



2015 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 very productive and fun 2015! As a board, staff, and hearty 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 hope to continue to offer enriching programs that engage the community in land conservation and responsible stewardship. We also simply want to gather the community...

Top items you must remember from this report if nothing else:

- 1). Received \$8,000 Community Foundation Grant for **Boardwalk Reconstruction Planning Process**
- 2). Installed **ADA accessible pathways** with grant monies around GR Center for easier access by physically challenged
- 3). **Increased visitation to GR Center by 20%** compared to 2014: **6,497**
- 4). **Increased overall program participation by 42%** compared to 2014: **4,538**
- 5). **Increased funds raised from Benefit Concert by 530%** in support of our mission
- 6) **Increased amount of donors by 7%** compared to 2014: 559 vs. 596
- 7). **Increased revenue from grants by 90%** compared to 2014: **\$109,000**
- 8). **Introduced first Grass River Summer Camp** in 2015
- 9). **Increased amount of volunteer hours by 40%** (2100 hours), equal to **\$46,200** of blood, sweat, and tears
- 10). GRNA accrued **8,000 contact hours** in overall programs in 2015
- 11). Conducted new water quality and habitat measurements on Finch, Cold, and Shanty Creeks with funds from **Dole Family Foundation**
- 12). **Conducted a successful Peer Consult** from Association of Nature Center Administrators with 30 interviewees participating. **Thank you!**

13). **Purchased an additional 9.066 acres** of contiguous wetland with a challenge grant from the **JA Woolam Foundation** and a match from the **Knudstrup Family**.

14). **Increased outreach engagement by 175%**, 306 people in 2014 vs. 843 people in 2015

15). **Partnered with SEEDS Youth Corps on stewardship**; Antrim County youth removed old, degraded sections of boardwalk to improve safety

16) **80% of public program participants are local, Antrim County residents, representing all 9 commissioner districts**

Testimonials from the Public in 2015

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 2015 went, than by offering testimonials from *your* constituents...

"I love the silence/beauty of the area and the knowledge and enthusiasm of those who are involved makes me feel more positive about our eco future."

"It encourages parents to provide the extremely important education that many schools neglect."

"For myself, GRNA brings me wonderful peace. There is so much to learn, and to be inspired by. I always leave feeling restored."

"It tells the story of how vital it is to protect the ecosystem"

"It provides a wonderful place for outdoor education, quiet reflection and learning. It is open to everyone and it conserves some of our precious waterways and land."

"I have been coming to Clam Lake for over 65 years. Thanks to GRNA my grandchildren can still enjoy the same peace and natural beauty I enjoyed as a child. It is precious."

"It allows people to get together or enjoy the solitude of nature. This is a great place for families and children to learn about all of the different plants and animals that are in the area. I always enjoyed the tours and classes as a child and still love the area as an adult."

"I thought all of the educational sessions were fabulous! All of the instructors were very engaging and kept the interest of the kids. Thanks for all you do! We'll plan to see you next year!"

"Great area with well-maintained and marked trails."

“Recommended by our host, Harvey, at the Inn at Torch Lake, this park is a wonderful place to hike. There is a lengthy boardwalk that takes you through a number of different scenic areas. I highly recommend it.”

Financial Position

In 2015, we finished with a positive change in net assets of about \$32,000. We brought in \$109,000 in grant monies, met our fundraising goal for donor contributions of \$129,000 (excluding Antrim County appropriation of \$45,150), implemented our first Challenge Match Grant from the Dole Family Foundation (to be repeated in 2016!), and our first Challenge Match Grant from JA Woolam Foundation for land acquisition. Our Benefit Concert Fundraiser was the most successful it has been, bringing in \$21,000 in net profit to support programs. Thank you sponsors!!!

Antrim County continues to decrease GRNA, Inc’s annual appropriation by \$5000 a year. In 2016 we are looking at a \$40,150 contribution from the county, and we are grateful. However, if this trend continues over the next 6 years, our appropriation will diminish to \$10,500. This is simply not a sustainable amount for management of 1400 acres of County-owned land.

Grass River Natural Area, Inc		
Statement of Activities		
Year Ended December 31, 2015		
Revenue		
Contributions	\$ 157,806	
Sponsorships	\$ 17,049	
Like Kind	\$ 5,819	
Class Fees	\$ 11,958	
Bookstore Sales	\$ 3,523	
Grants	\$ 108,757	
Interest/Investment	\$ (8,588)	
Fundraising	\$ 17,278	
Total Revenue		\$ 313,602
Expenses		
Wages & Benefits	\$ (163,178)	
Purchased Services	\$ (24,223)	
Repairs/Maintenance	\$ (24,520)	
Office Expenses	\$ (29,247)	
Rent	\$ (5,997)	
Advertising	\$ (3,728)	
Insurance	\$ (2,993)	
Memberships	\$ (877)	
Program Costs	\$ (15,613)	
Utilities	\$ (3,786)	
Depreciation	\$ (7,012)	
Total Expenses		\$ (281,174)
Change in Net Assets		\$ 32,428
Beginning Net Assets		\$ 376,982
Ending Net Assets		\$ 409,410

Putting ANCA Suggestions into Action

As many of you know, GRNA partnered with the Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA) in April of 2015 to undergo a Peer Consult. We wanted a SWOT analysis conducted (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) as well as professional feedback on creating the best visitor experience at GRNA and forging the most effective public/private partnership with Antrim County for future sustainability.

