

Project Title: “Protecting Natural Resources in Northeast Michigan for Current and Future Residents and Visitors” 2009.1090

Grantee Organization: HeadWaters Land Conservancy (HWLC)

Project Team: Mr. Don Inman, Board Chairman Emeritus; Mr. Dave Smethurst, prior Executive Director; Abigail P. Ertel, prior Land Protection Specialist; Alex Silver, prior Land Protection Specialist; Emily Cook, prior Land Protection Specialist; James Supina, Vice Chairman; Virginia Pierce, Treasurer; Libby Benjamin, Land Protection Specialist; Laura Justin, Executive Director.

Contact Person: Laura Justin, Executive Director, HeadWaters Land Conservancy. ljustin@headwatersconservancy.org

Grant Amount: $110,181.00

Time Frame: Original grant was intended to last 3 years, from 2009-2011. Extensions were granted from 2012-2014.

Focus Areas: Lands

Project Summary: Manage future development by acquiring conservation easements within the AuSable River Watershed, through landowner outreach and education. Priority Parcels were identified, working relationships with property owners were cultivated and conservation easement (CE) negotiations led to donated lands. The focus of the project was to limit fragmentation, excess development and degradation of the river and important riparian properties. HeadWaters Land Conservancy will monitor these lands in perpetuity and enforce all restrictions put forth in each conservation easement.

Project Context: The most sought after land for development in northeast Michigan is along water; be it a lake, stream or river. Although the AuSable is a designated Natural River, homes are still permitted every 200 feet along its banks. There is an estimated sixty miles of the Main Stream AuSable upstream of Mio. At the rate of one home every 200 feet, more than 1,500 new dwellings could be built in this portion of the AuSable River alone. A 26% growth rate was experienced within the watershed of the upper AuSable River between 1990 and 2000; whereas only a 6.9% growth rate occurred for Michigan overall.

Prior to the work on this grant, HWLC had already acquired nineteen (19) Conservation Easements within the watershed, sixteen of which include riparian properties on the AuSable or its tributaries. The AuSable River and the fishery it supports have many passionate and committed advocates including Trout Unlimited, Anglers of the AuSable, the AuSable River Property Owners Association, and the AuSable Watershed Restoration Committee. HeadWaters works with these and other conservation organizations to protect and preserve the AuSable River for future generations

According to the Department of Environmental Quality, when as little as nine percent of a watershed surface is covered with impervious surfaces like asphalt, concrete and rooftops, water quality begins to deteriorate in a quantifiable way. When the natural vegetative buffers along the river are removed, water temperatures will increase and harmful pollutants in storm water runoff enter the river directly. Changes in adjacent riparian lands and within the watershed can seriously impair the future viability of the AuSable River as one of the premier cold water trout streams in the country.

Goals & Results: The goals for the grant included prioritizing and mapping lands within the watershed, outreach to potential CE donors, education of property owners, and ultimately, completion of 15 conservation easements in three years.

Although outreach and education efforts were successful, the “forever” commitment of a conservation easement was overwhelming for many land owners. Placing permanent restrictions on land such as prohibition of property division and limited building development is very positive for the river but also a sacrifice for the land donor. In cases in which we could not move a property owner to action in the form of a conservation easement, we were able to offer education on best practices of land management for the health of the watershed. Although this outcome was not measured specifically, we do believe there will be a very positive affect on the AuSable River Watershed for years to come. We also provided several land owners with a comprehensive property management plan. Ultimately, HeadWaters Land Conservancy was able to place conservation easements on 7 properties representing 507 acres of land and 15,896 feet of waterfront. This brings HeadWaters total conservation in the AuSable River Watershed to 2,039 acres of land and 48,446 feet of water frontage.

**FINAL NARATIVE REPORT**

Background & Overview: Our goal was to prevent further fragmentation of ownership and reduce the level of new development within the watershed to prevent deterioration of the AuSable River and preserve its current uses for future generations. HWLC proposed to protect the AuSable River by actively seeking donations of 15 Conservation Easements and by monitoring and enforcing existing and newly acquired easements. Unfortunately, completing 15 CE’s within a specific watershed in 3, or even 5 years was not a realistic goal. *We discovered that there is a huge difference in the length of process between a project which is land-owner initiated versus one that is land conservancy-initiated*. Being a small conservancy with a huge service area also led to challenges. Our 11 counties of responsibility represent 3.9 million acres (15% of the Lower Peninsula) of land and hundreds of miles of waterfront, encompassing several watersheds. The needs of all those counties and their residents has to be considered even when our focus was exclusively on the AuSable.

Outcomes: HWLC started by prioritizing and mapping properties along and within the AuSable River Watershed. Research was conducted on each parcel to determine ownership, acreage, waterfront, number of structures on the land, etc. This piece was literally done by hand with plat maps and equalization records. Outreach to all landowners was accomplished through correspondence, one-on-one visits, invitations to existing CE properties and a few in-home gatherings meant to educate participants. As potential CE donors were identified, more site visits were scheduled and relationships were developed. This took much longer than expected and is still ongoing. In the process, 7 properties were protected.

If someone is invested enough, and willing to make the sacrifice of placing a conservation easement on their land, they become very dedicated supporters of the land conservancy and other groups working to conserve and preserve land and water in northeast Michigan. Finding people who care deeply is a great reward and reaps benefits for us all when a neighbor talks to a neighbor about land conservation and preservation of precious water resources. The message is always more powerful when it comes from a peer or a friend than from an organization.

Although many “land” donors don’t have the financial means to support HWLC, a few CE donors do have that capacity. Establishing relationships with these individuals may garner a longer term support of our operations.

Related Efforts: The GLFT grant was a stand-alone effort but we have also had support from the J.A. Woollam Foundation. The foundation is very excited about our work in the AuSable River Watershed and would ultimately like to help HWLC acquire a sizeable piece of land with frontage on the river, to utilize as a public preserve.

Communication/Dissemination: Because this project targeted a specific group in a specific area, communication was very direct in the form of correspondence and phone calls. Now that we have finally acquired GIS software and training, we will be compiling much more specific data about the AuSable River Watershed and the land protection efforts to date.

As part of our outreach and education programs, all grantors, such as GLFT are highlighted in a display of support we take to events.

Reflections: As stated earlier in this report, our number one lesson is that there is a huge difference in the length of process between a project which is land-owner initiated versus one that is land conservancy-initiated. By the time a conservation easement donor approaches HWLC, they have done years of research, soul searching and agonizing about what is best for the land and water they love, for themselves, and for their family. When WE approach someone and suggest we have a fantastic way for them to protect their land and water resources, they first have to believe us, and then they start the process at their own pace. Not that we would ever want to “pressure” someone into putting their land and waterfront into a CE, but you really couldn’t do it if you tried! In the future, I believe it would be much more realistic to limit the number of CE’s or preserves to one or two per year.

The flip side of the coin from a marketing and communications standpoint is the benefit of targeting a very specific audience with a very specific message versus all of the people in our 11 counties! You can make much better use of your resources when you know you are spending them on the right group in the right place.

We are grateful for the support of the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust and will continue to work toward our shared goal of preserving water resources in Michigan. Please accept our deepest thanks!

* A final Financial Report is attached along with copies of all previously submitted financial reports and accounting of expenses.
* Conservation Easements are included. There are no closing statements or title work available for CE’s.