



# ***LITTLE RIVER NEWS***

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

**THIS YEAR'S ANNUAL MEETING WILL BE HELD JULY, 6<sup>th</sup>  
AT SKINNER PARK IN IRONS, MICHIGAN. THE MEETING  
WILL BEGIN AT 10 AM, REGISTRATION BEGINS AT  
9:30AM. MORE INFORMATION INSIDE.**

## **Opinion from the Editor — Trustee David Spruance**

I feel compelled to break my long-standing, self-imposed prohibition of expressing a personal opinion in this newsletter. The responses to the announcement of the pending survey to determine area-wide support or lack thereof for a Natural River designation for the Little Manistee and the reactions to the results of the survey have been alarming to me.

I am well aware that we are living in a highly charged and emotionally polarized political environment, but the suggestion that the LMWCC's "determination" to somehow wrest from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Natural River status for the Little Manistee could not be further from reality. The trustees of the Little Manistee Watershed Conservation Council are elected by the Council's membership to implement the stated goals of the Council "to restore, protect, and preserve the natural character of the watershed by communicating resource problems and then implementing problem resolution."

Very simple and straight forward, and for almost thirty years that is what the Council has done with very few voices speaking in protest of the LMWCC's accomplishments. Over the years of its

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existence, working independently or in conjunction with other organizations, the changing composition of the board of trustees has been consistent in its dedicated stewardship of the river. To suggest that this current board is made up of elitist outsiders bent on trampling on the Constitutional rights of anyone is absurd. Like the vast majority of the Council's membership we live in and/or own property within the watershed, and yes, we have personal interests as well as obligations to the membership to do what we collectively deem is in the best interest of maintaining the river in as pristine a condition as possible for ALL of those who cherish the beauty, recreational opportunities and spiritual rejuvenation that the river affords each of us.

After years of effort and the expenditure of considerable resources, the Council, under the leadership of current president, Armas Soorus, and the tireless work of many trustees, a Watershed Management Plan was adopted in 2020 and approved by both the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency. The plan is a result and extension of the Council's Mission statement. It is a document that catalogues potential threats to the river and details mechanisms for avoiding or remediating those threats. One of the recommendations in the WMP for avoiding potential threats is asking the state of Michigan to consider including the Little Manistee River in the Natural River Program joining 16 other highly valued rivers throughout the state, in part to closely monitor future development and to establish a set of guidelines to prevent any development from harming areas within the watershed.

The LMWCC trustees think this is in the best interests of preserving the natural character of the river, and I personally think it is in the best interests of anyone who professes to care for the river. The situation is not a contest; it is not an act pitting one group against another group; it is not going to be resolved with losers on one side and winners on the other; it has nothing to do with political affiliations and beliefs nor where you come from nor how much money you have, nor how much property you own within the watershed or along the river's banks. Demonizing a group for believing that the river is more important than any of us individually or collectively refuses to confront the real issue which is how can all of us together best protect and maintain the river.

The LMWCC commissioned the Sociology Department at Grand Valley State University to gauge support for or opposition to the IDEA of a Natural River designation for the Little Manistee River. The LMWCC cannot arbitrarily make such a designation. That lies with the state and the DEQ as the agency in charge of the implementation of the program across the state. My suggestion, whether you are in favor or opposed to the POSSIBILITY of the state moving forward with such a designation, is to express your opinions to someone who can act on them. There is really no need for nor productive outcome in vilifying a small group of volunteers of a non-profit organization who are merely wanting to protect OUR resource for future generations by asking members of the watershed community what THEY think. It is one thing to criticize a decision that has been made and acted upon by a small group, but to criticize a process designed to include an entire community seems at best to be inconsistent with many of the comments made at the public meetings.

We need to do better.

We need to practice, respectful and constructive dialogue.

**STATEMENT FROM PRESIDENT, ARMAS SOORUS**

Major work by the board this past six months includes completing and presenting results of the Natural Rivers Survey, progressing with work on several eroding stream bank projects and planning more projects for in the future, planning macroinvertebrate and water quality studies and participating in the International Fly-Fishing Film Festival and the Great Lakes Environmental Festival.

