



2014 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 year in 2014. With a new administrative team, fresh ideas, and a dynamic board, we attacked the year with enthusiasm, strategy, and vision. And, we will continue to do so out of “a whole lotta heart”.

Ten things you must remember from this report if nothing else:

- 1). **15,000 visitors** to GRNA in 2014 (estimate from traffic counter)
- 2). **Increased visitation to GR Center by 15%** compared to last year: **5,451**
- 3). **Increased overall program participation by 23%** compared to last year: **3,146**
- 4). **Increased overall donor contributions by 52%** compared to last year
- 5). **Increased donor contributions by 45% in Year-end Appeal only** compared to 2013
- 6). **Increased revenue from grants by 160%** compared to last year: **\$57,000.**
- 7). **Coordinated and accrued 1500 volunteer hours**, worth **\$30,000** of hard work
- 8). GRNA accrued **2,874 contact hours** with students in school programs in 2014
- 9). Very active conservation and stewardship committees continue to tick off action items in our Natural Resource Management Plan.
- 10) We want commissioner involvement in our **2015 ANCA Peer Consult, April 24/25th** (Haley will be in touch with about this if not already)

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 2014 went, than by offering testimonials from constituents...

Testimonials from the Public

General:

“Our family has been to Grass River Natural Area most weekends since discovering it a few months ago. With two kids under 3, it has proven to be a place that works well for all of us! The nature center offers warmth and endless entertainment for our kids before or after our hikes. We've enjoyed a handful of presentations and a story hour there as well, and have been impressed with each so far! The staff have always been welcoming and more than willing to answer any questions for us, too! We love the varying trail distances as we can tailor our family hikes based on the weather, how far the little legs can last, and how close to nap time we are! As a birder, my husband could spend hours watching and listening to birds, making his way along the trails or out to the open water, or taking in all the activity at the feeders. I love that we get a chance to be active as a family, teach our kids about the incredible beauty and peace of Northern MI, and that we have access to all of this at GRNA!”

“I have been volunteering at GRNA for 10 years, and I just love it.”

“You have to experience this place for yourself...”

“Beautiful. And so rare to see!!!

Wetland Curriculum Field Trips:

"Connecting this trip to our PYP unit was a huge plus and it went so well with our central idea. All activities were educational for all and highly engaging. The guides were engaging and knowledgeable and overall learning occurred everywhere. Well done!"

"My third grade team took a day field trip to the Grass River Natural Area and we were blown away by your great education program, leaders, naturalists, and by the knowledge that our students gained." - 3rd Grade Teacher, Elk Rapids

Financial Position

We budgeted the year with a negative change in net assets of \$40,000. However, we actually finished 2014 with a positive change in net assets of \$100,000. This is in part due to temporarily restricted funds that were not spent as planned, bringing in \$57,000 in grants, \$21,000 in restricted contributions (kayak dock etc.), and \$14,000 in In-Kind donations.

With a new Fund Development Plan to guide us and with new leadership in place, we also successfully increased overall donor contributions by **52%** compared to last year (87K and 132K respectively). To put this in perspective even more, in looking at our Year-end Appeal only, we increased donor contributions by **45%** compared to last year (\$34,500 vs. \$50,000). This required a lot of time, effort, relationship building and strategy; our team is very proud of this.

Annual Review:

Currently undergoing our review and should be completed by April 1st.

Fundraising events:

Standard fundraising events ensued, including the Flower Fundraiser (May/June), Spring Fling at Dockside (May), and the Annual Grass River Benefit Concert (June 28th). We raised about \$7200 – “net profit” from these events.

Annual Appeals:

As stated above, our annual appeals (Spring and Year-end) were very successful, however we must continue to cultivate our current donors (in all giving categories) to increase contributions. We also need to engage new potential donors and cultivate new major donors in order to sustain operations and increased programming over the next 5 years, especially with the **County Appropriation decreasing by \$34,650 over the next 7 years.**

Grants:

We increased funds raised from grants by 160% compared to last year (\$22,000 vs. \$57,000). We accomplished this by:

- 1). Securing a \$5000 Rotary Charities Planning Grant to develop a 3-year Fund Development Plan.
- 2). Securing a \$75,000 Multi-year Rotary Charities Capacity Building Grant - received \$36,400 in 2014.
- 3). Securing \$6000 Grainger Foundation Grant for stewardship equipment and tools.
- 4). Securing \$4000 Dole Family Foundation Grant to support Water Resources Management
- 5). Receiving \$4000 from MiCorps in support of stream sampling project
- 6). Securing \$1750 from National Association of Interpretation, RE Olds Foundation, and Council of Michigan Foundations to support educational materials

County Appropriation:

County appropriated \$50,150 in 2014. They have allocated \$45,150 for 2015. Our annual appropriation will continue to decrease by \$34,650 in total over the next 7 years. This has a significant impact on GRNA’s sustainability, therefore we will continue to express our concern to the commissioners. We will also continue to request funding from the County for specific stewardship projects as advised.

