Michigan is rich in Great Lakes and natural resources, but imagine, if in trade, these awesome freshwater lakes were instead saltwater oceans. This notion is not too far from reality, as hundreds of millions years ago, and long before the glaciers carved the Great Lakes, Michigan once was a shallow saltwater sea full of ocean life!

A visit to coastal northeast Michigan offers visitors an opportunity to explore and find fossils of these ancient Devonian Seas of the Great Lakes region. Corals and crinoids (sea lilies), sponges and brachiopods (think sea shells), gastropods (snails) and trilobites — even an ancient fish — are all examples of living organisms that once thrived in these shallow ocean seas, and are now preserved in northeast Michigan rock formations.

From rock quarries and fossilized ocean life to sinkholes and limestone cobble shorelines, this region’s unique geology is prized as a local coastal tourism asset. Michigan Sea Grant and Michigan State University Extension have supported multiple sustainable coastal tourism research and development efforts with local partners and communities, helping them to identify opportunities to capitalize on these geological assets to promote sustainable coastal tourism. These geology-based attractions are promoted by the U.S. 23 Huron Shores Heritage Route from among a number of diverse coastal tourism opportunities offered in the region. Additionally, the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan offers a family Fall Harvest Fossil Fest celebrating how local geology has helped shape local communities and tourism in northeast Michigan.

Plan your trip: www.us23heritageroute.org
Residents and visitors, alike, can explore the amazing geology of northeast Michigan's coastline by way of rock hounding and fossil hunting throughout the region. A few highlighted stops (and partners) to help get you started include:

- The Besser Museum and the newly opened Lafarge Fossil Park are great places to add to your fossil collection AND to identify the fossils you may have discovered. Thanks to some artistic interpretive signage created by the youth of Lincoln Elementary (Alpena Public School), visitors can learn more about the region's unique geology and fossils they will find. This place-based education project of creating interpretive signage was supported through the Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative network.

- Rockport State Recreation Area is a great stop for those seeking to find fossils, sinkholes, and some great nature-based hiking. Spend hours (and hours) in this abandoned limestone quarry finding nearly every type of Devonian Era fossil you might imagine. Large Petoskey stones (colonial coral fossils) are always a prized find in this quarry — and Rockport’s coastline is known for amazing gastropod finds. The local Friends of Rockport often offer public events and activities for interested explorers.

- Does exploring sinkholes sound fun to you? Consider a visit to the underwater sinkhole of El Cajon Bay (accessible from shore, by way of Alpena Township park property) or take in a more landside visit to the Stevens Twin Sinks managed by the Michigan Karst Conservancy.

- Rogers City offers a view of one of the world’s largest operating limestone quarries, Quarry View Roadside Park. Be sure to also visit the Rogers City Fossil Park where you can hunt for ocean life fossilized in the stone excavated from this quarry.

- In downtown Alpena, walk the limestone boulders lining the shoreline of the Alpena Small Boat Harbor and Bay View or Mich-e-ke-wis Parks. Here you will find an amazing array of fossils including a wide assortment of brachiopods, and for lucky fossil hunters, maybe even an elusive trilobite.

- PaleoJoe, a Michigan business entrepreneur, shares his enthusiasm and expertise of local geology offering ‘fossil digs’ along this northern Lake Huron coastline. PaleoJoe partners with local libraries and the Besser Museum to offer local educational seminars.

For more resources and information about Michigan geology and fossils, visit the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality’s compilation of resources for students and teachers.