A Region of National Significance

The Calumet Region contains both globally rare natural areas and the enormous evidence of cities and industry. Two urban National Parks that highlight these features are found at the southern shore of the Great Lakes—the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Pullman National Monument. But the Parks do not exist in isolation. Near the Parks and between them are huge industries set next to delicate habitats and distinctive communities.

The landscape shows how American life changed during the boom years of industrialization that followed the Civil War and how changes continued through booms and busts in the economy to the present day. The innovative construction of a company town at Pullman in a wetland area in 1882 signaled how attractive this region would become to large industrial operations. Clusters of factories soon anchored the western end of America's Manufacturing Belt. An entire era of tremendous industrial production and massive immigration arose, but so did the struggle for a decent wage, safe work conditions, and a healthy environment. Heavy industry soon thrust into Lake Michigan, cut down dunes, filled the wetlands or lobbied to drain them, and witnessed a complete rearrangement of river flow. It built upon and spun a thickening web of rail lines, canals, roads, and pipelines second to no other region in the country.

The encounter between growing industry and people concerned about preserving fragile dunes gave rise to a new kind of environmental conservation in an urban environment at the beginning of the twentieth century. It drew upon local advances in the science of ecology and focused on the protection of open lands for city people. The new kind of National Park that developed fifty years ago wraps around the last large integrated steelworks constructed in America, the sort of contrast that defines this uncommon place.