Governance

New Board Chair Lori Sak has shown great leadership since stepping into her position September 2013. She initiated many needed policy revisions and put together an important presentation for new board members outlining GRNA history, evolution of GRNA, Inc., and our public/private partnership.

GRNA, Inc.’s Board of Directors continue to rely on the Strategic Plan to direct their action and involvement. In 2014 they were actively involved in our Fund Development Planning Process which

took about 6 months. Committee Chairs have been paramount in directing tasks and communicating progress to the whole board.

New community members Brad Kik and Rob Fleet joined the GRNA, Inc. board 2014. We are happy to have their expertise and skill.

Personnel

Since 2012 GRNA Inc. has turned over 100% of our administrative staff. In 2014 James Dake, Education Director, began his part-time position. Shelly Neuman started on March 3rd as our part-time Bookkeeper & Office Manager. They have both shown great skill and ambition in their respective positions. GRNA Inc. is a more efficient and productive organization because of them.

Tina Schrader, long-time Office Manager, left her part-time position at GRNA, Inc. She was invaluable in keeping GRNA on track in transitional years. In addition Chuck Bauer, long-time naturalist retired in November. We replaced this part-time Naturalist position with Natalie Lindsay who received an environmental studies degree from Northern Michigan University. She also holds a minor in Geographical Information Systems and has brought a youthful approach and new ideas to public programming.

Education

We estimate about 15,000 visitors to GRNA in 2014, based on our traffic counter. This does not include people using GRNA from the river. 5,451 of those visitors walked through the doors of the Grass River Center (up 14% from 2013).

We increased overall program participation by 23% compared to 2013. 3,146 people of all ages participated in our programs in 2014.

Public Programs:

We offered over 100 public programs in 2014, ranging from naturalist led boat tours, bird ID hikes, spring wildflower walks, watercolor painting, dog-sledding, salamander finding, to maple sugaring! In addition, we offered many free family events throughout the year.

School Programs:

Over 700 children participated in our Wetland Curriculum Program from four counties. We had our first Traverse City school group come out this year. Most importantly, GRNA accrued 2,874 contact hours with students in school programs and provided scholarships to assist schools in need.

Special Events:

We offered special events like the Autumn Fest which attracted 120 children and adults. We also offered an Earth Day event, the Grass River Shiver Snowshoe Race and the Joe Reilly Children's Concert.

Grants:

Raised \$1,750 in educational grants for program equipment - new dip nets, insect nets, insect carriers, soil samplers, binoculars, microscopes.

Conservation

Forest Management:

Our intention is to continue to manage sustainable aspen regeneration stands for wildlife. The properties of GRNA have been surveyed by Mike Merriwether over the last two years. There have been aspen stands identified for 4-8 acre cuts. However, due to the cold wet spring and lingering high water in the wetlands, the aspen cuts were not made. This will be a priority in 2015.

Mike Merriwether selectively cut about 5 acres of upland mixed hardwood forest at south end of property. Forest succession will be monitored long-term in these areas and incorporated into educational programming.

Habitat Management:

We continued to manage invasive wetland plant species at GRNA. We implemented the monitoring/eradication/control efforts for invasive/non-native Phragmites and purple loosestrife. Scouting occurred for garlic mustard and autumn olive.

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.

Water Resource Management:

We will always strive to maintain high water quality at GRNA. For this reason, the MiCorps Macroinvertebrate sampling project is important. Collections were conducted on May 10 and September 27 of 2014, with a training day for volunteers held on September 10. With the support of the MiCorps grant we are developing a sustainable program and a set of protocols for monitoring the Grass River watershed (Clam Lake, Lake Bellaire, Shanty Creek, Cold Creek, and Finch Creek). During the life of the MiCorps Grant we are obliged to 1) Report to the Grantor on a quarterly basis; 2) Make an oral presentation at the annual meeting held for all MiCorps Grant recipients; and 3) Post all of our collection data on a state of Michigan database.

