

Sleeping Bear awakes on top

TV viewers name lakeshore nation's most beautiful place

BY GARRET M. ELLISON
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — In the end, Jim Madole was just as surprised as everyone else.

The Grand Rapids resident was channel surfing earlier this summer and saw a "Good Morning America"



PRESS FILE PHOTO

What a view: Waterford residents Stephanie and Brad Cox look out on Lake Michigan at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in July 2009.

segment seeking nominations for the "Most Beautiful Place in America."

On a whim, he entered his favorite vacation spot up north: The Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a 35-

mile stretch of Lake Michigan shoreline boasting outstanding beaches, camping and stunning views.

Fast forward to Wednesday, when
SEE SLEEPING BEAR, A2

SLEEPING BEAR LOCAL TOURIST GROUPS SEE IMMEDIATE INTEREST

CONTINUED FROM A1

ABC viewers bestowed the dunes with the "Most Beautiful" honor by casting nearly 100,000 votes in an online battle that pitted Sleeping Bear against stiff competition from other picturesque American locales.

Michigan's "hidden gem" beat out Cape Cod, Mass.; Sedona, Ariz.; Aspen, Colo.; and Lanikai Beach, Hawaii, among others.

It's another instance of free publicity for Sleeping Bear, which received top ranking by coast expert Stephen "Dr. Beach" Leatherman in July in his first-ever survey of Great Lakes beaches.

"There's just something about them," said Madole, a former Air Force staff sergeant who works in customer service for Farmers Insurance Group in Caledonia.

His nomination described the monumental sand dunes as a peaceful and serene place that is perfect for "gazing out into the world, night or day, and realizing that the universe

is truly a magical, majestic mystery, and humans are just a very small part of it all."

"Here at Sleeping Bear, I sit in awe and wonder at the perfection of Mother Nature," Madole wrote.



Jim Madole

The results of the contest were announced in a three-minute Wednesday morning, resulting in a flood of calls into the dunes headquarters and sending tourism marketing officials in Benzie and Leelanau counties into high gear.

Within hours of the announcement, local visitors bureaus and park service administrators reported people who either saw the Wednesday segment or the earlier top 10 nomination already were asking about visitation options.

"We're still trying to get a handle on how to make the most of this," said Mary Carroll, president of the Benzie

County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau.

The southern boundary of Sleeping Bear is in Benzie County, which boasts Platte Bay and the Lower Platte River, a popular canoe, tube and kayak destination. The dunes end south of Leland at Good Harbor Bay.

In between are miles of lush forests, lakes and trails to such places as Pyramid Point, the Port Oneida ghost town and the Coast Guard Maritime Museum.

On the map

"It's really going to help put us on the map, for sure," said Sally Guzowski, president of the Leelanau Chamber of Commerce.

Northport, in Leelanau County, is a summer home for celebrity chef Mario Batali, who was on the "Good Morning America" segment promoting the area as the place he prefers to spend his summers.

The segment highlighted the shopping and restaurant options in the dune towns of Empire and Glen Arbor, where Cherry Republic owner Bob Sutherland was described as a "Willy Wonka" of cherry products.

Show producers incorporated footage shot for Traverse Magazine's website in their segment and were shown the best places to feature by managing editor Elizabeth Edwards.

Edwards said she was contacted after ABC producers in New York City started getting an avalanche of nominations for "this place that none of them had ever heard of."

A group of locals gathered at Art's Tavern in Glen Arbor at 8 a.m. Wednesday to watch the announcement, although advance buzz was positive because show producers had

been spotted in town.

"It was pretty hush-hush," tavern manager Sean Barr said. "They didn't want to let the cat out of the bag too soon."

While that secret remained mostly safe, the days of Sleeping Bear as a hidden gem may be over.

Online commenters have expressed anxiety about the by-products of increased tourism, namely increased trash and traffic. It was even on the mind of Madole when he made the nomination.

"I was a little leery of the attention it might bring," he said. "It's such a quiet place — I'd hate to see it become a tourist trap."

"I think the whole Lake Michigan coastline is a hidden gem," said his wife, Laura. The couple plans to take their annual vacation at the DH Day Campground after Labor Day, when the summer insects and tourists drop off and locals can reclaim the park before the start of fall color touring.

Sleeping Bear has averaged about 1.2 million visitors annually for the past decade, Park Superintendent Dusty Shultz said, with a slight drop-off during the recent recession years.

Capacity isn't a concern in a 71,187 acre park, but Shultz acknowledged popular spots like the Dune Climb and North Bar Lake in Empire can get crowded.

She said she tells visitors "if you take a walk a quarter-mile down the beach, you'll find that you're pretty much by yourself."

As far as the designation of "Most Beautiful Place in America," well, "we already knew it here," she said. "They just confirmed it on a national basis."

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