



Meyers Beach sea caves

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Pilgrimage Worthy

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore celebrates its 50th anniversary

By Jen Rose Smith

S LIM LAYERS OF FIERY sandstone jut from the waterline of Lake Superior in northern Wisconsin, where the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore presents travelers with an awe-inspiring maze of eroded coves, sand spits and hidden beaches. The archipelago is

celebrating a half century in the National Park System this year with special events and a revamped visitor center. Look a little closer, though, and you'll discover an even older story. "People have been using the islands for hunting, fishing and gathering for thousands of years," says Neil Howk, the 50th anniversary coordinator at the nonprofit Friends of the Apostle Islands

National Lakeshore. "And according to their spoken history, the Ojibwe people migrated to the Apostle Islands hundreds of years ago." The theme of the 50th anniversary celebration is "caring for our place on Gichigami," using the Ojibwe name for Lake Superior. Ojibwe legacies are a centerpiece of new exhibits on history, landscapes and nature at the Little Sand

Bay Visitor Center, scheduled to reopen June 13. The year will also bring historic celebrations and activities, including a 50th anniversary lecture series that highlights how Ojibwe people have shaped the landscape. The same natural wonders that first drew the Ojibwe to the Apostle Islands

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Devils Island



Sand Island Lighthouse



Mainland sea caves

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enchant visitors today. Perched off the northern tip of Wisconsin, this archipelago offers an accessible taste of the far north; the shores of Lake Superior include some of the southernmost reaches of boreal forests that stretch to the Arctic. Among these islands, find plants more often seen on the northern tundra than the upper Midwest. In the cool shade of sandstone cliffs, butterworts and Arctic primrose blossom in muted pinks and purples through the early summer, and low-lying bogs on Devils Island are fragrant with Labrador tea and sphagnum moss.

Visitors to the Apostle Islands will follow Ojibwe footsteps in a protected area that includes 21 islands that reach

25 miles into Lake Superior. It’s a wonderland for would-be explorers ready to take to the water, paddling kayaks or steering motorboats through waterways lined with old-growth forest. More than 50 miles of hiking trails invite wandering through woodlands, sand dunes and pristine shorelines, while scuba divers can discover shipwrecks strewn across the bottom of Lake Superior.

“It stays with you your whole life,” says Erica Peterson, president of Friends of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. “People visit a national park and say, ‘Oh, it’s beautiful.’ They come here and realize it’s more than a beautiful place — they internalize the perspectives of people before them and people in the future.”

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That link between the past and future of American wilderness served as an inspiration for then-Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson, who helped establish the national lakeshore in 1970. Nelson, a former governor who also founded Earth Day, was a fierce protector of the natural world in Wisconsin and beyond.

It wasn’t always easy. “The ultimate test of man’s conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard,” said Nelson, who died in 2005 at age 89. But in 2020, visitors can offer those thanks by celebrating the islands he loved while hiking, paddling and preserving the land for generations yet to come.