



GRASS RIVER NATURAL AREA, INC

2017 ANNUAL REPORT TO ANTRIM COUNTY

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

SUBMITTED BY HALEY BRENIER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

MISSION:

To manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grass River Natural Area, Inc. had a productive and inspiring 2017. As a board, staff, and enthusiastic group of volunteers, we are led by our passion for the land, water and wildlife that make GRNA unique. We are equally inspired by the human community and their connection to that land, water, and wildlife. We seek to offer safe and accessible recreational space, enriching programs that engage the community in nature, and responsible management of our 1492 acres using conservation and stewardship practices.

2017 is most noted by relationship building, intense fundraising, increased programming, and great progress in infrastructure improvement. We are proud of the County's commitment to boardwalk and road improvements and hope that partnership will continue. We are equally proud of the donors and foundations that stepped up and supported our first phase of boardwalk reconstruction.

HIGHLIGHTS TO REMEMBER FROM 2017:

- 1). **\$410,000** total (over 16 months) raised for Boardwalk Reconstruction Project
- 2). 21st Century Bio-inventory Project conducted in coordination with Michigan Natural Features Inventory. Deemed a **"Significant Biodiversity Hotspot"** by MNFI biologists!
- 3). **3210 volunteer hours** logged with **70% volunteer retention rate!**
- 4). **10% increase** in overall program participation compared to 2016
- 5). **20% increase in funds raised from fundraising events** (including sponsorships) compared to 2016
- 6) **Increased amount of donors by 4%** compared to 2016: 620 vs 641
- 7). **Raised about \$146,000 in grant funding** to support this public natural area, increase of 94%
- 8). **52% increase** in outreach engagement
- 9). Accrued **8600 contact hours** in programs in 2017



- 10). Conducted Invasive Species Survey of Scrabble and Finch Creek from GRNA boundary to mouth at Grass River - project supported by **Dole Family Foundation**
- 11). Completed Fundraising Phase for Boardwalk Reconstruction Project, began construction planning phase, and awarded job to RCI Construction
- 12). **Sold all Field Guides from first printing (1200)**. Education Director, James Dake, conducted talks all over the state, increasing our constituent base.
- 13). **County commissioners committed \$67,000/year** 2017-2019 for Grass River road improvement project
- 14). Implemented annual parcel monitoring program and developed an Arc GIS monitoring strategy
- 15). Developed content for new GR Center indoor exhibits to be designed and printed in 2018
- 16). Executive Director Haley Breniser is awarded national leadership award by the Association of Nature Center Administrators as well as Environmentalist of the Year by NMEAC.
- 17). Replaced old Perception Pathway interpretive signage with 10 new braille signs – project supported by grants from the Bellaire Lions & Lioness Clubs, GT Regional Community Foundation, Great Lakes Energy, and Michigan Braille Association

TESTIMONIALS FROM THE PUBLIC IN 2017

The feedback we get from visitors to Grass River Natural Area is of utmost importance. It helps guide our decisions to serve our community most effectively. So, how better to show you how 2017 went, than by offering testimonials from *your* constituents...

“My students are obsessed with your field guide. They are asking to take it home at night and have their noses in it each day. One teacher took a photo of a spider she saw and showed it to the kids, so a couple of her students took it upon themselves to use your guide to identify the type. Very powerful resource.” – local teacher, Antrim County

*“We greatly appreciate the opportunity to conduct vegetative surveys and FQAs at Grass River Natural Area. As a whole, the natural communities at GRNA comprise a **significant biodiversity hotspot** amidst a highly fragmented landscape that is highly deserving of its status and protection as a natural area. We were able to document 27 new county plant records and nine natural community types, including a large floristically diverse northern fen. By gathering these baseline data, GRNA can better target management activities, including responding to the immediate and growing threat of invasive species in the most important places.” – MNFI Biologist Phyllis Higman*

“I really love to come out to a Grass River in the summer time when I am on Torch Lake ... I love to bring my grandchildren because this is a place of wonderful natural beauty and peace and quiet ... they see and discover nature on their own and realize so much of what nature has to offer them in a peaceful quiet area!” –Trip Advisor



