

**GLFT Access to the Fishery Final Narrative Report
Custer Barrier Free Fishing Access Project on the Pere Marquette River
Submitted by Conservation Resource Alliance, January 2015**

- **Project Title:** *The Custer Barrier Free Fishing Access on the Pere Marquette River*
- **Grantee Organization:** Conservation Resource Alliance

Project Team: The following are the members of the project team who should be credited with contributions to the work:

- Custer Township
- Spicer Group Inc.
- Conservation Resource Alliance
- Pere Marquette Watershed Council
- United States Forest Service
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- Michigan Department of Environmental Quality
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Mason-Lake Conservation District
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Great Lakes Fishery Trust
- Great Lakes Fishery Commission
- OxyChem
- Village of Custer
- Swidorski Brothers, LLC

■ **Contact Person:**

Kimberly L. Balke, Project Manager
Conservation Resource Alliance
(231) 946-6817, kim@rivercare.org

- **Grant Amount:** \$200,000
- **Time Frame:** 10/14/2013–12/31/2014
- **Focus Areas:** Access

■ **Brief Project Summary:**

The Custer Barrier Free Fishing Access project is the first handicap accessible fishing site on the Pere Marquette River and includes two fishing platforms, a restroom, paved driveway and parking area, boardwalk, sidewalk, bench, educational signage, stone steps with stone platform to the river, runoff control, and streambank stabilization efforts. The project was effectively completed by partners of the Pere Marquette River Restoration Committee, in combination with the removal of a defunct sea lamprey barrier on township property. The site is already a State Historic Marker and is adjacent to Custer Road, a well-traveled road located off of US-10.

Project in Context

This orientation to the project should provide key background information on its purpose, location (where appropriate), and broader significance. You may wish to consider:

- Stakeholder identification of a need for the work: This site comprises the first and only handicap accessible recreation site on the Pere Marquette River. There are approximately 1,470,000 people in the state of Michigan over the age of five who have a form of disability with half of these people having difficulty walking or climbing stairs. The Custer site provides river and fishing access for all recreationists of various ages and abilities. With the removal of the defunct electrical sea lamprey barrier, and the site being in public (township) ownership it was inevitable that people would be accessing the site regardless by trampling sensitive streambanks and driving close to the river. Thus, the project provides a stable, ecologically suitable site for fishing and accessing the Pere Marquette River.
- Relationship to other, related products/programs: Educational signage at the site informs recreationists of other access points in the watershed, the variety of fish species to be found in the river at or near the site, related historical information, and overall stewardship efforts in the watershed. The site is already a registered Michigan Historic Site, “Notipekago,” and there was already signage that describes the Custer area along the Pere Marquette as the location of a battle between the Ottawa and Mascouten tribes in the 17th century.
- Intended population to be served: Populations of the Ludington, Scottville and Custer municipalities estimate at 10,000 and the population of the Pere Marquette Watershed at 31,650 as of the 2008 census. Though populations rank lower to other cities in Michigan, the PM watershed is a significant tourist destination throughout the year considering the variety of outdoor opportunities afforded and its proximity to larger cities such as Grand Rapids, Lansing, Detroit and Chicago. A 1998 report, “Final Report: Estimated fall 1996 and spring and summer 1997 recreation use of the Pere Marquette Wild and Scenic River Corridor,” documented that during one year there were an estimated 94,000 recreational user hours on the PM, and that was 19 years ago. Further evaluation of those studies concluded that 95% of the river users participated in fishing and 53% in canoeing or tubing. With the improved Custer access site on the mainstem where steelhead, suckers, brown trout and salmon pass, and the fishing platforms situated above the river with boat/canoe/kayak access already provided upstream of the bridge, the number of angler hours is expected to be in the thousands annually and account for over 90% of use at the site.

Goals of the Effort

The goal of the Custer Barrier Free Fishing Access on the Pere Marquette River was to create a Great Lakes fishing and educational opportunity for people of all ages and capabilities on the PM, a high quality Lake Michigan tributary. The site comprises the first and only handicap accessible fishing platforms, along with related amenities, on the mainstem of the Pere Marquette River, a State designated Natural River and federally designated Wild and Scenic River.

Results

In this section, briefly summarize the key results of the project. Identify the results (for example, products developed, outreach engaged in, participation/use of materials achieved, feedback received).

