



GRASS RIVER NATURAL AREA, INC

2016 ANNUAL REPORT TO ANTRIM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

SUBMITTED BY HALEY BRENISER, 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 2016. 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.

HIGHLIGHTS TO REMEMBER:

- 1). We re-branded! **Yours to Explore. Yours to Protect.**
- 2). Received \$6,000 Community Foundation Grant to perform a **new 21st Century Bio-inventory Project in 2017**
- 2). Installed **new directional and wayfinding signage** with a Building Healthy Communities Grant and donor matching funds totaling \$45,000.
- 3). **Visitation to GR Center increased from 6497 in 2015 to 6980 in 2016**
- 4). **Increased overall program participation** from 4349 vs. 4650
- 5). **Raised about \$15,000 net revenue from our Benefit Concert fundraiser** in support of our mission
- 6) **Increased amount of donors by 4%** compared to 2015: 596 vs. 620
- 7). **Raised about \$76,000 in grant funding** to support this public natural area
- 8). Kicked off second season of **Grass River Summer Camp and offered new Winter Camp** in 2016
- 9). **Increased amount of volunteer hours by 41%**, equal to \$70,000 of blood, sweat, and tears (2,973 volunteer hours)



- 10). GRNA accrued **8679 contact hours** in overall programs in 2016
- 11). Conducted Invasive Species Survey of Finch Creek from headwaters to GRNA boundary supported by **Dole Family Foundation**
- 12). Finished Planning Phase and Fundraising Strategizing for Boardwalk Reconstruction with Gosling Czubak Engineering
- 13). **James Dake wrote a Field Guide!** 550 sold and counting (many in schools)
- 14). **Increased outreach engagement by 20%;** 1632 people in 2015 vs. 1954 people in 2016
- 15). **Partnered with SEEDS Youth Corps on stewardship again;** Antrim County youth removed invasive Autumn olive along the Rail Trail and access road.
- 16). Received a Good Works Grant to purchase trail monitors to measure public use

TESTIMONIALS FROM THE PUBLIC IN 2016

The feedback we get from visitors to Grass River Natural Area is of utmost importance. It helps guide our decisions and it helps us serve our community most effectively. So, how better to show you how 2016 went, than by offering testimonials from *your* constituents...

"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

"Field trip with Grayling Elementary School's Extended Learning Year Intersession children. Top notch nature experts guided six groups of kindergarten through fifth grade students through a variety of engaging activities. First, we netted critters from the bottom of the river, including several sideswimmers and at least one (dragonfly?) larva. Then we spent a few minutes observing and learning about them before releasing. After that, we hiked along the board walk searching for clues one of the guides had placed along the path, learning about the "mystery" animal as we strolled. Last, we found out why some animals have quite similar scat even though they're entirely different creatures. Also heard about Ruby the snake, and the bear that enjoys hogging bird food. (There were three more "stations" the groups rotated through, these are the ones I got to see.) Thank you staff and volunteers for sharing your time, patience, energy, knowledge and positive influence on all of us." – Teacher



"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." – Facebook

*"I have been here several times (fortunately it's just down the road a bit!)
The trails are always nice, the people in the center are very friendly and helpful.
Plus they have excellent programs as well as Art classes from time to time.
A little 'gem' in Antrim County!" – Facebook*

*"We spent the past two afternoons enjoying the trails. Yesterday snowshoeing and today cross country skiing. Nice trails designated for each activity. Very quiet, we did not see anyone else on the trails either day." – Trip Advisor
(GRNA still ranked #2 for things to do in Bellaire)*

FINANCIAL POSITION

In 2016, we finished with a positive change in net assets of about \$30,476. We brought in about \$76,000 in grant monies, met our fundraising goal for donor contributions, and with the help of donors met a \$10,000 Challenge Match Grant from the Dole Family Foundation to help increase our donor base. Our Benefit Concert Fundraiser was successful, bringing in about \$15,000 in net revenue to support programs.

Antrim County allotted GRNA, Inc. \$40,150 for 2016 and decided to maintain our annual appropriation at that amount for 2017 for which our board and staff are very grateful. Thank you!



