Huron River Watershed Council
Annual Report
2012-2013

Think like a river
At our recent Suds on the River event I was struck by all the different ages, interests, and backgrounds of the people who care about the river. You may care about different things or have passions that run at different speeds, but at some level you have found us because we share a deep connection to the river.

- It may be that you love to fly fish—standing in the river, feeling the tug of the current on your legs, engaging in the puzzle of thinking like a fish, and the joy of the pursuit.
- It may be that you like to paddle the river—moving down its center, watching the water ahead of the boat for hazards, and listening to the gentle sounds of the paddle slicing through the water.
- It may be that you like to walk or sit along the river—noticing the changing seasons, changing river levels, and the cycles of birds, fish, and habitat.

I gave my heart to this river the minute I first stood in its push and pull, (with its distinct warm and musky smell). I’ve watched it thunder into foam, smooth to glass, and bubble up from the ground. I’ve been fascinated by how it speeds by and yet is always there; its constancy rooting me in place. This place, this flow, this continual energy and life defines me and this community. It connects us to the past, what has come before us or literally upstream, and what will come after us, or downstream.

The river gives us so much—and asks for nothing in return. But, as David Brower (a prominent environmentalist) said, “we must begin thinking like a river if we are to leave a legacy of beauty and life for future generations.”

What does it mean to “begin thinking like a river?” What does it need?

People who understand what is going on... people in creeks measuring water quality, counting healthy bugs, watching the water temperature, and keeping an eye out for problems.

People in decision making roles who talk about how important wetlands and floodplains are to the river, who are willing to protect vegetation and buffers along the rivers and creeks, and people who think creatively about how to balance human needs and desires with the river’s needs.

People who enjoy getting outside and recreating on the river and in the watershed; those who encourage others to get out and appreciate the river’s beauty and recreational offerings.

People who make the choices that reflect the values of clean water—by reducing turf grass as part of landscaping, by fertilizing less, by disposing of household hazardous waste and pet waste correctly, and by installing a rain garden or rain barrel.

And who are these people? They are US. We are a community who cares about this river, who understands and is willing to invest the time and money and CARE in these pursuits.

Thank you for doing the work (and Fun!) of thinking like a river and asking the question of what the river needs.

For the river,

Laura Rubin, Executive Director
Championing a river renaissance

The Huron River is one of the most popular paddling and fly-fishing rivers in Michigan, and home to the busiest livery. The Huron River Water Trail builds on that recreation interest by installing consistent way-finding signs along the Trail’s 104 miles, fixing up access points, and enhancing education and information about recreation on the Huron.

In this fiscal year, HRWC launched the Paddler’s Companion, a brand new waterproof book that is the essential guide for a trip on the Huron River, whether for an afternoon or a multi-day trip. Paddling down the river was also made easier with the completion of an improved portage and signage at the Superior Portage.

We spread the word about RiverUp! through presentations to community leaders, planners, the tourism industry, and paddling enthusiasts. Partnerships with Pure Michigan, local Convention and Visitors Bureaus and Downtown Development Authorities, MDOT and others are yielding exciting projects and synergies within the watershed and to larger markets. The Great Lakes edition of the magazine Long Weekends featured the Huron River Water Trail on the cover of its fall issue.

In the Ypsilanti area, RiverUp! is planting the seeds for a vibrant river corridor from Peninsular Park to Belleville that builds on the future community center on Water Street, the parks system, the water trail, and the Border to Border trail. With commitments from the MotorCities National Heritage Area (a program of the National Park Service) and Ypsilanti Convention and Visitors Bureau, we are developing a design for the Huron River Ford Heritage Trail.

In Ann Arbor, the clean-up of the east side of the MichCon/DTE Energy 14-acre property at 841 Broadway was completed. HRWC worked to move the clean-up along and repurpose the site for mixed-use development, trails, and parkland.