Partners worked together to develop a recreational access site that includes the following amenities:

- 2 fishing platforms measuring 30'x10' and 20'x12' built on helical piers, complete with 42" high railing comprised of a synthetic top rail, coated steel mesh and treated wood support system with breaks/lowered railing sections for fishing pole and angling by wheelchair. The river dynamics are such that a deep hole is located downstream and adjacent to one of the platforms.
- Sidewalk connecting parking area, platforms and boardwalk
- Boardwalk 5' wide by 70' long with 42" high hand rail built on combination of helical piers and steel posts
- 3-space bituminous parking area with room for a turnaround site
- Paved driveway
- Rock-lined stormwater bioswale for treating runoff
- Restroom facility
- 3-panel educational and information sign
- Park bench
- Boardwalk connecting platform area under Custer Bridge to upstream access site & restroom area
- Stone steps and 2 stone platforms
- 300 lineal feet of stabilized streambanks
- Red osier dogwood plantings and application of native grass/annual rye seed mix

Initial feedback from anglers has been extremely positive with fish being caught on the platforms during construction and during progress meetings with partners; these experiences provided enjoyable validation of the project. A presentation given by CRA and Custer Township at a Mason County Township Association meeting further validated the project where positive feedback from township officials was received.

Products and Resources

Communications and media coverage on the project included:

- Article, "Fishing platform planned for Custer Weir" in the Ludington Daily News on Friday January 17, 2014
- Article, "From no trespassing to a red carpet welcome – Custer site now open" in CRA's Catalyst for Winter 2014
- Article, "Construction at Custer Weir underway" in CRA's Catalyst for Summer 2014
- Pere Marquette Watershed Council outreach materials and Mainstream newsletter
- With construction wrapping up in late 2014, a ribbon cutting and appreciation event will be held in the spring 2015
- CRA Project Fact Sheet

FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT

Background/Overview

1. Was the project completed as originally intended? If not, indicate how the final outcome(s) differed from what was anticipated. Does your experience suggest that original expectations were realistic? What factors hindered or helped progress?

The project was completed as intended; a minor revision regarding the restroom facility was needed. Overall, the outcomes exceeded original expectations due in large part to effective team building, regular meetings during design, and wise financial management.

- An additional fishing platform was afforded and installed; this added capacity to the site and improved aesthetics.
- A compromise was needed for siting the restroom facility. Due to limited space by the river, a high water table and saturated soils, there was not sufficient room for the restroom facility near the parking area. However, there was plenty room on the other side of the road near the existing upstream boat launch, and the site was ideal with being high, dry and comprised of sandy soils for the restroom facility.
- Instead of 6 to 10 parking spaces adjacent to the platforms, 3 spaces were provided along with a spot to turn a vehicle around because of limited space near the river and lowland hardwoods. However, there is abundant parking near the entry of the driveway and on the other side of the road near the pre-existing boat launch and new restroom facility.
- One of the fishing platforms was cited adjacent to the deep pool immediately downstream of the sea lamprey barrier for better fishing opportunities. Upon removal of the sea lamprey barrier, the deep pool remained intact due in part to existing stone that had been placed under the former barrier and how the river channel responded to the work. The pool habitat will be monitored after snow melt and spring high water events.

Outcomes

2. What activities were pursued in relationship to intended outcomes, and to what extent did you achieve the following intended outcomes listed in your proposal? (Merge intended outcomes from proposal.)

The activities of combined competitive/qualifications based bidding for design and construction, and regular meetings and communications with the project team were the most significant factors in ensuring intended outcomes were achieved. Intended outcomes cited in the proposal that were met include constructing: handicap accessible fishing platform (2), bathroom facility, replacing existing boardwalk that safely connects platforms to upstream boat launch area underneath Custer Bridge, parking spaces, educational signage, and streambank restoration work comprised of fieldstone placement, topsoil and planting of native shrubs and grass seed in exposed areas where the former lamprey barrier infrastructure had been removed.

3. What audience(s) were you particularly hopeful of reaching? To what extent did you reach them? Did you receive any feedback?

