

Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment Director **Rebecca Humphries**



Rebecca Humphries, Director, Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment

Earlier this year, Rebecca Humphries was named director of the newly formed Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Environment. At the 2010 MRPA Conference and Trade Show, she received the MRPA Grand Award, one of the Association's highest honors.

Humphries recently sat down with MRPA to discuss her vision for the new department, the importance of accessible recreation and her love of parks, recreation and Michigan's great outdoors.

MRPA: Director Humphries, you have spent more than thirty years in the wildlife, recreation and natural resource fields. What drew you to these areas early on?

RH: I always enjoyed being in the out of doors. I grew up in Southeast Michigan and my family had property in Montmorency County; those two elements shaped my choice in career.

I have tremendous memories hunting as a family and fishing in the summer months.

I also worked for Pontiac Parks and Recreation when I was in college. I had the opportunity to see the recreation centers; how they brought families together and how they were so important within the community.

MRPA: Under your leadership, the MNDRE has incorporated the concept of accessibility and accessible use into its mission statement. What drove this change?

RH: It was a conscious decision that we as a management team deliberated on. It was an interesting discussion because we struggled with what accessibility means to folks. Does it mean that every inch of the state is accessible by all people, for ORV's and for vehicles? Or does it mean that these resources are great and we want them available for future generations, but people need to be able to see, touch and feel them if they are to be really meaningful.

In the end, we decided that we needed to be making conscious decisions to connect people with the out of doors, and that means all people. We want to be thoughtful in our approach to ensure that we're open, transparent and truly accessible in every sense of the word.

MRPA: With budgets shrinking statewide, what advice can you offer professionals who wish to make their facilities accessible but are concerned about funding?

RH: Trust fund [Michigan Natural Resource Trust Fund] dollars are available for new developments, and extra points are available for projects that incorporate accessibility and universal design.

Secondly, just because we have limitations, do not be afraid to talk to folks that have special needs to see if there is a way to [make] accommodations for them. Providing universal access is wonderful, but we're not there in all cases. Sometimes minor adjustments and accommodations that don't cost much can make a huge difference in the usability of facilities.

MRPA: Are there any other thoughts you'd like to share with readers and members of MRPA?

RH: We're thinking a lot about the future and what [our role should be] as a state agency.

We very much want to be a partner and facilitator, getting people connected with the outdoors, with their community and being more active.

The partnership with MRPA is a shining example of how we can work together to achieve joint goals and make sure that we're heading in the right direction in this state. We look forward to good dialogue about what's needed from the state level, [as well as] what we can let go of, so that we can provide what is [needed] during these tough economic times.

[Natural resources] are our [state's] calling card. It's what has set us apart in the past and will help maintain our population and business base in the future. ●