We attended the October 31 Annual Fresh Water Summit, hosted by the Fresh Water Institute at NMC. This is a great networking opportunity and GRNA should always be represented.

2014 Conservation Internship:

Adrianna Coultres returned and as expected, she did an outstanding job. She participated in all aspects of the conservation program and was effective in data acquisition, data input into

data bases, hot and buggy field work, invasive species eradication, teaching, organizing, and providing valuable thoughtful input to our programs.

Bird Conservation:

Faithful volunteers, Dick Sanderson and Theresa Moore assumed the responsibility for organizing the 2014 Bird Blitz. Needless to say, it was a success in terms of volunteer participation and actual data collected by the birders. In addition, and in accordance with the goals set for 2014, Dick entered, proofed and submitted all (2014 and past years data) of the bird sighting data from GRNA. This data is now on a national database called eBird and is accessible to birders everywhere. As a result, people seek out GRNA specifically to view selected species.

Landscape Committee:

Grant money was secured for this project in 2011/2012. Our many, dedicated landscape volunteers met in 2014 for several work days throughout the summer. They added trees to the landscape around the building as well as more native herbaceous plant species in the meadow, rain gardens, and bird gardens. They also erected educational signs to be used by visitors.

Stewardship

Our stewardship committee and volunteers are vital in helping our staff maintain 7.5 miles of trails and boardwalk. In 2014 our Stewardship Committee Chair, Brad Gerlach, helped coordinate a Trail Monitoring Program. We now have about 5 volunteers who hike various sections of our trail system and report on the condition biweekly.

Haley, James, and Jeff put new sign posts out and new directional signage up with a numbering system. We have more plans for improving signs in the next 2 years. In the meantime, we took down many old, rotting signs along all trails and will continue to do so.

Our Annual Spring Clean-up day was cold and rainy but 33 faithful volunteers showed up and braved the weather. They moved old signs, trimmed shrubs, cleared pathways of branches, blew debris off 1 mile of boardwalk, cleaned the cabin, and removed large downed trees from trails with chainsaws...etc.

The Cold Creek Trestle was “patched” this fall. A crew of hefty GRNA volunteers contributed two days and personal equipment to patch holes in the decking for user safety.

Community Outreach & Volunteer Involvement

About 1500 volunteer hours were accrued in 2014. This equates to \$30,000 worth of precious time and hard work spent on our trail monitoring, boardwalk repair, landscape gardens, wildflower tours, bird monitoring, invasive species control, school field trips...etc.

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 in-part define our sustainability.

Immediate Goals for 2015

We received our first allocation from the Rotary Charities Capacity Building Grant in December 2014 - \$36,341. Early 2015, we offered James Dake a fulltime position as Education Director and we posted the new part-time Community Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator position. These positions allow Haley Breniser, Executive Director, to focus more of her time on Fund Development - cultivating donors, coordinating fundraising events, seeking foundation support - to bring GRNA long-term sustainability. The RC Grant comes with a detailed Action Plan and associated accountabilities, and we will follow these closely over the next 3 years.

We have accomplished many of the objectives stated in our 3-year Strategic Plan and 3-year Fund Development Plan. Haley is working very hard to implement new approaches in development. For example, we will focus our attention on ONE main fundraising event in 2015 – The Grass River Annual Benefit Concert on June 27th. We are aggressively seeking \$13,000 in sponsorships (corporate and local small businesses) for 2015. Haley has assembled a new committee that comes with great skill and experience in event planning. We are encouraged that this will be a very successful year with the band **Steppin In It** headlining again.

Grass River Natural Area is introducing its FIRST Grass River Summer Camp! This has potential as a profit center for GRNA, Inc. like many other nature centers across the country. James Dake has run camps of 200+ participants in the past, and already we have seen a lot of interest from the community. James has also worked strategically to incorporate homeschool groups in our programming. For the FIRST time we will offer a homeschool program in 2015. In fact, we had a family from Suttons Bay sign up this week.

Finally, an immediate goal of GRNA, Inc. in 2015 is to better engage the County commissioners in all things Grass River. We will begin this effort with a Peer Consult offered by the Association of Nature Center Administrators on April 24/25th weekend. A consult from ANCA is unique in that these are professional people who carry no bias about our organization or Antrim County but are also very knowledgeable about the inner-workings of a nature center/natural area such as GRNA. They have visited many centers across the country and come with an open, but very detail-oriented mindset. They will interview our most important constituents, and we want the County involved in this. Haley will follow up with each of you soon about this opportunity. This is your opportunity to share your vision for GRNA with us. And, as partners we want and need to hear it. So, please pencil in an hour of your time April 24/25 on your calendars!