In our efforts to restore more natural flows to the river, HRWC also:

- Prevented the construction of a proposed low-head dam on the Huron River.
- Hosted a successful workshop, “Resources for the Small Dam Owner,” that offered useable information for the 25 dam owners and operators who attended.
- Recruited a team of graduate students at the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment for the next 18 months to study the flow regime of the Huron River and develop a suite of recommendations for improving it for the benefit of river recreation, fisheries, and river communities.
- Inventoried more than 100 dams on the Huron River system and identified potential dams for removal in coordination with the owners.
Using water efficiently

SAVING WATER SAVES ENERGY

This year, HRWC continued its mission of promoting the water-energy nexus. The Saving Water Saves Energy project reached an estimated 3,000 people in the summer festival season, attending over 15 events in nine different communities throughout the watershed. Its message: There’s hidden energy embedded in our water – nearly 13% of our nation’s electricity goes to pump, heat and treat it. Using less water saves energy, money and reduces your carbon footprint.

We handed out 1,500 five minute shower timers, 1,000 toilet leak detection kits and collected 350 “pledges to save.” Outreach how-to presentations were made to river groups at both the Michigan Watershed Summit and the national conference of River Network.

Saving Water, Saves Energy also worked with DTE Energy to publish water-energy efficiency tips and information in EnergySmarts, a green living magazine that goes to 16,000 residential DTE Energy customers throughout Southeast Michigan. And we partnered with Detroit Public Television to produce and air a public service announcement: “A Hero Rises.”

Adapting to climate change

CLIMATE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

HRWC successfully galvanized a group of professionals in three sectors across the watershed. Members of these teams now have a strong understanding of how climate is predicted to change in the watershed and have spent meaningful time thinking through what this means for their professions. Teams determined where their sectors were most vulnerable based on existing and predicted changes to local climate. A few high priority strategies were developed, which, if implemented, would reduce the vulnerability of the sector, and as a result, watershed communities, to a changing climate.

The Water Infrastructure team advocated for precipitation frequency data that reflects the best available climatic information. Precipitation frequency curves establish the severity, duration and probability of occurrence of storm events and form the basis of many decisions such as storm drain sizing and definition of floodplains. The team is also establishing a list of “no-regrets” actions that if pursued would create resiliency to climate change.

The In-Stream Flows team established a network of dam operators to better coordinate the management of flows in the river in anticipation of more extreme flow conditions. The network facilitates improved day-to-day management of individual dams, the river as a whole and improves readiness for flood conditions and drought.

The Natural Infrastructure team investigated how key tree species in the watershed are expected to be impacted by changing temperature and precipitation regimes. Understanding if future conditions are expected to be favorable or unfavorable to various species will give insights as to how natural communities may change. This has implications for acquisition, management and restoration of natural lands. A primer on climate impacts and resiliency strategies for tree species of the Huron River watershed was developed.
Collecting reliable data is the foundation for good decision-making

STREAM MONITORING

Over 300 volunteers participated in our Winter Stonefly Search, two River Roundups, and the Measuring & Mapping program. These volunteers are our eyes on the river, helping us find immediate problems and collecting data that we use to track the long-term health of the Huron River and its tributaries.

As a result of Washtenaw County’s extensive effort in addressing erosion and stormwater problems on Mallett’s Creek, our volunteers saw higher insect populations in the fall here than we have seen in ten years, indicating an improvement in stream health. 2012’s unusually dry weather conditions affected our sampling. Water levels were very low and we saw a marked increase of bugs which preferred slow-moving and stagnant water—like marsh beetles, mosquitoes and water treders. The heavy spring rains of 2013 flooded our sample sites and fewer bugs overall were found.

This fiscal year, we also piloted a new creek-walking program, which provides a way for people to really feel like they are adopting a stream as they visit the same location several times over the course of a summer. Two teams of four to five people walked short sections of Fleming Creek and Mill Creek, with the goal of locating and documenting erosion problem areas, incoming water pollution, and trash by taking pictures and recording GPS coordinates. Water thermometers and conductivity meters helped them identify changes in water sourcing and quality as they progressed along the stream.

