THE SETTING

REGION

COMMUNITY ANALYSIS
REGION

Historical Setting

The Crane Lake waterway pre-dates the American Indians who traveled its waters for generations before it became a fur-trading route for the Hudson Bay and Northwest Companies. In 1736, voyagers established a post near Crane Lake to trade supplies for furs. In the 1800s, the waterway became the main access route for prospectors seeking Canadian gold, and a post office, customs station and two commercial fisheries were established. “Rum-runners” transported Canadian liquor to American customers via this waterway when Minnesota enacted Prohibition in 1917.

However, it took the lumberjacks to make the wilderness surrounding the waterway accessible. The Backus-Brooks Lumber Company acquired timberlands and water rights and by 1906 was constructing roads and railroads. With transportation access in place, timber baron Backus invited his wealthy friends to enjoy the region’s scenic and recreational opportunities. The railroad brought travelers to Tower, Minnesota, where they boarded steamboats to Vermilion Dam. A portage road, built in 1890, connected Lake Vermilion and Crane Lake. The resulting traffic encouraged settlers to establish resorts.

By 1910, scores of entrepreneurs such as Andrew Koski, Oliver Knox and John Nelson began to construct successful resorts, establishing a thriving tourism industry that endures decades later. Today, Voyagers National Park, the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness and Quetico Provincial Park converge at Crane Lake.

Current Setting

Because of its unique location near the Canadian border, this end-of-the-road community serves as an important access to the Crane Lake chain of lakes. Access to Crane Lake is via County Highway 23. Orr, which is the closest full-service community to Crane Lake, is thirty miles away. Crane Lake students travel to Orr to attend school. The nearest medical facility is fifty miles away in Cook.

Location and abundant access to recreational areas establishes the community of Crane Lake as a popular short-term vacation destination. Many people visit and use the local lodging facilities for a few days to a few weeks at a time. Thousands of visitors also use the community as a point of departure for trips into the adjacent recreational areas of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Quetico Provincial Park and Voyagers National Park. While most of the visitors come during the summer months, there is a growing demand in winter because of the popularity of outdoor winter sports.

Tourism and lodging comprise the major employment opportunities for the community. Seasonal employees need to support tourism-based industries are in short supply. Lack of employee housing and the remoteness of the community contribute to the limited labor force. While income-related information for the Crane Lake area is not currently available, the median household income for Saint Louis County is $33,064 as compared to the state median household income of $37,483.

Federal, State and County land surround Crane Lake. Private land available for economic development is limited.

Facilities within the community include single-family homes, restaurants, taverns, hotels, lodges, rental cabins, a post office and a U.S. Custom’s office that is open 12 months a year. Crane Lake is the second most heavily used seaplane base in the country.

The Saint Louis County Board of Commissioners located in Duluth currently governs Crane Lake, an unorganized area. Federal census data that focuses solely on the Crane Lake area is not available; however, based on the number of dwellings, it is estimated that there are 100 year-round residents. There are many seasonal residents that are closely associated with the Crane Lake community. These residents typically live here at their summer homes during the warm weather months of the year. Based on the number of seasonal dwellings in the community it is estimated that there are between 200 and 250 seasonal residents within the Crane Lake area. The population trend shows a gradual increase, most likely due to the quality of living within the area.

The above text is from the Crane Lake Community Action Plan, 2001.
A. Vermilion Falls
A ten minute hike on a well-maintained trail brings the visitor to Vermilion Falls, a cascading torrent of water forced through a ten foot wide opening in the granite (USFS, 1999).

B. Vermilion Gorge
A one and a half mile hike gives the visitor spectacular views of the Vermilion River Gorge, a rugged landscape of sheer granite cliffs and rock outcroppings.

The trailhead sign is located near the houseboat yard at the Voyagaire. The actual parking location is poorly defined making it hard to know where to park within this area.

C. White Pine Way
This is another view of the 80-acre parcel the Town of Crane Lake would acquire in the land exchange agreement.

D. Crane Lake
Crane Lake is unlike any other lake in Minnesota. Situated between Voyageurs National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, it provides a beautiful natural setting for a unique community.

E. Land Exchange Area
The wooded character of the 80-acre parcel that the Town of Crane Lake would acquire in the land exchange agreement is shown in this photograph of the intersection of White Pine Way and County Road 24. This intersection provides access into the southern third of the parcel. The photograph also shows the parcel’s changing topography and some of its unique rock formations.

F. Signs of Crane Lake
The arrival to Crane Lake is first marked at the intersection of Nelson Road and County Highway 24. The “Welcome to Crane Lake” sign has been sited in the area past Handberg Road and marks the final procession to the first views of Crane Lake. It marks the end of a series of initial views of the lake. These signs and the Voyageur statue are community icons. These signs and the Voyageur statue are community icons that provide interpretive information about the history of Crane Lake and the region.
COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

A. Vermilion Falls

B. Vermilion Gorge

C. White Pine Way

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F. Signs of Crane Lake
G. Gold Coast Road
Gold Coast Road runs along the western shoreline of Crane Lake. Most of the community’s businesses are located along this stretch of road. These include a post office, boat launch, international customs port, and a variety of commercial and service businesses. These varied establishments and amenities along Crane Lake’s “main street” define the town.

H. County Boat Launch
The county boat launch marks the end of the road and arrival at Voyagaire. The large undefined space provides an opportunity to create a new parking arrangement and public space area on the lake. A kiosk provides visitor information.

I. Water Community
The lake shapes the Town of Crane Lake. Boat houses, businesses and community spaces are all oriented toward the lake and providing for easy lake access.

J. The Gate
Crane Lake is unlike any other lake in Minnesota. Situated between Voyageurs National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, the lake provides a beautiful natural setting for a unique gateway recreational community.

K. Fire Hall
Crane Lake Fire Hall is an important gathering place for the community. Its garages and meeting room make the fire hall a valued community asset. Because the fire hall and chapel are located across from each other, this area is a valued civic space for the community.

L. Chapel
Crane Lake Chapel is another important community gathering place. Its space and unique design make the chapel a Crane Lake landmark.