

Conflict Surrounding the Establishment of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore

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Located in Lake Superior at the tip of the Bayfield peninsula in northern Wisconsin are 22 islands named the Apostle Islands. These islands are home to immense natural beauty, like the famous sea caves, and host incredible tourism that draws in people from all over the world. These islands have been a part of northern Wisconsin forever. However, many do not know the history behind the lengthy battle for establishing 21 of the 22 islands as a National Lakeshore to bring them to national attention. Of the 22 islands, 20 were established in 1970 and the 21st was established in 1986. After extensive research from primary sources from Gaylord Nelson, and analyzing various perspectives written by other historians, this paper will examine the conflict surrounding viewpoints on establishing the Apostle Islands as a National Lakeshore. Specifically, the perspectives analyzed feature both sides of the debate with supporters, such as citizens and businesses, and people in opposition, which includes private landowners and Ojibwe members, to explain why they chose the stance they took. Only by analyzing all perspectives can the conflict, and its management, be truly understood.

To understand the establishment of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, it is critical to know a key individual by the name of Gaylord Nelson. Born in northern Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson grew up with a love of the outdoors and preservation which became focal points in his political career from being a Democrat state legislator, Wisconsin governor, and a US senator.¹ He truly was a pioneer of Wisconsin conservation. Nelson worked tirelessly for years amending the National Lakeshore bill and garnering support while reaching compromises for it. Surprisingly, in the 1930's the National Park Service originally scouted the Apostle Islands as a candidate for becoming a National Park, however landscape architect Harlan Kelsey deemed the

¹ Ann Barker, "Focus: Gaylord Nelson," *BioScience* 19, no. 7 (1969): 649, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1294950>.

islands “unfit” due to logging destroying the vegetation and overall visual appeal.² Nelson brought the idea back to life in the 1960’s, but modified the goal to be establishing them as a National Lakeshore instead.³ President Kennedy approved of the idea, but the proposal was never fully approved until President Johnson, and then was never enacted until President Nixon in 1970.⁴ The Apostle Islands are still a tourist destination and in 2004 President George W. Bush signed into law the “Gaylord Nelson Wilderness Area” to forever cement his impacts in Wisconsin and national conservation history.⁵

Why choose to make the Apostle Islands a National Lakeshore? Above all, the Apostle Islands are still Wisconsin’s only National Lakeshore. The scenery is truly breathtaking between the sea caves, lighthouses, and so much more. As proposed statements by Nelson have described it, “This uniqueness must be preserved for the benefit and pleasures of people in the generations to come.”⁶ One goal of creating the National Lakeshore was to boost the northern Wisconsin economy by creating recreational spaces within the islands and by developing surrounding cities, like Bayfield, to host tourism.⁷ At the time, northern Wisconsin did not have much economic activity other than the timber industry. Another goal was preserving the islands and all their

² James Feldman, “The Need for Legible Landscapes: Environmental History and NPS Management at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore,” *The George Wright Forum* 28, no. 2 (2011): 148, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43598187>.

³ Harold C. Jordahl, and Annie Booth, *Environmental Politics and the Creation of a Dream: Establishing the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 71, <https://search.worldcat.org/title/719388606>.

⁴ Jordahl and Booth, *Environmental Politics and the Creation of a Dream: Establishing the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore*, 71.

⁵ James W. Feldman and William Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), IX.

⁶ “Apostle Islands- Background, 1968-1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 22, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

⁷ “Apostle Islands- Bill and Related Material, 1964-1966”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 23, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

beauty, which was of importance to Nelson and other conservationists.⁸ Establishing them as a National Lakeshore would halt further development, logging, and the potential for human activity to ruin the islands. This addition to northern Wisconsin was viewed as being universally positive as it would help out local cities and put Wisconsin on the map as a travel destination. Nelson even stated upon the passing of the National Lakeshore bill (number 778) that, “With protection, Wisconsin and the nation will enjoy this resource and the local economy will be strengthened through the tourism that will result” and called on the government to preserve more.⁹