Lastly, follow us on Facebook and on our new website for constant updates!

**Grass River Natural Area
Report to Antrim County Commissioners
FYE 2014**

	(000's of \$)				
Revenues	2012 ACT	2013 ACT	2014 ACT	2015 PLAN	
Antrim County Support	60	54	50	45	<i>Thank you for your continued support!</i>
Like Kind - Antrim County	3	3	3	3	<i>Thank you for your continued support!</i>
GTRCF Endowment	4	4	5	5	
Like Kind Donations	-	-	14	-	
Donor Contributions	42	87	132	126	
Grants	118	22	57	41	
Other Support	40	29	35	65	
Total Public Support & Revenues	268	200	295	285	
Expenses					
Wages & Benefits	90	64	113	175	
Program Costs	12	9	17	60	
Overhead	50	100	63	84	
Total Expenses	152	173	193	319	
Change in Net Assets (AKA Net Income)	116	27	103	(34)	
Beginning Net Assets	132	248	274	377	
Ending Net Assets	248	274	377	343	

Significant Accomplishments in 2014

- Secured a \$5000 Rotary Charities Planning Grant to develop a 3-year Fund Development Plan.
- Secured a \$75,000 Multi-year Rotary Charities Capacity Building Grant - First year \$36,000 for 2015.
- Secured Grainger Foundation Grant - \$6000 - for stewardship equipment and tools.
- Secured Dole Family Foundation Grant - \$4000 - to support Water Resources Monitoring
- Secured \$2250 Scholarship from Association of Nature Center Administrators Peer Consult Program - occurs April 25th 2015
- Secured monies for Kayak Dock Project from individual donors
- Secured \$2000 from Bellaire Rotary for Education Intern
- Secured \$1750 to support educational materials from National Association of Interpretation, RE Olds Foundation, and Council of Michigan Foundations
- Increased General Contributions in both our Spring and Year-end Appeals. With new Fund Development approach, we increased Year-end donations by
- Applied for a multi-year grant from the Alden and Vada Dow Family Foundation to support operations
- Increased visitors to GR Center by about 15% compared to 2013
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Planned Significant Accomplishments for 2015

- Because of RC Capacity Building Grant, we were able to hire our Education Director fulltime Jan 2015, and we hired a part-time Community Outreach and Vounteer Coordinator (March 2015).
- Secure a multi-year operating grant from Alden and Vada Dow Family Foundation
- Secure a \$10,000 Challenge Grant from Dole Family Foundation to increase contributions by \$20,000
- Secure the Alden and Vada Dow multi-year grant
- Implement Rotray Charities Capacity Building grant action plan.
- Net \$12,000 from Annual Benefit Concert this year. Secure substantial sponsorships.
- Remove sections of boardwalk that are old and underused. Engage SEEDS Youth Corps (Traverse City) as a partner.
- Coordinate and implement Grass River Natural Area's first ever Summer Camp.
- Organize and conduct ANCA Peer Consult April 23-26th -- engage commissioners in this important process.
- Develop new volunteer management program and hold successful recruitment and apreciation days.

Explanations

INCOME:

Contributions: 2015- 10% reduction in County funding; 15% increase in donor contributions per FD plan.
2014 - \$17 Temporarily Restricted Funds were from kayak dock donation.

Like-kind Donations: \$8 of this variance was the Club Car gift in 2014. Another \$2 came from gifts from Grainger.

Grants: 2015 - Dole challenge grant included to complement equal fundraising income in 2015;
2014 - RC SAP: \$5, MI Corp: \$5; Grainger: \$6; Water Resource: \$4; RC Capacity: \$24; Other: \$2.

Fundraising Income: 2015 - Benefit Concert (\$13), Challenge Grant (\$10).

Misc: 2015 - Camp (\$7).

EXPENSE:

Salaries, Wages and Benefits: 2015 - Add Fulltime Education Director, part-time Community Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator, part-time Camp Naturalist, and extra hours for naturalists and maintenance.

Repairs and Maintenance: 2015 - \$12 allocated for conservation and stewardship

Program Costs: 2015 - includes spending of Temp Restricted Funds and special events: Kayak dock (\$8), landscaping (\$10), concert (\$10), water resources and wetlands (\$5), camp (\$2), furnishings (\$7), other (\$1).