The Custer site provides river and fishing access for all recreationists of various ages and abilities. There are approximately 1,470,000 people in the state of Michigan over the age of five who have a form of disability with half of these people having difficulty walking or climbing stairs. Also the intended population to be served includes Ludington, Scottville and Custer municipalities estimate at 10,000 and the population of the Pere Marquette Watershed at 31,650 as of the 2008 census. Though populations rank lower to other cities in Michigan, the PM watershed is a significant tourist destination throughout the year considering the variety of outdoor opportunities afforded and its proximity to larger cities such as Grand Rapids, Lansing, Detroit and Chicago. Past studies documented that during one year there were an estimated 94,000 recreational user hours on the PM with 95% of the river users participated in fishing and 53% in canoeing or tubing. These people will be reached in the upcoming spring, summer and fall seasons now that the access site is complete. Preliminary feedback from anglers using the site last fall during construction was indeed positive with fish being caught from the platforms and stone steps.

4. What relationships or opportunities were developed or strengthened through the work?

Most notably strong relationships between CRA, Custer Township, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MDNR, MDEQ and the Pere Marquette Watershed Council were developed and further strengthened throughout the design and build phases. The project was highlighted and presented upon by CRA and Custer Township during a Mason County Township Association meeting in October 2014. Partners are eager to hold the ribbon cutting for the site in the spring of 2015.

5. Whether they were intended or unintended, what do you consider the most important benefits or outcomes of this access project?

The most important benefits include providing the first handicap accessible fishing site on the Pere Marquette River, and improving a site (ecologically and aesthetically) where failing infrastructure on a river threatens to cause bank erosion, instream scouring and unsafe conditions. This project will serve as a successful role model for other sites on rivers in northern Michigan where CRA and partners are challenged with finding the funding and cooperation for removing failing infrastructure (dams, road crossings, etc.) and replacing them with effectively designed restoration and/or access sites for the community.

Site-Specific Information

For each question below, be as explanatory as possible. The GLFT uses this information for internal evaluation purposes as well as directing the public to the access site (via the GLFT online angler access guide: www.gflt.org/angleracc.htm).

6. Describe the access structure (i.e., length, width, location, design, etc.).

There are two universally designed ADA approved fishing platforms (made of composite materials) measuring 30'x10' and 20'x12' with hand railing that is 42" high and comprised of PVC coated wire mesh, each with a drop down section and opening for casting and fishing pole access. There is a boardwalk 5' wide by 70' long with the same railing and design requirements. Structures are built on a combination of poured concrete helical piers, and driven steel posts for durability, stability and strength against river current and high water events.

7. Answer the following questions:

- a. How do visitors access the structure (e.g., driving directions to the parking lot, how far is the structure from the parking lot, what connects the parking lot to the structure, etc.)? The fishing platforms are adjacent to the paved parking area with a sidewalk linking the amenities. The driveway to the parking area is just south of the Custer Bridge off of Custer Road that intersects US-10 in the Village of Custer, between Ludington and Baldwin.
- b. What amenities are offered at the access site (e.g., restrooms, benches, barrier free access, handicapped parking, lighting, etc.)? A handicap accessible restroom, park bench, two ADA approved fishing platforms, ADA approved boardwalk, stone steps down to the river, interpretive 3-panel sign, paved driveway, paved parking area with 3 spaces, and sidewalk linking the amenities.
- c. What educational opportunities (e.g., interpretative signs) are offered at the site, if any? Educational signage at the site informs recreationists of other access points in the watershed, the variety of fish species to be found in the river at or near the site, related historical information, and overall stewardship efforts in the watershed. The site is already a registered Michigan Historic Site, “Notipekago,” and there was already signage that describes the Custer area along the Pere Marquette as the location of a battle between the Ottawa and Mascouten tribes in the 17th century.
- d. What species of fish are commonly caught at the site? During what months of the year is fishing best for each species? Chinook salmon are caught from August through October, Steelhead are caught October through April, brown trout are typically be from September through December, northern pike are caught year round, and white, longnose, and redhorse suckers are caught in April and May,
- e. Does the Michigan Department of Natural Resources regularly stock any fish species at or near the site? If so, what species, at what time of year, and how often? MDNR Fisheries Division does not stock any fish at the Custer Access Site. MDNR does stock steelhead in the Big South Branch of the Pere Marquette annually, so the fish need to swim through the Custer site. There is excellent salmon and steelhead natural reproduction that happens on the gravel bars in the Pere Marquette River upstream, and so the fish have to move through the lower river and the Custer site to get to the gravel.
- f. What tactics do you recommend for catching these species (e.g., small bags, bottom casting, minnows, wobbling plugs, Hot ‘n Tots, etc.)? Recommended fishing tactics include the following: For salmon, skein spawn (chunks of eggs still clumped together) under a bobber. For lures use spinners (Mepps, Vibrax, Panther Martin etc.), spoons (Little Cleos), and wobbling plugs. Plugs can either be casted or backed down through the holes using the boat. For casting, Rapala Husky Jerks and Deep Thundersticks. For backing them down with the boat, use Flatfish, Kwikfish, or Hotntots. Fly anglers should use large, gaudy streamers fished quickly. For steelhead, small spawnbags either fished under a bobber or bounced along the bottom. Other baits include nightcrawlers and waxworms. Many like to fish waxworms under a bobber on a small jig, particularly in the winter. Lures should be spinners, spoons, or plugs. Fewer anglers cast plugs for steelhead, but the back down

