plover. They’re an important bioindicator of Great Lakes sandscapes, not to mention an important part of the region’s natural heritage.

The national lakeshore islands even serve as a refuge for a finite group of humans. There are five remaining estates, two on Sand Island and three on Rocky Island, whose families have negotiated lifetime use and occupancy

Crags and crevices

The harsh winds and waves of Lake Superior—the largest freshwater lake in the world by surface area—carved the Apostle Islands from sandstone. Some have lofty caves held up by delicate arches.

SCULPTED BY SUPERIOR

Wisconsin’s Apostle Islands and the chilly waters that surround them are a mix of protected parks, Indigenous lands, tourist areas, and shipping lanes. In August 2021, photographer David Guttenfelder set out on an 18-day expedition to capture the unique landscapes and cultures thriving in these southern reaches of Lake Superior.

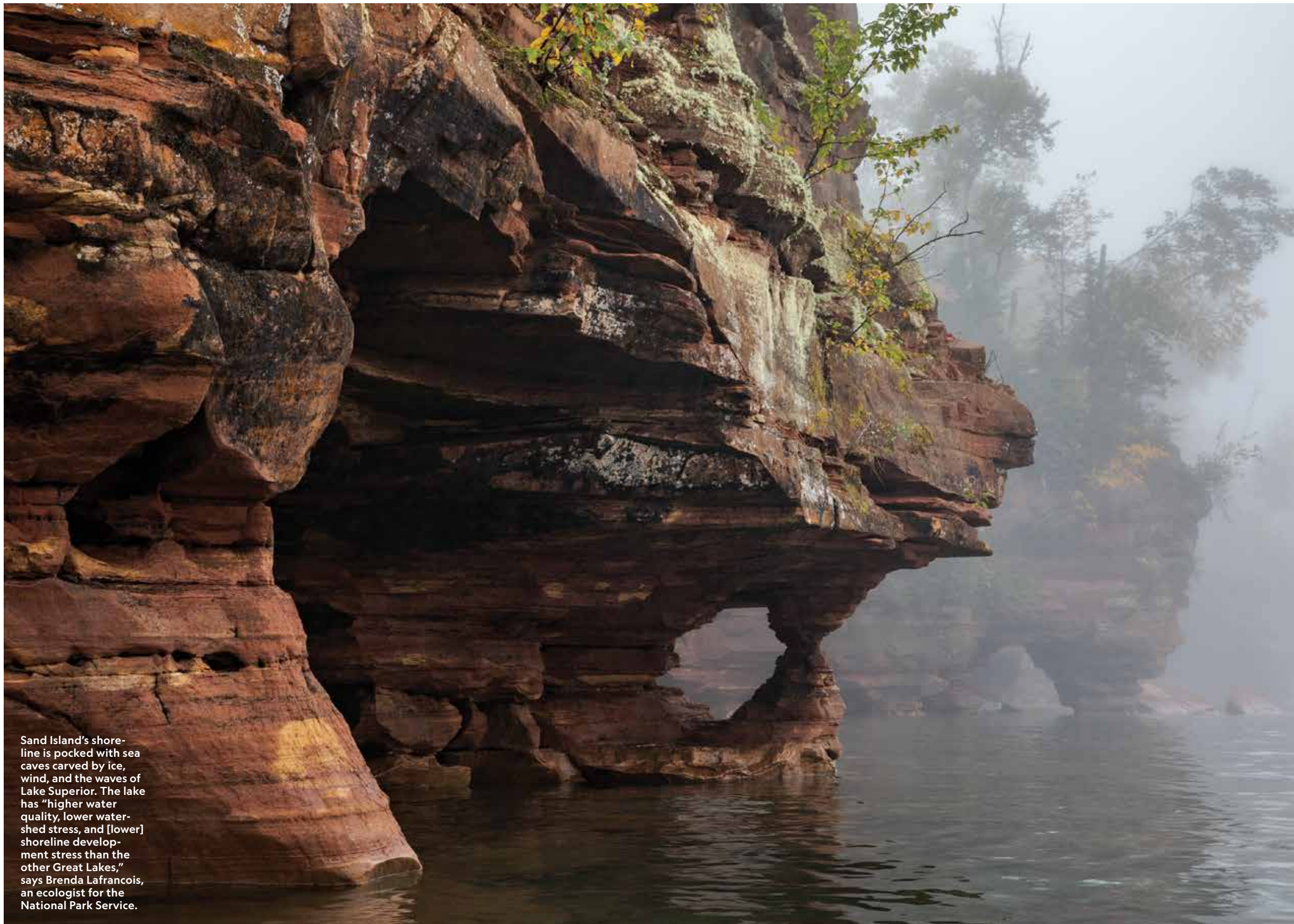
- ▲ Marina
- ⚓ Shipwreck
- 📍 Photographer’s route
- 🏠 Photographer’s camp
- 🌿 Apostle Islands National Lakeshore boundary
- 🏡 Indian reservation

2 mi / 2 km
 SOREN WALLJASPER, NGM STAFF
 SOURCES: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE; WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES; NOAA; GUYAUSHK JAMES E. PETE



Ancient isles
 Madeline Island, the largest of the Apostle Islands, was exposed by the last retreating ice age glacier some 15,000 years ago. The islands have been inhabited for thousands of years. Madeline plays an important part in the Ojibwe migration story, and remains a spiritual and cultural hub for the tribe today.