The Natural Rivers Survey was completed by Grand Valley State University and the results presented at Elk Township Hall at two public meetings in February. You can see the detailed results of the survey at [LMWCC.org](https://www.lmwcc.org) under the Natural Rivers Program Tab at the top of the page. In summary, 44% of the respondents supported the NR Program, 26% were opposed, and 30% were unsure. About 75% of the unsure wanted to learn more about the NR Program before deciding. The overall completion rate of the survey was 37%, which reflects a great deal of interest by the participants. All the details of the Natural Rivers Program can be seen at <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/fisheries/natural-rivers>. The public meetings were contentious, especially the first one. Some of those that opposed the program were angry, and we heard comments like “The LMWCC board should be tarred and feathered,” and they were abusive to Professor Buday. As the discussion progressed it became clear that pretty much everyone in the room cared about protecting the river. The difference was how. Some thought it was best the townships did it. Some distrusted the DNR to have any role in it. Others thought we had enough protection on the river already.

I was personally disappointed by the threats and abuse at the first meeting. The LMWCC board conducted the survey through an impartial third party with the expertise and reputation to do it properly. The board told them what we wanted to learn and from whom, and they took it from there. GVSU wrote the questions and the rest of the survey in adherence to generally accepted practices in this field. We wanted to know what landowners within the watershed thought of the Natural Rivers program for the Little Manistee River and believe the GVSU survey is an honest answer to that and a few other questions. If we can't ask questions like this, then we cannot function as we should. Confirming the integrity of the information presented to us is a critical part of making good decisions. However, it needs to be done in a civil manner.

From this point on the decision is in the hands of the DNR. They are reviewing the results of the survey internally and considering the interests of all other stakeholders in this shared resource. Fishermen, canoers/kayakers and others that have businesses, live and recreate in the area are among them. We don't know how long it will take.

The LMWCC was invited by the Iron Fish Distillery and Vogue Theater to participate in the first International Fly Fishing Film Festival held in Manistee on March 2 and share in the proceeds of the event. The LMWCC had a display showing our work and interests in the lobby of the Vogue Theater during the festival, and we talked with a large number of festival attendees about the Little Manistee River. Events included speakers talking about where to fish in Manistee County, Reintroduction of Arctic Grayling and, of course, Wine Tasting. Films featured exceptional videos of fly-fishing experiences by some inspired videographers at both domestic **(cont. page5)**

## RESULTS OF THE LITTLE MANISTEE WATERSHED SURVEY

The following is excerpted verbatim from the “Executive Summary” of “The Little Manistee Management Survey 2023” prepared by GVSU’s Amanda Buday *et al.*

The Little Manistee Management Survey was conducted by the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Social Science Lab on behalf of the Little Manistee Watershed Conservation Council (LMWCC) to gather input from watershed residents on local water quality and a proposed Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Natural Rivers Program (NRP) designation for the Little Manistee River.

The Little Manistee Management Survey was mailed to 1,503 property owners and stakeholders in the Little Manistee River watershed. The research team attempted to contact all property owners along the Little Manistee River and its major tributaries, sending surveys to 714 riparian property owners. These would be the landowners directly affected by the proposed NRP designation. Additionally, a random sample of 661 property owners in the Little Manistee River watershed were mailed surveys to provide input on the average viewpoint of landowners in the broader area. Surveys were also mailed to 135 stakeholders with special interests in the Little Manistee River due to their membership in the LMWCC or other area tax-paying organizations who requested to participate.

We received completed questionnaires from 304 riparian property owners, 160 watershed property owners, and 67 other stakeholders, for a total of 531 survey respondents. The overall survey completion rate was 37%, although, as discussed below (see “Survey Methods”) the survey participation rates varied by respondent groups, with riparian owners and members of interest groups participating at higher rates than watershed property owners.

We learned that Little Manistee property owners are enthusiastic about enjoying the solitude, beauty, and sport provided by their treasured river. Many place a high priority on conservation of the river’s natural resources, even while holding complex views regarding the role that the DNR should play in management of the Little Manistee. We heard that many were uncertain about what exactly an NRP designation would mean for their property and future development plans, and others were concerned about maintaining the flexibility they need to manage their property.