There were many citizens and businesses who supported Nelson and would write to his office thanking him for his efforts. Nelson acquired support from at least 37 business organizations, 17 civic organizations, 12 national organizations, 16 farm organizations, 50 conservation clubs, 28 newspapers, and many others, accumulating over 180 “Apostle Backers” as he referred to them.¹⁰ Examples include the *Milwaukee Journal*, the Sierra Club, Bayfield Common Council, Barron County Farmers Union, and many more.¹¹ Many companies were extremely dedicated to seeing the establishment enacted. Additionally, many citizens supported Nelson from all over the state and there are large collections of letters to which Nelson replied. A citizen named Walter P. Taylor, originally from Elkhorn, Wisconsin but moved to California, wrote to support the bill and said, “Wisconsin seems to be losing a good deal of its wilderness land to so-called ‘progress’

⁸ “Apostle Islands- Background, 1968-1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 22, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

⁹ “Apostle Islands, passage of bill, 1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 125, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹⁰ “Apostle Islands- Background, 1968-1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 22, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹¹ “Apostle Islands- Background, 1968-1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 22, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

and ‘civilization’” and praised Nelson for his conservation efforts to protect the islands.¹²

Thomas and Patricia Saltz, from Madison, Wisconsin, wrote in as well to show support and described the islands as, “one of nature’s remarkable creations.”¹³ Another Wisconsinite supporter, Greta Potter, wrote in with unwavering support for Nelson and even crafted him an illustrative poem detailing the Apostle Islands that she hoped would be framed in hotels.¹⁴ Some citizens who wrote in praising Nelson would also ask him for favors like Isadore C. Sznajder with, “please give your kind consideration to a much needed improved U.S. Highway #2.”¹⁵ It truly is remarkable that Nelson would write back to each and every citizen in a respectful manner. It made him an incredibly personable politician. Through countless letters and research, the core supporter base Nelson amassed were Wisconsinites who valued conservation and businesses who hoped to prosper economically from the establishment of the Lakeshore. Some supporters also had personal stories and memories of the islands which was why they supported the establishment of the Lakeshore. What is even more impressive is how Nelson still would respond to all letters even if they were extremely combative. A Madison, Wisconsin attorney named Richard J. Callaway wrote in comparing Nelson to that of a badger because, “Like our state animal, you fear no one and do not back down from congressional combat.”¹⁶ In those combative cases, Nelson would acknowledge their thoughts and craft a response that was

¹² “Apostle Islands- Apostle Backers, 1967”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹³ “Apostle Islands- Apostle Backers, 1967”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹⁴ “Apostle Islands- Apostle Backers, 1967”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹⁵ “Apostle Islands- Apostle Backers, 1967”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹⁶ “Apostle Islands- Apostle Backers, 1967”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

respectful while also countering their points. This approach worked well for managing conflicts in a peaceful manner.

It is also important to understand the perspectives of those who opposed Nelson's National Lakeshore plan. Madeline island was excluded for commercial reasons, but there were several other islands where people resided.¹⁷ When there was discussion of turning the islands into a National Lakeshore, many residents panicked because they did not know what would become of their private property. Many wrote to Nelson excoriating him in frustration and worry. One concerned couple, the Heebink's, wrote to Nelson asking for help to keep their property as, "It does not have any cliffs or caves on it, and would be of no importance to a park" and "Other property owners in the area also oppose incorporation of this area into the park."¹⁸ There were many opposed and the land acquisition process was extremely difficult and tense. At the time of the establishment of the Lakeshore, there were over 25,000 acres of private land for both homes and other uses, making land acquisition difficult for the National Park Service.¹⁹ The Park Service even offered the owners, "the chance to lease their lands back from the government for twenty-five years or for the lifetime of the owner."²⁰ This meant that properties were often put in the youngest family members name so the family could have the land for the longest amount of time.²¹ Very few of those properties remain in private hands today.²²

While some cooperated and sold their land, others chose to take the Park Service to court including the Westhagens. The Westhagen family lived on Sand Island and appeared at every

¹⁷ Personal vacation summer 2024. Learned from tour guides.

¹⁸ "Apostle Islands, passage of bill, 1970", Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 125, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

¹⁹ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 193.

²⁰ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 194.

²¹ Personal vacation summer 2024. Learned from tour guides.

