



The LaRue Library, right, is one of the many fixtures at the University of Michigan Biological Station in Pellston. PROVIDED

NATURAL ENDEAVOR

New 'biosphere region' seeks
to foster ecological collaboration
in Northern Michigan

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PELLSTON – The University of Michigan Biological Station is the epicenter of a new, UNESCO-recognized "biosphere region," but leaders from the station hope the designation will bring together ecological groups from throughout Northern Michigan.

The Biological Station, located on the south shore of Douglas Lake, originally received recognition from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a "biosphere reserve" in 1979. That's a special title the organization gives out to protected areas around the world where sustainable

development practices are used to foster a healthy ecological relationship between people and nature. In the U.S., some of those reserves include places like Mammoth Cave, Glacier National Park, and Isle Royale.

"These biosphere reserves were originally conceived of as unique places on Earth where human beings and the environment interacted in interesting and sustainable ways," said Knute Nadelhoffer, former director of the biological station.

At the time, the designation simply included the 13,000 acres managed specifically by the biological station. But, about six years ago, UNESCO informed Nadelhoffer and his colleagues that the station would have to renew its designation if it wanted to keep that status. But the biosphere reserve program had expanded its scope significantly since 1979, and the biological station wanted to as well.

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"We entered into a long process, actually, of really rethinking what a biosphere reserve was," he said. "We wanted it to be more than just an honorific title, which is really what it was (previously), and it's always nice to have those, but it didn't seem to be translating into anything that was really productive or useful beyond which we already do."

So, they used the reapplication process as an opportunity to sit down with other agencies and organizations in the region that were doing similar work — preserving natural areas and engaging in sustainability practices — and include them in the discussion. What resulted was a partnership between the biological station and 15 other agencies, conservancies, tribes and groups. Collectively, those groups form the Obtawaing Biological Region.

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Rather than simply the biological station, the biosphere extends from Sleeping Bear Dunes to Sault Ste. Marie, encompassing preserved lands managed by various groups, including Huron Pines, The Forest Service, Department of Natural Resources, National Parks Service, Tip of the Mitt, Little Traverse Conservancy, the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, and others.

Local governments will be included in the collaboration as well.

"It's a table," Nadelhoffer said. "It's an opportunity to meet every year and share our experiences, compare our goals and programs, and look for opportunities to cooperate to advance the quality of life."

The name, Obtawaing, is an Anishinaabek word meaning common ground or a meeting place, and was once the name of a village between what is now Harbor Springs and Cross Village.

The name was chosen for the biosphere region, in

part, based on the fact that the region stands at the center of the Great Lakes water basin.

"You drop a pin in the middle and we're there," Nadelhoffer said. "So that's the meeting place. It's the meeting place of the rivers, the peninsulas two countries and indigenous and other cultures."

But it also stands for the spirit of collaboration inherent in the endeavor.

"The name reflects the need to find the ways which we can work together, to foster stewardship and cooperation amongst organizations who previously may have thought of themselves more locally rather than regionally," said Frank Ettawageshik, the executive director of the United Tribes of Michigan, in a press release. "The promise of this is wide open and has yet to be realized. We've taken this initial step, but it's just now a framework within which things can happen, and we don't know what they're going to do yet."