The LMWCC sought to understand the level of support within the watershed for the Little Manistee River to receive a Michigan Natural Rivers designation. The Natural Rivers Program (NRP) is administered by the Michigan DNR. The program establishes a local citizens committee to develop standards for protection of the land within 400 feet of the riverbank and important tributaries. Survey respondents were presented with a summary of the program and its intention and were directed to explore more detailed information about the NRP (**cont. next page**)

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on the DNR website. Respondents then indicated whether they support, oppose, or are unsure about enrolling the Little River in the Michigan NRP.

Of the 514 respondents who answered the question at the time of surveying, 44% (n=224) supported an NRP designation for the Little Manistee River, 26% (n=135) were opposed, and 30% (n=155) were unsure about the proposal. Approximately one out of three Little Manistee property owners were unsure about the NRP proposal (30%, n=155), and 75% of these landowners indicated that they had not been adequately informed about the specifications of the program and how it would affect their property. We overwhelmingly heard that landowners were concerned about their ability to flexibly manage their property free from state interference. Those wishing to promote the NRP therefore have an opportunity to build support among this substantial constituency of “unsure” landowners using a focused communication strategy that specifies which land use requirements and restrictions would be implemented within the 400-foot management district under the DNR’s jurisdiction.

Stronach Township survey respondents were by far the least enthusiastic about the NRP. Many Stronach respondents wrote that they believed the existing zoning regulations in Manistee County provided adequate protection of the river, and they cited dissatisfaction with the DNR’s management of the Little Manistee River Weir in Stronach Township as further evidence of their distaste for the NRP. Those wishing to promote the NRP would be best served by developing a proposal that excludes the Stronach reaches of the river, and perhaps the whole of Manistee County.

A larger proportion of survey respondents supported the NRP proposal (44%, n=224) compared to survey respondents who opposed it (26%, n=135), but there is overall less support than there is opposition and uncertainty about the proposal (56%, n=290 opposed or unsure). We also found that support was higher among part-time or seasonal residents and those who own properties in the wider watershed than among full-time residents and owners of riparian properties. This suggests that those promoting the NRP have more work to do in building support among property owners who are the most direct stakeholders to the NRP proposal - riparian owners and full-time residents.

**(President’s message continued from page 3)** and exotic locations.

The festival was very well attended and a huge success thanks to the work of the folks from the Iron Fish Distillery and Vogue Theater.

As we are writing this newsletter, we are also planning on having a similar presentation to that of the Film Festival at the Great Lakes Environmental Festival in Manistee on April 20. This festival will include 30+ regional activist organizations and businesses with tables as well as about a dozen environmental presentations on things like fracking, environmental journalism and farms and clean energy. They expect about 500 attendees. It should be another way to get the word out about our organization.

## NEWS FROM LMWCC AND AROUND THE GREAT LAKES

### ANNUAL MEETING

This year's members' gathering will be held at Skinner Park in Irons on July 6. The meeting will begin at 10AM, and the doors will open for registration at 9:30. There will be a raffle (tickets will be in the mail) for a kayak package, a tour of Iron Fish distillery, and a guided fishing trip with guide, John Gouker. Also the bucket raffle will be on full display. If you have items to donate to this, please bring them to the pavilion at Skinner on Friday evening at 5:30. Speakers scheduled to appear are Nate Winkler of Conservation Resource, and Dana Castle of the Michigan DEQ will be available to answer questions about the Natural River Program. As always lunch will be provided by the members of the Indian Club.

### FLY-FISHING FILM FESTIVAL

LMWCC Vice-president, Jim Squier, provided this report.

The Vogue Theater, Iron Fish Distillery, and the Manistee County tourism bureau hosted the first International Flyfishing Film Festival showing in Manistee on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ten professionally created projects highlighting flyfishing filmed in locations around the world were shown. After the viewing audience members were asked to vote online for their favorite film. The event also featured seminars presented by local entities: fishing guide, John Gouker, shared his expertise on fishing local waters; biologists from the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians discussed the state's effort to reintroduce grayling into select rivers around the state, and Chelsea Peete, from the Manistee River Lodge, talked about getting started in flyfishing.

Admission to the event was \$25 a person with all proceeds benefitting the Little Manistee Watershed Conservation Council and The Vogue Theater. Organizers hope to

hold this event annually.

