LAKE SUPERIOR:

Water covers 70% of the earth’s surface area, but only 3% of it is freshwater. Saltwater makes up 97% of the earth’s water supply. Of the earth’s freshwater, 90% is locked up in glaciers, polar ice caps, and groundwater aquifers. Only 0.32% of the world’s water is available in freshwater lakes and rivers. Lake Superior is the largest freshwater lake in the world, and contains 10% of the world’s fresh surface water. Lake Superior, with a volume of 2,934 cubic miles, or 3 quadrillion gallons, holds as much water as the other Great Lakes combined, enough water to cover all of North and South America to a depth of 1 foot.

Lake Superior is 350 miles long and 160 miles wide, with a shoreline length of 2,726 miles and a maximum lake depth of 1,279 feet. The average lake depth is 489 feet. Lake Superior’s water surface area of 31,700 square miles is equal to the area of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire combined. It takes the sun 30 minutes to cross Lake Superior. It is large enough to influence local weather patterns, creating cooler summer temperatures and warmer winter temperatures along the shore than occur just a few miles inland.

Lake Superior has its own periodic seiche (SAYSH), caused by wind and barometric pressure, which pushes and pulls water from one side of the lake to the other, much like oceanic tides. The lake is classified as ultra-oligotrophic by limnologists who study lakes, meaning its cold, sterile water has few nutrients and slow growth rates. Water temperatures average 40 degrees in the summer. Lake Superior is the cleanest of the Great Lakes, with an unmatched water clarity that allows visibility of 30 feet or more. Because of its large volume, however, the lake has a slow replacement rate, making it highly susceptible to pollution. It takes 191 years for natural processes to replace all the water currently in Lake Superior.

The lake first filled with glacial meltwater 10,000 years ago. The drainage basin of Lake Superior is relatively small, at 49,300 square miles, when compared to the lake’s large 31,700 square mile surface area. The drainage basin is 89% forested, which helps contribute to water clarity. The elevation of Lake Superior is 602 feet above sea level. Over 1,000 ships a year visit the twin ports of Duluth-Superior, making Duluth-Superior the largest freshwater port in the world. Ships export grain, iron ore, and lumber from Minnesota. Fierce storms hit the lake in November and March, whipping up waves 10 to 20 feet high. There are more than 350 shipwrecks in Lake Superior.
THE GITCHI GAMI TRAIL & THE NORTH SHORE:

Currently segments of the Gitchi Gami Trail are being planned and built. When complete, the trail will extend along the North Shore of Lake Superior from the City of Two Harbors to the City of Grand Marais. In places the trail will run parallel to Highway 61, the North Shore Scenic Drive. In other places the trail will leave the highway to travel through state parks and communities. The trail will be a major amenity in an amenity-rich environment for residents and visitors alike. It offers an opportunity to:

- Experience and enjoy Lake Superior, the many rivers that cascade down the rocky terrain to the lake, the flora and fauna in this very special microclimate, and the cultural heritage of the area,
- Create trailheads in communities; a strategy that will help support the community’s economy and add to the community’s livability by providing access to the trail by local residents, and
- Link the numerous recreational resources available in this very special landscape into a system of recreation amenities that can be accessed from each other.

THE LARGER CONTEXT:

Minnesota’s “North Shore” of Lake Superior is like no other place in the Midwest. In a region characterized by flat prairies and rolling farm fields, the North Shore offers deep, dark forests, rugged mountains, and a windswept coastline with crashing waves. Fresh streams tumble through rocky gorges into the ice cold waters of Lake Superior. The North Shore has a refreshing and invigorating character that is unique in the Upper Midwest.

The North Shore of Lake Superior is a popular destination for recreationalists from throughout the United States and Canada. When completed the Gitchi-Gami Trail will wind its way along the narrow edge of Lake Superior, paralleling the North Shore Scenic Drive, which extends from Duluth to the Canadian Border. Dramatic views of rocky beaches, jagged cliffs, thundering waterfalls, and sheltering pines are revealed around every bend in the road. The Arrowhead Region of northeastern Minnesota contains the state’s last significant tracts of old-growth pine and white cedar forest. Wolves, moose, deer, black bear, and birds of prey roam the forests, while salmon and trout swim the clear waters of Lake Superior and its tributary streams.

Eight state parks, three state forests, one national forest, a national monument, and several wayside parks provide numerous opportunities to experience the outdoors. The Superior Hiking Trail winds 200 miles along the rocky mountain tops overlooking the North Shore. Every state park has a network of well maintained trails. Fishing boats, sailboats, kayaks, and tour boats are available for rent and hire along the shore. In winter, hundreds of miles of groomed trails attract cross-country skiers, snowshoers, and snowmobilers. Lutsen Mountain is the Midwest’s largest downhill ski resort.

The North Shore’s rich history is deeply connected to the cultural traditions of its inhabitants. Native Americans have lived on the North Shore since the retreat of the last glaciers 12,000 years ago. French missionaries and fur traders began arriving over 350 years ago. Many place names along the North Shore originate from Ojibway words or their French translations. Scandinavian immigrants arrived to work the mines and settle the land. The charming logging and fishing communities of the North Shore retain their ethnic heritage. The Sawbill, Caribou, Arrowhead, and Gunflint Trails lead inland to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Museums and state park interpretive centers help tell the story of the North Shore.