In response to recommendations in the final report from ANCA, GRNA has:

- Transitioned our former Nominating Committee into a more robust Governance Committee. Governance Committee gives board members more ownership of board training, evaluations, recruitment, and succession planning.
- Composed a Marketing Creative Brief with assistance from Dani Knoph a volunteer marketing professional. We then partnered with Chelsea Bay Design in Traverse City for the beginning of the Re-branding process (new logo and tagline).
- Wrote a grant to the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation. Awarded an \$8,000 grant to work with Gosling and Czubak on preliminary plans in order to estimate cost and suggest phases of project moving forward.
- Implemented better baseline data collection in order to measure progress for internal use and grants
- Created a new position called Facilities and Land Steward (formerly Maintenance) and hired a very capable, experienced person who is committed to improving stewardship tasks at GRNA.
- Sat down with County Council, Janet Koch, and Pete Garwood to get clarification on jargon in our County Contract and GRNA, Inc.'s overall liabilities as a partner.
- Implemented new camp program that in turn increased earned revenue income by 43%
- Researched and advertised Planned Giving opportunities at GRNA. We also plan to hold a community presentation on this in coordination with Mark Reidy, Edward Jones, and Jack Unger in fall 2016. Stay tuned!

Growing through Science Education

By James Dake, Education Director

2015 continued to be a year of growth, creativity, and excitement for education at Grass River. As part of our Rotary Charities Capacity Building Grant, the education director position was transitioned to full-time which has allowed time for development and planning of our education program. This has provided us the opportunity to think strategically about where we see education and interpretation leading us in the years to come.



At a recent meeting of the Association of Nature Center Administrators we discussed the relevance of nature organizations today. Historically, nature centers and conservation organizations were thought of as “Islands of Green” – natural places tucked away and isolated where people were often not allowed. As our field has evolved over the years, our role has become more prominent and vital in our communities. Now, more than just awareness and education, we seek to inspire, to provide authentic experiences, to engage our communities, and to remain relevant in rapidly changing times. We seek to interpret the story of our natural site into a language that relates to our audience, so they can leave with an increased appreciation for the natural world and an understanding of their important role in its preservation. On top of this, GRNA, Inc. also manages all 1,452 acres of the natural area using ecological management techniques to care for our special ecosystems. This science drives our education and helps to define who we are. In other words, we live what we teach.

Research has shown that in order to increase our impact and inspire new lovers of the land and water, we need to serve as mentors that provide people with longer exposure and multiple experiences interacting with the outdoors. It is rich experiences with the outdoors that make lovers of the outdoors. In 2015, we followed this model by offering our first ever summer day camp which allowed children to spend four six-hour days in a row exploring Grass River. These extended experiences allowed kids to engage with Grass River throughout the summer months. Moving into this year, we are expanding our camp experiences to provide for more enriching opportunities. Our school field trips, too, follow this model by providing full-day experiences for local school children to connect with the natural world. We are also offering more year-round opportunities and expanding our outreach. In fact, in 2015, people of all ages spent over 8000 hours interacting with Grass River and our staff. An impressive feat!



The numbers continue to demonstrate our community’s love for Grass River: over 4500 participants in programs and outreach, over 6400 visitors to the Grass River Center, a doubling of followers in our online presence, the awarding of over \$1700 in scholarships to students, and a countless number of compliments and enthusiasm from our supporters. We thank you for your encouragement and support. It is the passionate Grass River Community that propels us forward.

Rooted in Conservation and Stewardship

Habitat Management:

GRNA Docent, Theresa Moore, committed to offering weekly bird hikes which have been popular, engaging, and educational. We continued to collect data on diversity of plant communities. Docents, Julie Hurd and Phil Jarvi, conducted weekly botanical walks and while doing so collected phenology of plant populations. The GRNA plant database is continuously added to.

Invasive species monitoring for purple loosestrife, garlic mustard, and autumn olive continued. Look forward to working with Antrim Conservation District and CAKE on control measures in 2016.

Water Resource Management:

We sampled 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. We recruited Tom Clement, local fisheries biologist, to conduct further sampling on the three tributaries. He collected water quality samples and sent them to GVSU. He also observed habitat and road stream crossings at each site noting erosion control issues and road crossing improvements. Full report can be found on our website: www.grassriver.org



Community Outreach & Volunteer Involvement

Our volunteers are vital in reaching our mission, engaging our visitors, and running successful programming. They are key components in carrying this non-profit organization forward. They are our current and future supporters, and they define our sustainability.

In 2015 we hired a new position called Community Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator (with support from Rotary Charities of TC). Because of this, we were able to increase our volunteer hours to 2100, compared to 1500 in 2014. We also increased the amount of contact people had with GRNA staff and volunteers to 8000hrs. We forged new partnerships and attended more outreach events, engaging almost 850 people through outreach alone.

Immediate Goals for 2016

- 1). Facilitate and complete Boardwalk Reconstruction Planning Process with Gosling and Czubak Engineering Sciences
- 2). Complete Re-branding process with Chelsea Bay Design
- 3). Compose new northern Michigan field guide with GRNA highlighted throughout, made possible through grant monies from Great Lakes Energy People Fund
- 4). Widely advertise our 2016 Challenge Match Grant to NEW donors (awarded by Dole Family Foundation)
- 5). Implement new Walk with Ease and Come Out & Play programs through Mparks and Department of Health and Human Services. Also design and secure new signage with Grant monies awarded to us.
- 6). Implement new outreach program, called Links in the Chain, with Paddle Antrim grant monies.
- 7). Bio-inventory for small mammals conducted by University of Michigan professor Phil Myers to begin this spring and be repeated in summer and fall.