### 2023 — WARMEST YEAR ON RECORD

This past year has exceeded scientific expectations as February set new heat records for the ninth month in a row. The upper Midwest has not been spared. Chicago recorded a late February high temperature of 72°, and Wisconsin witnessed its first ever February tornadoes. Overall, this winter has been 5.4° warmer than the long-term average, 0.8° warmer than the previous record set on the winter of 2015-2016. The steepest temperature increases were centered on the upper Midwest: Minnesota was 2.7° hotter than previous warmest winter; Wisconsin 2.2°, and Michigan was 1.6° warmer than its warmest winter in record.

Usually ice coverage on the lakes peaks in mid-February with as much as 91 percent of the surface area covered. The Great Lakes Ice Tracker website reported that as of mid-February of this year only three percent of the lakes' surfaces were covered, and currently (March 2024) that number is 1.2%. That is the lowest percentage since 1973 when the site began collecting data. Scientists are desperately trying to understand how iceless winters may affect the world's largest freshwater system. Currently their ideas are purely theoretical as lake temperatures are too dangerous for data gathering expeditions during the coldest months.

However, the scientific community is theorizing that iceless waters will absorb sunlight faster, warming lake waters earlier in the spring. This could cause the earlier development and larger blooms of toxic blue-green algae that will have a negative impact on fish populations. Coupled with warmer water temperatures this will result in less oxygen in the deeper and colder waters of the lakes. Less **(cont. on next page)**

**NEWS FROM LMWCC AND AROUND THE GREAT LAKES**

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oxygen could cause a die-off of plankton and other organisms at the bottom of the food chain resulting in lower numbers of healthy fish. This may result in longer fishing seasons, but that would certainly be accompanied by tighter fishing quotas.

Lack of ice will also mean greater and faster evaporation causing lake levels to drop, and without ice cover, powerful winter storms could severely erode shorelines. More erosion will affect navigation into shallower places like harbors by pushing greater amounts of sediment into new areas primarily along shorelines. A researcher for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources said, "If we lose ice cover, we are really changing the fundamental ecosystem of the Great Lakes in ways that we really don't understand right now."

However, scientists also admit that it is extremely difficult to predict the effects of climate change on the Great Lakes ecosystem because these are alarming, yet unprecedented circumstances.

**ASIAN CARP UPDATE**

"The Army Corps of Engineers has informed the governments of the states bordering Lakes Michigan and Huron as well as Canadian officials of their intention to submit a long-term proposal by the end of 2013 for preventing the invasive species, Asian Carp from entering the lakes via waterways traversing the state of Illinois. The original schedule was for a plan in 2015." After ten years a plan is being put in place.

In late 2020 the US army Corps of Engineers submitted detailed proposal to a partnership between the states of Illinois and Michigan for a physical structure on the Illinois River near Joliet Illinois. The recommended plan involves a layered system of structural and non-structural control measures. Structural

measures include technologies such as a flushing lock, an engineered channel with electric barrier, underwater acoustic deterrent, an air bubble curtain and an automated barge clearing deterrent. Non-structural measures, implemented in conjunction with other federal agencies, could include public education and outreach, monitoring, integrated pest management, pesticides, manual or mechanical removal, and research and development.

\$226 million in federal funding has been appropriated for the project from the 2022 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

Last fall 750,000 lbs. of silver and big head carp were removed from the Illinois River. Using a 900 foot seine commercial fisherman contracted by the EPA moved fish to the river's banks where they were extricated to be used for industrial applications, including fertilizers. The weight indicates between 75,000 and 107,000 fish were removed in the ten-day harvest period. In the thirteen previous years, using similar techniques, an average of 1.7 million pounds of fish were removed per year. Last year's numbers represent a significant decrease.

**LMWCC FINANCIAL STATUS**

As of April 1 LMWCC has on hand \$29,910 in a checking account with Lake-Osceola State Bank and an additional \$9,180 in a savings account.

With a prolonged pause on projects, and hence expenditures due to the pandemic, the board of trustees agreed to invest cash in short term CD's with Wells Fargo Advisors. The current value of those vehicles is \$50,035.00. There are also investments of LMWCC in the Manistee County Community Funds.