technique is very popular. Hotntots, Willys Worms, Hot Shots, and Tadpollys are all good choices. Fly anglers can again use streamers, but egg patterns, stonefly patterns, and even Hex nymphs also work.

- g. Where can anglers stay if they want to overnight near the access site? A variety of motels, hotels and campgrounds are in the towns of Custer (Whiskey Creek Campground, Camp Rakas), Walhalla (Barothy's Lodge), Scottville (Carrier Ridge Lodge, Crystal Lake Campground, Henry's Landing), Baldwin (Day Star, Wolf Lake, Baldwin Creek, Lake Forest, Pere Marquette River Lodge) and Ludington (Holiday Inn Express, Best Western, Viking Arms, Snyders Shoreline, The Inn, Lamplighter Bed and Breakfast, etc.) are within 20 miles of the access site either west or east and afford a variety of amenities and rates. There are also rustic federal and state campground opportunities throughout the watershed.
- h. Is there anything else you would want to share with a potential visitor to the access site? Visiting the Baldwin USFS Ranger Station is a good idea to ensure that watercraft and/or parking permits are secured if the recreationist might also explore upstream stretches where these permissions might be required.
- i. All of the project objectives were successfully met, and in fact exceeded with the ability to install 2 platforms instead of just 1.

Pictures

- 8. Provide at least three photos of the completed project.

Fishing Platforms, Stone Steps & Bank Restoration



Parking Area



Boardwalk



Restroom



Interpretive Sign & Park Bench



9. Signage from the GLFT will be secured on the railing at one of the platforms. Note that the GLFT is listed in the far right panel of the interpretive signage as one of the project partners/contributors (above photo).

Related Efforts

10. Was this project a standalone effort or was there a broader effort beyond the part funded by the GLFT? Have other funders been involved either during the time of your GLFT grant or subsequently?

The Custer recreational access development was a combined effort that also included the removal of the defunct electrical sea lamprey barrier formerly operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and owned by the State of Michigan, with the property itself owned by Custer Township and leased by the State of Michigan. By constructing the Custer Barrier Free Fishing Access in combination with the lamprey barrier removal, the streambank protection, soil stabilization, runoff and stormwater management needs were collectively met. Removal of the lamprey barrier alone would have resulted in an informal site frequented by recreationists susceptible to erosion, litter, trampled streambanks, randomly parked vehicles, and misuse. Total project funds included the \$200,000 from the GLFT, \$200,000 from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, \$1,000 from OxyChem and \$890 from Custer Township.

11. Has there been any spinoff work or follow-on work related to this project?

The project had a wide scope that was effectively completed, and it will serve as an example for CRA and partners to use in other watersheds where failing infrastructure sites on a river can be potentially transformed into recreational access.

Reflections

12. Please describe any unanticipated benefits, challenges or surprises, and/or important lessons learned over the course of the project.

An unanticipated but not overly surprising challenge included there being some vandalism comprised of painting at the site during construction. The paint was able to be removed and the likely offender (although not confirmed) was talked to directly by the township supervisor. The interpretive sign is comprised of a material that paint easily washes off of; this is a proactive approach to potential problems.

13. What recommendations (if any) would you make to other project directors working on similar efforts or to the GLFT?

Forming the project team is a critical cornerstone of an effort of this caliber. Regular communications and meetings with partners (agencies, owners, other non-profits, stakeholders, contractors), and engaging in a combined competitive and qualifications-based bidding process for design and construction are important practices that will contribute toward effective team building.