"I always enjoy the children and their parents or other family members ... they seem so interested in all the natural discoveries that occur while they are in this very peaceful area! Those that get to visit this natural treasure seem to really appreciate the gift of this area!!" - Facebook

"My review is somewhat biased. My uncle was very involved in the establishment of this incredible area . . . but, it's been some time since we visited. We brought our granddaughters, 4 and 7, and they had an amazing time running along the well-established trails, finding frogs (toad?) checking out the streams, fish, trees, etc. The trails are well cared for, it is a wonderful respite to walk along in quiet solitude. It appears a good deal of educational offerings are available." – Trip Advisor

"Very well marked trail system and cross country trails are awesome! We hit up the track set cross country trails, glided along the Rail Trail, and dipped down into the loops just for snowshoers...which was tricky to navigate at first, but ended up being super fun on our skis! Lots of scenic creek crossings and places to explore. We'll be back!" - Facebook

"Every program I have attended has been fun, well planned, and very educational. My whole family just attended the Maple Syrup demonstration and we are already tapping trees in our yard! I love Grass River and I am thankful it is so close to home." – local resident

"I spent an hour cross country skiing and another hour hiking on the snowshoe trails enjoying the sunshine and great outdoors. The cross country trails were well tracked and clear of trees. We use the trails year round and enjoyed the classes we have participated in." – local resident

FINANCIAL POSITION

By Treasurer Pete Byron

The highlight of 2017, was a successful fundraising campaign to reconstruct our aging boardwalk system. By year end, our generous contributors, including Antrim County, had committed over \$370,000 to this improvement, with construction set to begin in June, 2018. We are well-positioned to manage this exciting project with the capacity our supporters have been able to build over the past two years. Unrestricted contributions were flat with the prior year, indicating strong continued support for our mission, including during a major project like the Boardwalk Reconstruction. We had another banner year in our investment portfolio, earning almost \$40,000! We have not added to or subtracted from that in 2018; but, the prior two year's earnings have contributed to increased financial stability and a strong balance sheet. Finally, our first annual Gala was a success, generating both individual contributions and sponsorships from area businesses and organizations. We plan to replace our annual concert with the new gala event in 2018. Grass River Natural Area, Inc., remains on a solid financial footing led by a highly competent staff who knows how to properly manage our hard-earned and generously-contributed net assets.



*Note: Per policy, our 2017, financials are being audited, instead of reviewed. This process takes more time and was not complete as of the publishing of this report. As such, this report reflects internal financials.



	YTD 2017
PUBLIC SUPPORT, REVENUES AND RECLASSIFICATIONS	
<u>Unrestricted</u>	
Contributions	159,112
Like Kind Donation	6,099
Class Fees	14,939
Bookstore Sales	12,104
Grants	23,377
Interest & Investment Income	36,015
Sales Tax Collected	-
Fundraising Income	40,093
Reimbursements & Refunds	2,478
Misc	281
Net Assets Released	35,709
Total Unrestricted	330,207
<u>Temporarily Restricted</u>	
Contributions	252,048
Like Kind Donation	4,600
Class Fees	-
Bookstore Sales	-
Grants	122,951
Interest & Investment Income	2,858
Sales Tax Collected	-
Fundraising Income	-
Reimbursements & Refunds	-
Misc	-
Net Assets Released	(35,709)
Total Temporarily Restricted	346,748
<u>Permanently Restricted</u>	
Contributions	-
Like Kind Donation	-
Class Fees	-
Bookstore Sales	-
Grants	-
Interest & Investment Income	-
Sales Tax Collected	-
Fundraising Income	-
Reimbursements & Refunds	-
Misc	-
Net Assets Released	-
Total Permanently Restricted	-
Total Public Support, Revenues and Reclassifications	676,955



EXPENSES	
Salaries, Wages and Benefits	193,683
Purchased Services	20,228
Contributions to Local Units of Government	-
Repairs and Maintenance	11,461
Office Expenses	29,310
Rent	7,904
Advertising	1,030
Insurance	6,507
Memberships and Subscriptions	1,468
Program Costs	20,518
Taxes	-
Utilities	3,147
Loss on Uncollectible Pledges	-
Depreciation Expense	3,490
Total Expenses	298,745
Change in Net Assets	378,210
Beginning Net Assets	439,886
Total Net Assets	818,096



EDUCATION

General Accomplishments

In 2017 we made strides in education to support our mission to provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment. The important projects we accomplished this year were made possible thanks to your support.

