



PARKS, *Trails,* & Land

Sharing More Than Common Ground





After recently aligning themselves on several policy issues, mParks has strengthened its alliance with two beloved Michigan organizations that it shares a common mission and philosophy with, Heart of the Lakes (HOL) and the Michigan Trails and Greenway Alliance (MTGA).

“The three organizations have been engaged with the legislature to amend the constitution to provide more dollars for trails and park development with the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF),” said Bob Wilson, Executive Director of MTGA. “We all took a common position on that, along with a move to amend the recreation passport program to allow more dollars to go into the local recreation grant program.”

Through that experience the executive directors of the three organizations realized the potential to strengthen their alliance by getting involved with other areas that would benefit each organization.

“Our individual board chairs were active in getting the three executive directors together for a meeting,” said Jonathan Jarosz, Executive Director of HOL. “We talked about how we have different niches but that we’re doing the same things in relation to communication, advocacy, and marketing.”

A larger meeting was then crafted with board members from each of the organizations. The conversation was focused on opportunities for collaboration.

“When the idea for a joint board meeting first came up, the mParks Board of Directors was 100% supportive,” said Clay Summers, Executive Director of

mParks. “They just really felt like having these larger conversations outside of our little silos made a lot of sense.”

“Our organizations all depend upon access to the outdoors, whether you’re building parks or trails or whether you’re trying to enhance people’s experience in the outdoors by having more land and water available,” said Wilson. “We saw that there is a potential for us to engage in not just joint advocacy efforts, but also promotion of that mission by aligning our organizations in some common messaging.”

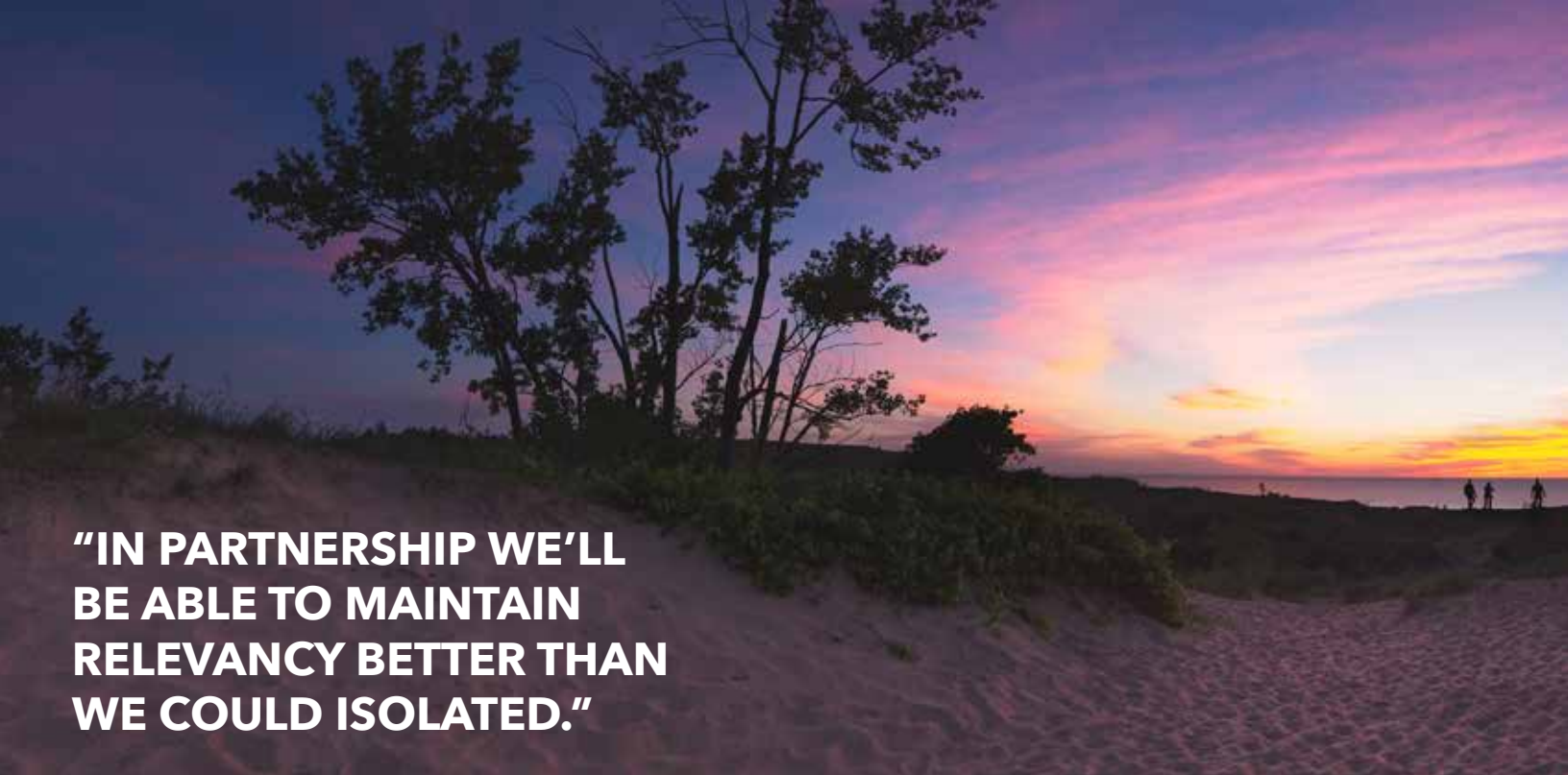
The organizations share many similarities.