²² Personal vacation summer 2024. Learned from tour guides.

congressional hearing and strongly protested against the establishment because they wanted to develop their land in a variety of ways such as having horses, a business, and gardens.²³ This court process went on for over a decade between the Westhagens wanting more money with tensions becoming very heated.²⁴ The final settlement was in 1983, and the Westhagens received \$241,500 for their property with the National Park Service agreeing to some of their terms.²⁵ Another man, by the name of Howard Peters, ended up in battles with the National Park Service despite originally supporting the establishment of the Lakeshore, since he initially overlooked how it would impact his logging company (the Park Service ended logging on the islands.)²⁶ These are perspectives many did not take into account with the establishment of the Lakeshore since there were not thousands of citizens being impacted. Nelson did not stand down from the fight and worked towards compromise in the form of monetary compensation and the ability for them to keep the land until they passed away. While those for the establishment emphasized the importance of preserving the Apostle Islands, the opposition focused on the direct impact the National Lakeshore status had on citizens who owned land there. The letters reveal how personal the impact of the establishment was for those who resided there, which accounted for their hostility over losing their property. It also explains justifiable reasons as to why they opposed the Lakeshore and why others viewed them as an obstacle. These perspectives cannot be overlooked when examining the conflict, and its management, as a whole.

The other group strongly opposed to the National Lakeshore were the Lake Superior bands of the Ojibwe, specifically the Red Cliff and Bad River tribes. The Ojibwe have always resided on

²³ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 194.

²⁴ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 194.

²⁵ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 195.

²⁶ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 195.

the Apostle Islands, and the surrounding mainland area, and Madeline island was even named after an Ojibwe woman.²⁷ In their language, Madeline island is “Moningwanekaning” which means “Palace of the Golden-breasted Woodpecker.”²⁸ Throughout history there have been treaty battles in the region that have been accompanied by unwarranted acts of aggression and protests. One disagreement was Nelson’s proposal for an open beaches act for recreational purposes alongside the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore bill which was met with blowback from The Bad River Tribal Council writing to Nelson, “I don’t [think] it is in the interest of the Indian people that we allow our beaches to be declared public lands.”²⁹ There have also been issues over court approved spear fishing. The Ojibwe can legally spear fish in a handful of off reservation lakes which was met with supporters and blowback.³⁰ Some protestors fought against, “off-reservation treaty rights” and even placed fake fish in the lakes to break the Ojibwe’s spears which led to police involvement.³¹ Since the Ojibwe have been under scrutiny and have always had to fight to keep their land and rights, it makes sense why they would be strong in their stance against the establishment of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.

One of the largest arguments with the establishment was the incorporation of Ojibwe Red Cliff reservation land into the Lakeshore which would force the Red Cliff to cede the land. When Nelson drafted the initial plans for the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, he included around 10,000 acres of tribal land with the plan of relocating the tribes to another “to be determined”

²⁷ H. E. Hale, “How the Apostle Islands Were Named,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 1, no. 1 (1917): 97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4630059>.

²⁸ Hale, “How the Apostle Islands Were Named,” 97.

²⁹ “Apostle Island, Correspondence, 1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 31, box 123, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

³⁰ Steven Silvern, “Nature, territory and Identity in the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Controversy,” *Ecumene* 2, no. 3 (1995): 267, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44251771>.

³¹ Silvern, “Nature, territory and Identity in the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Controversy,” 268.

area.³² This caused extreme outrage from the tribal nation. There are immense amounts of correspondence, revisions, and amendments to the bill, but the only compromise the tribes wanted was for their land to be left out. Victoria Gokee, member of the Ojibwe Red Cliff, protested in Washington D.C. and the issue received national attention.³³ She argued how the land had always belonged to the Ojibwe and made references to how native people had always been suppressed and forced to cede their land in larger historical contexts.³⁴ Nelson repeated this removal rhetoric by having his thoughts leaked about how to, “exchange Tribal Council lands”... “for lands of equal value farther inland.”³⁵ The Red Cliff and Bad River were set on protecting their land which was a massive obstacle for Nelson. Activism even reached Milwaukee, Wisconsin as members of the Wisconsin Indian Tribal Council held marches and passed out literature against Nelson because he was going to take sacred Ojibwe land and convert them for public use.³⁶ After immense debate, the compromise achieved was considered an Ojibwe victory as the Lakeshore did not touch Bad River lands and only had a couple of thousand acres of Red Cliff land.³⁷ Nelson underestimated how powerful the Ojibwe were in defending their land even after the establishment of the Lakeshore in 1970. They made up a core anti-establishment base

³² “Apostle Islands- Native Americans, 1969-1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 26, box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

³³ Katrina Phillips, “When Grandma Went to Washington: Ojibwe Activism and the Battle over the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore,” *Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association* [NAIS] 8, no. 2, (2021): 29-52 *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A674226222/UHIC?u=stevens&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=272caa5d>.