**GRNA, Inc. 2017 Budget
and 2016 Actuals**

PUBLIC SUPPORT, REVENUES AND RECLASSIFICATIONS	Budget 2017	Actual 2016
Contributions	192,362	179,960
Sponsorships	20,000	17,200
Like Kind Donation	3,205	8,400
Class Fees	22,860	16,808
Bookstore Sales	17,475	10,232
Grants	52,750	75,502
Interest & Investment Income	12,503	24,725
Fundraising Income	147,280	16,079
Total Public Support, Revenues, and Reclassifications	469,967	348,906
EXPENSES		
Salaries, Wages and Benefits	198,196	181,841
Purchased Services	103,295	59,472
Repairs and Maintenance	17,767	4,447
Office Expenses	13,090	22,429
Rent	3,205	8,334
Advertising	11,000	5,345
Insurance	5,800	3,637
Memberships and Subscriptions	7,784	2,383
Program Costs	23,407	21,430
Utilities	3,272	2,925
Depreciation Expense	2,370	6,189
Total Expenses	389,462	318,430
Change in Net Assets	80,505	30,476
Net Assets - Beginning of Year	439,886	409,410
Net Assets - End of Year	520,391	439,886



GROWING THROUGH SCIENCE

By James Dake, Education Director

In 2016 we focused our education efforts on improving the visitor experience at Grass River while also being more active in our community. Your support of the important work we do made these projects possible.

In the spring and summer we received a grant from the Michigan Parks and Recreation Association (mParks) in partnership with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). The purpose of this Building Healthy Communities (BHC) grant program was to create policy, as well as systematic and environmental changes that support physical activity, with an aim to reduce cardiovascular disease, obesity, and other chronic conditions among disparate populations. Our miles of trails and hands-on programming were a perfect fit to get people active outdoors.

With the help of mParks, GRNA implemented and evaluated evidence-based programs (*Walk With Ease* and *Come Out and Play*) to increase access to physical activity opportunities in the Natural Area. *Walk With Ease* led adults on weekly walks on the boardwalks to get them active, while *Come Out and Play* was integrated into our Summer Camp and Story Hour programs to get children moving in the outdoors. Both programs encouraged participants to track the number of steps they took each day and to keep a journal of their activities. These programs helped to reinforce the fact that Grass River Natural Area was established by the community, for the community, and is a space that is open for all people to use and enjoy.

Another important piece of this grant program was to provide funds for park improvements to the Natural Area. Through a public survey, we gathered input from the community which recognized a need for improved directional signage in the Natural Area. With the help of designer Gene Ullery-Smith out of Traverse City, we worked on a new design for directional and wayfinding signage throughout the summer, integrating our new logo, themes, and messaging. In November, these new signs were installed throughout the Natural Area to improve the experience of all visitors.

In September of 2016, Grass River Natural Area, Inc. became a publisher with the release of James Dake's *Field Guide to Northwest Michigan*, a gorgeous full-color field guide with over 400 regional species. The goals of producing this guide were to provide an accessible resource for people to easily learn about and appreciate the plants and animals in our region, to compile local information into one book that is useful for novices and experts for use in the outdoors, and to be useful in schools by helping local teachers to give their students real-world examples of concepts they teach in class.



Since its publication, with printing supported by the Great Lakes Energy People Fund and The Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, the book has been used with students and visitors as a guide for our educational programs, including school field trips and public programs throughout the fall, winter, and spring. Over 100 copies have been donated to local classrooms for use by teachers as a local textbook to be used by hundreds of students. The book has also become a regional best-seller at local bookstores, showing an interest and need in the community for learning about local ecology. The book will be a continuing part of our programming and outreach to educate the region on local flora and fauna.

Due to the great interest in the Field Guide, we plan to do a second printing of the guides by summer of 2017. We hope to get the guides into more schools in Northwest Michigan, so that students throughout the region can have a local science textbook that helps them to appreciate the plants in animals around their schools, parks, and backyards. Supplemental materials are being developed for teachers to use in conjunction with the field guide for their science classes. This book has allowed students to connect with science they can relate to in their own backyards, which helps them to gain an appreciation of our natural environment - a major aim of our mission.

Many measures continue to demonstrate our community's appreciation Grass River: In 2016, people of all ages spent over 8600 hours interacting with Grass River and our staff. We also had over 4600 participants in programs and outreach, nearly 7000 visitors to the Grass River Center, a doubling of followers in our online presence, the awarding of over \$2000 in scholarships to students, and a countless number of praises and enthusiasm from our supporters. We thank you for your dedication and support. It is passionate individuals like you, from our beginning through today, that help us to complete this essential work.