“The three primary areas that HOL works in is where the overlap with mParks and MTGA really starts to shine through,” said Jarosz. “Those areas are capacity building for members, policy and advocacy work, and communications and marketing.”

“If I had to draw comparisons, MTGA and HOL have the non-profit heavily in common,” said Jarosz. “HOL and mParks have the public/private lands piece heavily in common. And between MTGA and mParks what I would call ‘recreation as an activity’ is something that they share.”

The organizations also share similar advocacy models.

“Last year we produced a piece called ‘Challenge Us, We Dare You,’ which was a 15-minute film featuring women from Michigan and how they engage in the outdoors and how that empowers their lives. That piece got spread by our members and then picked up by a number of film festivals. Now REI has picked it up and is pushing it nationally. What does that have to do



“IN PARTNERSHIP WE’LL BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN RELEVANCY BETTER THAN WE COULD ISOLATED.”

with land conservancies? It has to do with getting people jazzed up and excited about the outdoors. Our advocacy model, very similar to mParks and MTGA, is based around this idea of getting people excited about the places around them and the stories that are created, about where they had these experiences, and turning them into advocates.”

This is a standard social change model, helping people identify the thing they care about, getting them more engaged and seeing the value, and then, ideally, they become donors, supporters and advocates. The three organizations have differences as well.

“There are a lot of differences but there is so much overlap that once everyone sat in the room together it became obvious that working together is a no

brainer,” said Jarosz. “The things that our board members have authorized us to work on together include policy and advocacy work, messaging, membership, and capacity building activities where appropriate. For example, if one organization is running a workshop, it could be run by and offered to all three.”

“Bob and I and our organizations are registered lobbying entities,” said Jarosz. “We’re all 501c3s, but in order to do the work that we do in Michigan we’re registered lobbyists, mParks is not. The thing that mParks has that the other two of us don’t is the Foundation. We have some different tool sets that we use but we don’t have complete overlap.”

“Being able to capitalize on each other’s strengths is the real exciting part to this venture,” said Summers. “Also, being able to see connections in the future with our mParks Foundation and some of the great work they are doing in communities is exciting as well.”

Established in 2002, the mParks Foundation provides financial support to people and programs that work to enrich the health and well being of all Michigan citizens through increased access to recreation and outdoor experiences.

There are some societal challenges that the three organizations will have to face moving forward.

“There are huge shifts in how people under 40 currently relate to the outdoors, including how they





engage with and support organizations and advocate for causes," said Jarosz. "Those are the things that will give us the most trouble but are also the things that I think in partnership we will be able to address better and understand better. In partnership we'll be able to maintain relevancy better than we could isolated."

What's next

"Next, we'll firm up the advocacy role that we share," said Wilson. "Also, we'll see what we can do in terms of organizational efficiency. We'll look into if there are other services that we can share to help more effectively spread the resources that we have amongst the three organizations."

All three executive directors know they also need to focus on trying to increase diversity in the organizations.

"It's really important that we make a concerted effort in that regard," said Wilson. "We need to capture more of the picture that is really out there, especially in our urban areas."

"We all are working very hard to represent our communities and members statewide and really listen to what they need to be successful," said Summers. "At mParks specifically we have a re-energized Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee working to identify ways to reach the profession as a whole and really start to take an active role recruiting young folks into the

outdoors, as well as educating them on the profession."

The three organizations plan to work together for the next year and a half on behalf of the MNRTF ballot campaign. A coalition has been built to grow support for the ballot question in 2020.

"There are nine partners as part of the coalition," said Jarosz. "I see our three organizations as being the tip of the spear because we're going to have to energize our members, whether they're individuals or organizations."

"Non-profit work can often be a struggle," said Wilson. "We're competing for membership dollars, we're competing for foundation dollars, and it's great when you can find three organizations like ours that can potentially help each other in a joint mission. It's exciting for me because I think it strengthens the future for all three of our organizations."

"It's also been a great opportunity for three individuals who really didn't know one other to develop good friendships," said Wilson. "On a personal level it's meant a lot to me, not just to my organization, to have these two new friends who are trusted colleagues that I can work with. That's pretty cool."

"The cool and exciting answer about what's next is I don't know, but it should be fun," said Jarosz. "We're going on a road trip, we've got a full tank of gas, our sunglasses on, and I think I know generally which direction we're driving."





Heart of the Lakes

Heart of the Lakes is the state association for Michigan's land conservancies and their partners. They strengthen the collective efforts of organizations dedicated to the conservation of Michigan's environmentally and economically significant land and water. They currently have 34 member organizations, two-thirds of which are land conservancies and the others are partners in land and water conservation. Heart of the Lakes focuses on three principle areas.