³⁴ Phillips, “When Grandma Went to Washington: Ojibwe Activism and the Battle over the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore,” 29-52.

³⁵ Phillips, “When Grandma Went to Washington: Ojibwe Activism and the Battle over the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore,” 37.

³⁶ “Apostle Islands, passage of bill, 1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 125, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

³⁷ Phillips, “When Grandma Went to Washington: Ojibwe Activism and the Battle over the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore,” 49.

and their perspectives are valuable for understanding the sacred nature of the Apostle Islands and how Nelson managed the conflict.

Private landowners and the Bad River tribe of the Ojibwe collaborated as well when it came to battles over Long Island. When discussion began on including, non-reservation, Long Island to the Lakeshore in 1986, the Ojibwe protested as it, “had vital religious significance”... “as it had provided a stopping point on the Ojibwe migration to western Lake Superior.”³⁸ Long Island was owned by two families who protested against the inclusion as well. One of the family members, Archie Wilson, stated, “We are not newcomers bent on profit or destruction”... “The land is part of our heritage and family tradition. We want nothing more than to be allowed to pass these properties on to our children and grandchildren.”³⁹ The compromise reached involved two priorities but only satisfied the Ojibwe concerns. The top priority of Long Island was to conserve the environment while the second goal was, “the development of human use and visitation patterns” to still protect the island and please Ojibwe members.⁴⁰ While the Ojibwe agreed to those terms, the private landowners maintained their opposition and ended up losing their battles with the National Park Service similarly to other families. Although both groups in the opposition of the Lakeshore seem starkly different, they both shared the motive to protect their land, physical or spiritual, on Long Island. This common motive enabled them to unify against the acquisition and have power rather than fear. The battle over protecting Long Island is just one example of how Ojibwe members and private landowners unified against Nelson’s proposal for the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.

³⁸ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 200.

³⁹ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 200.

⁴⁰ Feldman and Cronon, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, 201.

The letters speak to each other and paint a bigger picture of the conflict during the establishment and why people chose to take the stance they did. Those in support of Nelson tended to be conservationists and businesses. The core reason for support involved profiting from tourism in addition to protecting and conserving the wilderness of the islands. Those in opposition of Nelson tended to be private landowners and Ojibwe members. The core reason being that their land ownership was threatened. Conflict is a significant component to history since it represents a force of change or continuity which has the ability to transform societies. In this historical event, this complex conflict was a force of change amidst continuity because Gaylord Nelson wanted to change the islands' status so that they would be preserved, or continued, for the future. Through conducted research, it is revealed how compromise was reached in an effort to appeal to all sides and mitigate division. Only by listening to all perspectives can one truly reflect and have an informed understanding of the event and how its conflict was managed. All in all, the establishment of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is a true testament to how Gaylord Nelson was able to navigate the impasse so that he could preserve and protect the immense beauty, nature, and historic Apostle Islands for generations to come.

The establishment of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore headed by Gaylord Nelson was well worth the lengthy fight. People from all over still visit to take it all in and can kayak through the sea caves. Who knows, maybe someday it will become a National Park. To have a true knowledge about the establishment of the Lakeshore, it is important to understand why the conflict over the establishment existed and how it was navigated. That includes both sides of the argument and their reasoning. It is important to recognize the hostility of the Ojibwe and private landowners as their land ownership was being taken. On the other hand, it is important to know why people supported the establishment for the economic benefits and conservation efforts.

Nevertheless, both sides can agree that the breathtaking islands needed to be protected in Wisconsin for generations to come. As Gaylord Nelson said, “For a very modest investment, we can preserve in perpetuity a remarkable natural resource whose greatest meaning will be for future generations of Americans to whom we have a responsibility to pass on a legacy of wilderness and recreation resources.”⁴¹

⁴¹ “Apostle Islands, passage of bill, 1970”, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1959-2005, folder 1, box 125, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

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