ROOTED IN CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP

Habitat Management:

We partnered with Dr. Phil Myers from UofM Biological Station to perform small mammal trapping at GRNA. Phil has conducted research on home range shifts of small mammals as it relates to climate change across the country. Altogether, Phil caught 19 white-footed mice (plus 3 animals re-captured the second night), 4 eastern chipmunks, 2 short-tailed shrews, 2 meadow voles, and 2 woodland jumping mice. He was very happy to see the jumping mice; this is one of the species of "boreal" small mammals that is becoming very scarce in the northern Lower Peninsula.



Overall trapping success (32 captures in 200 trap-nights) is around average for mid-summer of most years. The GRNA white-footed mice were a good mix of young and old animals, and most adults were reproducing. That suggests a strong population.

Water Resource Management:

We performed our annual sampling of Finch, Shanty, and Cold creeks for macroninvertebrates in spring and fall, with a volunteer-led crew. Results were entered on the state website and into our GRNA database for long-term monitoring.

In addition Kendra Luta our Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator conducted an Invasive Species Survey along Finch Creek with support from the Dole Family Foundation. Here is an excerpt from the report:

“Grass River Natural Area harbors many ecological features that contribute to rich biodiversity and rare species of plants. Stream side assessments are an essential function in the management and conservation of the ecological features of critical watershed habitats. Invasive plant species have become detrimental to these critical habitats, using the waterways as a means of spreading rapidly and quickly than their initial gravity dispersed pattern and becoming problematic across large sections of land (Mack 2003). Riparian systems often contain more non-native species than the surrounding landscape due to increased seed dispersal from moving water and physical disturbances from water movement and flooding (Thomas et al 2006). Invasive plant species are a growing concern with land management and conservation organizations due to threats of competition of resources with native plants, hybridization with native flora, the alteration in structure and function of ecosystems, and the potential of degradation of fish and wildlife habitat (Charles et al. 2007). Many of these plants produce large numbers of seeds that stay viable in the soil for years, tolerate many soil types, spread easily and efficiently, and grow rapidly often displacing slower growing plants (Brock 1998). Invasive plant species also create a negative economic impact on natural areas and preserves, such as a decrease in recreation due to the degradation of habitat quality and the cost of reducing, controlling or eradicating the infestation (Olsen 2006).

Although the most effective way to prevent the establishment of invasive species is to prevent their introduction, Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR) increases the chances of successful removal while populations are localized and densities are low (Leung et al. 2002).



Once populations are well-established removal becomes more difficult and the financial and ecological cost of long-term management increases (Lodge et al. 2006).

Three cold water creeks, Finch, Cold and Shanty, flow through Grass River Natural Area into Grass River, eventually reaching the Grand Traverse Bay. The first stream being surveyed is Finch Creek with a length of approximately 4.5 miles (Figure2). By conducting this survey GRNA hopes to get a solid picture what species are threatening the stream side habitat on GRNA property as well as what potential threats are upstream. This baseline survey is the first source data that will be used to determine long-term monitoring and management plans for terrestrial invasive wetland plant species for GRNA.”

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

Total Volunteer Hours: 2973 (41% increase compared to 2015)

150 Volunteers in database

\$70,000 worth of blood, sweat and tears!

2016 was a year for continued growth within the volunteer program at GRNA, showcasing the knowledge, skills and hard work of our committed volunteers. Volunteerism has transformed over the years and changes in generations have contributed the shift to a new volunteer model. Volunteers have always made a positive impact in the community but these recent shifts have seen volunteer task lists being replaced by meaningful, targeted, skill-based work; work that is equally meaningful to the volunteer as it is to the organization. Our volunteers at GRNA are not only prepared for this shift but may have been the ones to initiate the shift. Not only do our volunteers do the important hands-on, “grunt work” of stewardship days to keep our facilities and trails clean and safe for visitors but they also lead education programs, work shifts at the center, organize events, and take part in our volunteer-led citizen science programs. They are skilled. They are energetic. They are the backbone of GRNA and their contributions are an integral part of our mission and the important work that we do within the community. With the incorporation of more learning opportunities for volunteers we hope to continue to attract and retain the high quality volunteers who positively contribute to GRNA.