"We do capacity building for our members, which includes educational training, workshops, webinars, and one-on-one technical assistance," said Jorasz. "For example, a member might need guidance on best practices for a strategic plan they are working on. Or they might need advice on a new donor management system."

They also do policy and advocacy work, which Jorasz says falls into a neutral policy bucket.

"Our work to date has been helping protect the ability of conservation organizations in Michigan to do their work. That could be threats to tax exemptions, that could be political threats to how donors can give, it could mean a number of different things," said Jorasz. "The policy side of things is primarily a protective piece."

The third area is communications and marketing.

"For a long time Heart of the Lakes was promoting itself," said Jorasz. "What we've done over the last three to five years is make a really strong effort to focus on themes that people care about and then help create digital media around those themes."

They recently updated their strategic plan and identified priority areas they want to focus on over the next two years as related to policy, capacity building and communications.

"The emerging thing that Heart of the Lakes has taken a state-wide lead on is what's referred to as the outdoor industry, which is defined as the spectrum of things that allow people to get outside," said Jorasz. "That includes the manufacturer of equipment, the retailer, and the public and private organizations. The outdoor industry is more a reference to an economic cluster than to outdoor recreation as an activity."

Jorasz sits on the DNR's Outdoor Recreation Advisory Council. Heart of the Lakes is also spearheading the effort to create a non-governmental outdoor industry

"In the Midwest we see outdoor conservation and recreation as two different things. Everywhere else they're not," said Jorasz. "If you want to go outside and play or ride your bike down a trail, there is an industry cluster around that which includes our organization's work. Generally, the outdoor industry tries to engage economic development, workforce development, health and wellness and conservation and stewardship."

An additional priority area is Farmland Preservation. Michigan is the second-most agriculturally diverse state in the nation, producing over 120 commodities on 10 million acres of farmland. From fresh, local fruits and vegetables available around the state to the commodities that are exported, Heart of the Lakes and its members feel that Michigan can't afford not to invest in agricultural land protection.



"A number of our members do quite a bit as related to the conservation of farmland for farming," said Jorasz. "I sit on the state's Farmland and Open Space Preservation Board, which is a funding mechanism for state grants for farmland preservation."

Another big thematic area they prioritize is conservation defense.

"For example, there are many challenges to non-profit's tax exempt status on property tax in Michigan," said Jorasz. "That could be a trail corridor or a nature preserve. For us it's a tool that non-profits use to allow them to do their work well. We work to make sure the organizations can do the work that they're intended to do."

To learn more about Heart of the Lakes visit www.heartofthelakes.org.





The Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance

The Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance (MTGA) began life as the Michigan chapter of the Rails to Trails Conservancy. It was a national organization with many states having their own chapters.

"We worked for many years converting abandoned railway corridors into trails," said Bob Wilson, Executive Director of MTGA. "Then in the early 1990s we moved out of that model and became MTGA, because there was a lot more work to be done in addition to converting abandoned rail beds."

The organization then got involved with different types of trails and separated from the Rails to Trails Conservancy. MTGA now focuses on natural surface trails, mountain bike trails, hiking trails, water trails and more. Their principal role in the last two years has been to serve as an advocate in the legislature for trails policy and trails funding.

"If you hike, bike, trail, paddle, walk, run or ski on the trails in Michigan, we advocate for your interests before the legislature and the executive branch," said Wilson.

MTGA has 700 active individual members and around 150 business/friends groups and members of industry.

"Something that's relatively new is that we entered into an arrangement with the Michigan History Center to develop a history telling scholarship program," said Wilson. "We pay tuition for graduate students in history programs around the state to get them onto our trails to listen to and fact check local trails of history, so that it is told on a consistent basis."

"One of our original activities is the Michigander bike tour," said Wilson. "Every year we choose a different part of the state and work with communities that have trails to help connect them with a multi-day bike ride. This year it is in the Tawas area."

MTGA is also very focused on what they call their five Great Lake-to-Lake trails, which are trails that cut across the middle of the state in both the upper and lower peninsula. Ten years ago they got together with the Kellogg Foundation and stakeholders from all over Michigan to try to find areas to connect trails for a longer destination type trail. What they envisioned as a result were the five Great Lake-to-Lake trails. The first one that will be generally open to the public is Route 1 that connects 17 existing trails into one big destination trail.

"From September 13-18 we're holding our inaugural Great Lake-to-Lake bike tour along Route 1 which will allow riders to move from South Haven to Port Huron," said Wilson.

"If you look back a few hundred years, trails have always been part of community-building, state-building, even nation-building," said Wilson. "When you think about the Roman Empire you see the importance of water and land trails for moving commerce. When you look more recently to the history of Native American tribes in Michigan, they were using land and water trails to move their tribes on a seasonal basis and for commerce. As long as there is that need to connect people and give them venues for commerce, trails will still be a constant need."

Wilson feels that is why educating about the historical component is so valuable, since history has a tendency to repeat itself.

"What better way to connect with the importance of our natural resources in a sustainable fashion than to get out on our trails where we can expose people to our wetlands, rivers, lakes, streams and our sand dunes. What really defines Michigan at its essence are these natural and historical resources."

To learn more about the Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance visit www.michigantrails.org.