First, we worked to improve our messaging and presence through upgraded and attractive signage, so that visitors that use the natural area outside of staff hours are welcomed and given information on who we are and what we do. We worked with graphic designers to add signage in more of our outlying properties to let people know they are in the natural area and to provide contact information. We also created new interpretive signage through a collaborative effort with many partners. The interpretive signage was installed along our Perception Pathway and Fern Trail as an upgrade to a sensory trail. The new braille signage was installed by Image360 of Traverse City, and designed with the help of Gene Ullery-Smith Graphic Design. The entire project features new braille signage that focuses on using your senses outdoors, along with our "Field Guide to Northwest Michigan" transcribed into braille, a new guide cable and posts, and a new roof on our educational pavilion at the start of the trail. This project was funded by the Michigan Braille Transcribing Fund, the Bellaire Lions Club, the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation FOCUS Fund and Access to Recreation Endowment, Great Lakes Energy, the National Association for Interpretation Region 4, and the Elk Rapids Lions Club. The project would not have been possible without the support of these organizations. This trail allows people of all abilities to have an outdoor sensory experience on our boardwalks.

Next, we have made great efforts to extend our reach by providing more programs and outreach throughout the region. GRNA partnered with NMC Extended Education to offer a series of adult classes. These included a 3-part reptiles and amphibians class, a 3-part water quality class, and presentations as a part of their adult campus day. We also had various programs at libraries in the region, bookstores, schools, Audubon clubs, and conferences, including the Michigan Wildflower Conference, the Michigan Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education, the National Association for Interpretation, and the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative Placed-Based Education Conference. Grass River also hosted a regional meeting for the Association of Nature Center Administrators. Through these efforts, we have extended our off-site reach to connect with nearly 3,000 people outside of the natural area.

Our "Field Guide to Northwest Michigan" publication continues to be a best-seller in the region. In 2017 we sold out of our first printing and moved on to a second printing. The guide continues to be sold in bookstores throughout the region and is used in many classrooms as an addition to the science curriculum focusing on place-based science. One teacher commented, "My students are obsessed with your field guide. They are asking to take it home at night and have their noses in it each day. One teacher took a photo of a spider she saw and showed it to the kids, so a couple of her students took it upon themselves to use your guide to identify the type. Very powerful resource."



The numbers we record continue to demonstrate our community's appreciation for Grass River: In 2017, people of all ages spent over 8000 hours interacting with Grass River and our staff. We also had over 5000 participants in programs and outreach, 7000 visitors to the Grass River Center, and a countless number of praises and enthusiasm from our supporters. We thank you for your commitment and support. It is passionate individuals like you, from our beginning through today, that help us to complete this essential work within the natural area and beyond.

A Collaboration Highlight

In 2017, Grass River began a collaboration with Mill Creek Elementary to provide outdoor and environmental education, taking students outdoors in their school yard. This project has goals to create professional development for teachers, implement outdoor engagement opportunities for students, and utilize the natural area surrounding the school. GRNA has created environmental learning opportunities for Mill Creek students, while at the same time, teachers are receiving professional development as they learn and work alongside trained outdoor educators. Through this partnership, we hope to provide education, opportunities, and engagement for both teachers and students at Mill Creek Elementary. GRNA staff will provide curriculum and lead outdoor education programs throughout the 2017-2018 school year, while also helping to utilize and improve upon the existing Mill Creek Environmental Learning Center. This space has an excellent pond filled with wildlife, a trail, and an education pavilion. Already, Grass River has worked with students in collecting wildlife from the pond with nets, using our field guides, collecting insects, and tapping maple trees right on the school property. This program was supported by the Community Foundation's Elk Rapids Area Education Endowment.

