



People & Place

Universal Access to Nature



The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy led a coalition of partners to create a universally accessible canoe and kayak launch on the Pine River in Gratiot County. This access point, located on one of their preserves, was subsequently transferred to Gratiot County Parks and Recreation in support of a historic 35-mile water trail. The Conservancy's mission to protect natural habitat and open space is enhanced by the distinct and essential role they play in the collaboration—providing the land needed for a successful water trail, thereby helping people understand and appreciate the river through enhanced recreational access.



People & Place

Land Conservancies as Community Builders

Place matters as Michigan rethinks its path to restoring prosperity in the 21st century. The way we value place depends very much on the diversity and beauty of the natural resources unique to Michigan. Every community has a story. The time has come for Michigan to recreate our state narrative to reflect the trust, optimism, and inspiration that is evident in land conservancies' work as innovators and advocates.

With generous support from the Consumers Energy Foundation, Heart of the Lakes launched an initiative to document how land conservancies and their partners are important to local economic development and thriving communities. Land protection projects from around the state, including this one, were selected as case studies to showcase land conservancies in their role as community builders.

Community building projects demonstrate the relevance of conservation to successful Michigan communities – helping to create attractive places to live, work, and play. Land conservancies that engage in this work find themselves more fully integrated in their community and able to deepen their connections and relationships. Through community building projects, conservation is strengthened as a shared value.

This approach becomes even more important in a rapidly changing world where protection of land simply for the sake of conservation may no longer resonate as strongly as it has in the past. Our everyday links to the land continually diminish. Community building projects are a way of tackling that problem at both ends. Meeting people where they are, instead of trying to convince them of some intrinsic values they may not share or understand, will create new opportunities to promote the importance of nature alongside economic development.

As nonprofit organizations dedicated to the permanent protection of land for the public good, Michigan's conservancies help create vibrant places through both land protection, as well as community engagement activities in support of local goals and objectives.

Heart of the Lakes is pleased to highlight a few exceptional projects with this case study and others, while recognizing the great work of the conservancies behind them. These projects exemplify a commitment to building communities and the value of people and place. Thank you to the Consumers Energy Foundation for making it possible to do so.

Chippewa Watershed Conservancy

Incorporated in 1985 as the Isabella County Nature Conservancy, the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy (CWC) later changed their name to reflect an expanded service area and mission. As their service area grew, the Conservancy remained committed to the belief that there is a need to set aside critical lands to protect sensitive wildlife habitat and to preserve open space and scenic views for future generations. The Conservancy began as all-volunteer organization, until 2004, when they established their first staff position. They are currently protecting nearly 4000 acres, held both in conservation easements and nature preserves.

It is the Conservancy's belief that that it is not enough to protect land for protection's sake. Their intent is to connect the communities in their service area to the land in way that makes it clear why the concepts of natural space and water quality and a sense of place are important to all. For more information, visit www.chippewawatershedconservancy.org

The Pine River as a Water Trail

The Pine River in Gratiot County is a quiet, slow-moving tributary which eventually empties into the Saginaw Bay by way of the Chippewa and Tittabawassee rivers. This winding waterway is habitat to many species of plants and animals, but until recently, was not easily accessible to both residents and visitors to the area despite the historical importance of waterways to local communities. Like many Michigan communities, those in Gratiot County started at the water's edge. Prior to formal roads, most of Michigan's community development occurred along its waterways. Water was the primary means of transportation, and our communities trace their beginnings to waterside commerce, industry, or transportation. Whether they were Native American settlements, early European encampments, trading posts, or fishing communities, Michigan grew up along the water. As a result, recreational water trails touch Michigan's being like no other concept.



In 2011, the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy began working with a group of local partners to address ways to promote the Pine River as a recreational resource. Members of this ad hoc group, called Friends of the Pine River, include the Conservancy, Gratiot County Parks & Recreation Department (GCPRD), Chippewa Nature Center, Alma College, Lumberjack Park Association, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Gratiot Conservation District, Gratiot County Drain Commissioner and a number of private citizens. The group discussions resulted in a plan to create paddling access points, and importantly, a universally accessible launch to the Pine River. The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy and its partners felt that providing access to the Pine River would be one of the single, most important ways to encourage people to support its protection and conservation.

Many Hands Make Light Work

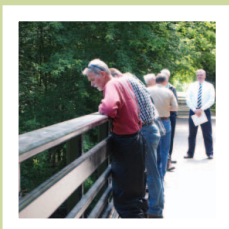
The Friends of the Pine River's first collaborative project was the update of a 1970's era water trail map of the Pine River covering a distance of 35 river miles. During the update of this map, the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy oversaw the installation of a rustic access point on one of their preserves near the north end of the water trail. At the south end of the trail, a 1.2-acre parcel of land was transferred to Gratiot County Parks and Recreation Department for development of a universally accessible parking area and paddling launch facility. The universal access project continues to be a regional collaboration involving the CWC, GCPRD, Chippewa Nature Center, ITC Corporation and the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative.

Due to its small size and constricted location between the Pine River and the nearby road, this parcel of land is not a highly viable property for permanent protection as natural space and there are no threatened or endangered species associated with it. However, the land is ideally suited as a canoe launch point and has historically been used as such, though not with the previous landowner's permission. This stretch of the river is slow-moving and flat, due to the presence of a dam about a mile and a third downstream from the property. Portions of the river are 500-600 feet wide, making it easy for disabled persons or beginners to navigate. The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy initiated the transfer of the property to the Gratiot County Parks Department and it has been renamed the Philip and Linda Luneack County Park, or Luneack Landing.



Lasting Benefits

The Friends of the Pine River believe that many of the region's future economic opportunities are tied to the quality of its natural resources and that quality of life is enhanced immeasurably by providing enhanced access those resources. By creating formal, yet sensitively developed river access points, there are multiple benefits. Encouraging use of the river will bring in tourism dollars from visitors to the area, as well as attract local paddlers. The economic benefits of increased river use are often seen quickly due to the relatively low overhead compared to other recreational attractions, and designated water trails can attract more users through the development of signs, websites, and maps.



Heart of the Lakes

Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy was founded by Michigan's land conservancies to unite their individual efforts around a common goal – protecting Michigan's land. Heart of the Lakes supports land conservation by supporting conservation policy and practice, advocating sound public policies, and providing tools to strengthen conservancy effectiveness.

With Heart of the Lakes' support, our members are able to conserve Michigan's forests, farmland, coastline and other extraordinary places critical to Michigan's social, economic, and environmental well-being.



Heart of the Lakes

Center for Land Conservation Policy

www.heartofthelakes.org