Addressing pollution

STORMWATER MANAGEMENT

Our water quality monitoring of stream chemistry and flow expanded to the Lower Huron and Downriver Watersheds in Wayne County this past year. We have over 30 active sites, monitored by 40-plus volunteers. The results to date show improvements in nutrient loading, but not bacteria.

We worked with the stormwater groups in Livingston (Chain of Lakes), Washtenaw (Middle Huron), and Wayne (Lower Huron) counties to revise watershed management plans and pollutant loading reduction plans that focus on nutrient (phosphorus), biota (flashy flows) and bacteria impairments. These plans develop and prioritize innovative implementation projects, focusing on road and turf replacement, floodplain expansion, and stormwater infiltration.

Our non-point source education efforts continued with multi-media ads, articles, brochures and the 2012 Watershed Community Calendar. We distributed 37,000 calendars in the fall of 2011, using the piece to promote a regional public survey to assess watershed awareness. 741 people participated, sharing their thoughts about water quality and what they would do to protect it. In March, a targeted pet waste campaign went to over 100 pet retailers and veterinarian offices in Washtenaw County.

HRWC’s monitoring and planning efforts led to two new projects: a Honey Creek study to identify and reduce sources of bacteria, and Green Infrastructure planning in Washtenaw County to help integrate and coordinate projects across the region.
Protecting and preserving land that keeps the Huron healthy

BIORESERVE PROJECT

All five watershed land conservancies and several governmental preservation programs use HRWC’s Bioreserve data to focus their conservation work and prioritize lands to pursue for permanent preservation. Volunteers performed ecological assessments on over 50 natural area properties throughout the watershed, including four Metroparks. The program provided Floristic Quality Assessments on the 12 Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy nature preserves in the watershed and it helped Six Rivers Regional Land Conservancy gather a list of potential wetland properties to pursue for acquisition with wetland permit mitigation funds. Computer mapping layers and analysis were completed for Livingston Land Conservancy’s strategic conservation plan.

This year, five properties (200 acres of natural area and farmland) are now permanently preserved thanks in part to Bioreserve data. An additional five properties (547 acres) are in the process of being protected with one conservancy working on the funding for the preservation of four properties (270 acres) in the Portage Creek watershed and another working on a contract for protection of a 40-acre property along of the shores of Big Lake, the Huron’s source.

HRWC created Green Infrastructure Plans—mapping out and describing important, intact natural areas, linkages between them and other smaller important natural features, and then using that data to help communities plan for incoming development in a way that maintains those ecosystems. This planning improves ordinances that protect waterways and wetlands in Lyndon Township and is on track to help Dexter, Unadilla and Webster townships in the next year.

STREAMSIDE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Led by volunteers, our streamside education program reached 500 high school students this year, teaching them the importance of water quality parameters and how to test for them in the Huron. Two intensive educator trainings and the development of top notch teaching aids ensured the strength of the program for the future.

Photos: H. Buffman

Inspiring youth
**STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES**

**HURON RIVER WATERSHED COUNCIL**

**STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES**

Fiscal Year April 1, 2012 to March 31, 2013

- **REVENUE**
  - Membership Dues: $150,698 (13%)
  - Government Grants: $201,240 (17%)
  - Contracted Services: $234,352 (20%)
  - Foundation and Corporate Grants: $535,140 (45%)
  - Contributions: $48,754 (4%)
  - Other: $29,614 (2%)
  - **TOTAL REVENUES**: $1,199,798 (100%)

- **EXPENSES**
  - Program Service Costs
    - Watershed Planning & Management: $380,222 (33%)
    - Education: $254,257 (22%)
    - Stewardship: $315,858 (27%)
    - Management & General: $93,533 (8%)
    - Fundraising: $125,668 (11%)
  - **TOTAL EXPENSES**: $1,169,538 (100%)

- **CHANGE IN NET ASSETS**: $30,260
  - Net Assets, beginning of year: $495,291
  - Net Assets, end of year: $525,551

**Photo: A. Savage**
The Huron River Watershed Council extends its gratitude to every person who gave of their time, talents and financial resources to protect the Huron River and the watershed that surrounds it.

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