The surface of Lake Superior—the headwaters of the Great Lakes—lies an average 600 feet above sea level, and vital shipping routes connect the lake to the ocean. Waves on the lake can reach 30 feet.



Sand Island's shoreline is pocked with sea caves carved by ice, wind, and the waves of Lake Superior. The lake has "higher water quality, lower watershed stress, and [lower] shoreline development stress than the other Great Lakes," says Brenda Lafrancois, an ecologist for the National Park Service.



Jim Pete, a tribal elder also known by his Ojibwe name Guyaushk, teaches a group of teen boys from the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa during a camping trip to Sand Island. Guyaushk wears ceremonial attire that includes a bear claw necklace and a beaded stole, as he shares the seven traditional Ojibwe teachings on wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, and truth.

agreements with the National Park Service. Their fishing shacks, cabins, compounds, and docks are owned by the Park Service, but each family works hard to maintain them in accordance with the rules of historic preservation. In exchange, they have exclusive use until the last person named on the agreement dies.

Phebe Jensch, one of the last remaining Islanders, as they're called, describes her family's connection to Sand Island this way: "It's our church, our home, and our spiritual center."

IN JUNE 2021, JIM PETE, a tribal elder from the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, whose Ojibwe name is Guyaushk, or Seagull, invited us to join a group of nine 13- to 18-year-old boys

from Red Cliff on their five-day camping trip to 2,949-acre Sand Island.

Four miles from the mainland, Sand is one of the closest and most popular islands to visit, with its 1881 lighthouse and sea caves. Between the 1890s and 1944, a vibrant community of Norwegian fishermen, farmers, and their families lived here, the national lakeshore's only year-round residents. On the island's south end is the still inhabited settlement of Shaw Point.

When we arrive at the campsite, nestled in a grove of hardwoods above a sandy beach on the island's eastern shoreline, we find the campers engrossed in a game of capture the flag, a can of mosquito repellent standing in for the flag. Scott Babineau, a tribal leader and the camp director,

is frying fish with three other staff members while corn on the cob cooks in the embers of the fire.

The Ojibwe campers are here, Babineau explains, to discern "a life's purpose." With traditional activities such as wigwam and fire building, fishing, and plant identification, as well as discussing challenging topics like intergenerational trauma, the goal is to help the kids "start thinking ahead," says Babineau. "I want to help the kids understand that their actions have consequences."

The Apostle Islands are at the center of the Ojibwe migration story, the spot from which "the Ojibwe tribe first grew, and, like a tree, has spread its branches in every direction," according to the writings of famed 19th-century Ojibwe scholar William Warren. Despite the islands' importance, however, many of the kids had never had the opportunity to set foot on any of them until this trip.

"I'd say 90 percent of our tribal members have never been to the islands," Chairman Boyd later told me. "It's a haven for tourists, but you have to have access to a boat, and that isn't easy to get ahold of."

He adds that the band hasn't always felt welcomed by the National Park Service. But things are changing. In June 2021, for the first time in the park's history, a ceremony was held during which the Red Cliff Band's flag was hoisted at the Little Sand Bay Visitor Center.

After dinner around the campfire, Babineau announces that the trip must end prematurely the next morning because the winds are forecast to pick up the next afternoon, making it too dangerous for the long paddle back to the mainland.

The teens groan in response. When I ask them what their favorite part of the experience has been, I get a volley of answers, from "surfing waves" and "swimming" to "being free from video games and electricity."

Camper Cody Engels says, "It's a better version of school, and the food is really good." Then he adds, "Plus I learned how to survive out in nature."

"This is wisdom gathered from the elders," Guyaushk tells me. "It's important that we talk about how we are supposed to be." □

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Stephanie Pearson is the author of the National Geographic book *100 Great American Parks*. Photojournalist **David Guttenfelder** focuses on conservation, culture, and geopolitical conflict.



The sun sets over York and Sand Islands, seen from the grounds of Raspberry Island lighthouse. "I'm so grateful for the Apostle Islands," says Guttenfelder, who is based in Minnesota. "Knowing that most people don't have such easy access to nature, I don't take it for granted."