LAND MANAGEMENT

In 2017, the GRNA Land Management Committee (LMC) focused on two components of GRNA activities, conservation and stewardship. For Conservation the LMC was responsible for fostering the identification of unique/special/threatened natural resources at GRNA that need conservation; development of conservation strategies to protect/enhance those natural resources; implementation of conservation practices; and monitoring and scientific research to assess success of conservation actions and identify and maintain high ecological integrity at GRNA. In addition, the LMC participated and supported the GRNA Stewardship program that was overseen by the GRNA Land Steward who is responsible for the work that maintained the facilities, boardwalks and trails. Related to stewardship activities, the LMC members participated in Stewardship Days, special projects and jobs as requested by the Land Steward. These projects included everything from cleaning buildings, inside and out, to felling or clearing trees along the trails. Conservation included both new and continuing projects that provided some exciting and new information. New projects included the launch of a bumble bee survey that will be coordinated and participate with the national Bumble Bee Watch. This was the beta year for this and a number of species were observed and identified, and even a rare species was observed in August. A beetle survey was initiated and was done from May to October. Various sampling methods were employed and over 350 species in 60 beetle families were identified. Both of these projects will be continued in 2018 and



expanded in terms of participation of our growing cadre of Citizen Scientists! Ongoing projects like the stream sampling for macroinvertebrates, surveying the small mammal (i. e. mice, voles and moles) populations, inventory of the diversity of plant species in all habitats, and regular birding forays throughout the year, will all continue into 2018. Participation by the public is growing and there is a growing interest by learners of all ages. The goal now is to effectively communicate what has been seen, heard and found to all of the visitors to Grass River, and to document the results of these studies in the appropriate data bases and publications.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

Brief Stats Review

3210 hours

99 volunteers

70% retention from 2016

\$79,000 of volunteer work

Volunteers Tell The Story of Who We Are

With our long history of volunteerism at GRNA, volunteers are the reason that we have the Grass River story to tell. Without them, there would be no us. Fifty years ago volunteers started the process of preserving the land we now call Grass River Natural Area and they continue to make an incredible impact in fulfilling our mission today. Although highlighting the year in statistics is a great way to highlight our volunteer program, the stories behind these numbers are the real telltale of the efforts of our volunteers.

The stories of the volunteers who trudged through acres and acres of thick cedar wetlands to survey for invasive plant species...and then came back the next week to do it again. And the education volunteers who were delighted to see the sparkle of intrigue in a student's eye as they learned about the wonders of the natural world during a field trip. And our volunteer docents who have positive and engaging interactions with visitors and staff every time they help out at the front desk of the center.

"I love being there at the center, answering questions and meeting new people."

It is these stories that sum up the essence of why our volunteers are such an important part of who we are and we are excited to continue to create these moments that make these wonderful stories come to life.



A Positive Community Presence

2017 marked a year for increased visibility for GRNA within our regional community. When we developed our Strategic Plan in 2017 one of the goals we established was to “expand awareness and position GRNA as a premier resource.” This goal is attained in many forms, from partnering with other organizations on projects to simply having a presence at community events around the region. One way we were able to accomplish this in 2017 was to be more strategic in selecting community outreach opportunities we wanted to be a part of. We looked back at the past few years to analyze the location of the event, how many people were reached and what kinds of interactions we were having. We hit the ground running and in 2017 were able to reach over 1450 people through community events alone, a 50% increase from 2016!

What we have found with these events is that they absolutely accomplish the basic goals of attending: to reach a target market, to increase exposure for the important work that we do, and inspire people to come out and explore the natural area. But these interactions also create a personal connection with Grass River before they even step foot on the property. When we get a chance to talk one-on-one with people about who we really are and what we do, we have great opportunity to meet them where they are at and, in turn, they get to experience the passion that staff and volunteers have for this this very special place. It is not about simply giving them an elevator speech to hit on all of the talking points we want them to know, but to share our experiences and make them feel like they too are a part of the wonderful Grass River story, because they are.

Success at community events is hard to define and difficult to gauge. How do we know if our efforts are working? Here is my version of what community outreach success means. It is the person who thanks me over and over for spending the time to explain the history, natural features and experiences that they will have at GRNA. It is the family who visits the natural area the next weekend after we talked because our message stuck with them and inspired them to explore. It is the child who exclaims “I can’t wait to visit Grass River!” to their parents in the middle of a busy blocked off street at Wednesday on River Street in Elk Rapids.

These are the things that happen every time we have an opportunity to tell people who we are and what we do at community events. So to answer the question of whether these efforts are working. Yes, they absolutely are.