



Huron River Water Trail Stewardship and Safety Assessment

This assessment was prepared by the Huron River Watershed Council with financial support from REI and input from partners of the Huron River Water Trail.

Introduction

The Huron River Water Trail (HRWT) is a 104-mile (167 km) inland paddling trail with over 50 public or fee-based entry points along its length. The Huron is the 18th trail of the National Water Trail System, a network of nation exemplary water trails from Puget Sound to the Hudson River. It is also one of the first 5 state-designated water trails. In Michigan.

The HRWT connects people to the river's natural environment, its history, and the communities it touches in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. From the rapids at Delhi and Dexter to the placid flat water at the entrance to Lake Erie, it presents a wide range of recreation options for paddlers of any skill level to enjoy at their own pace. Five Trail Towns, communities committed to strengthening their connection to the river, provide diverse cultural heritage and points of interest. Several sections of the HRWT are especially popular fishing destinations renown throughout the Midwest. The connected lakes of the Huron River are also a premier spot for sailing windsurfing, swimming.

The HRWT intersects several major land trail networks, many of which are fueled by strong community support and public funding. This includes the Iron Belle Trail, that runs from Iron Mountain to Belle Isle, the Lake-to-Lake trail, that will run from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron, the Downriver Linked Greenways, and the Border-to-Border Trail across Washtenaw County.

The HRWT is the result of many great partner organizations working over many years to bring people to the river and inspire its protection. As the popularity of river recreation and near-river recreation has grown, so to have the challenges that come with success. More people enjoying the river leads to some inevitable impact and some unfortunate misuse. This assessment identifies the key safety and stewardship priorities that water trail partners should pursue.

Identified Safety Priorities

Safety is a concern wherever paddlesports are popular due to the inherent risk of drowning. There are several locations along the water trail that have presented actionable, tangible, and specific safety issues.

As recreational usage of the water trail has grown in popularity, particularly over the past decade, the success and enjoyment of trail users has come with associated challenges. Some of these challenges have been exacerbated by increased use, while others are new issues that have emerged due to changes in development, access, climate, or degrading infrastructure.

Identified safety concerns fall into the following categories:

- Risk of drowning, injury, or watercraft damage near dams or other permanent obstructions
- Risk of drowning, injury, or watercraft damage near transient obstructions (such as woody debris jams)
- Requirement of rescue, or river users getting lost on the river
- A lack of universal access launches either inhibits accessibility to the river, or forces river users to access the river in ways they feel compromises their safety
- Water quality, including but not limited to PFAS, fuel spills, and harmful algal blooms
- Insufficient communication among water trail partner organizations regarding public notification of river conditions and transient hazards

To address these concerns, the following general safety priorities have been identified:

- Establish and maintain safe river access throughout the entire water trail at frequent intervals
- Establish and maintain safe portages around all obstructions suitable for the level of paddlers using the river section in question
- Establish and maintain appropriate safety signage near all dams and obstructions
- Water trail partners work together to alert river users of transient hazards
- Fill access gaps and construct additional universal access launches (UALs) along the entire water trail

Dams Present Inherent Safety Risks

Dams are, by their very design, dangerous. They impede natural motion and can create strong currents capable of trapping even able-bodied and experienced paddlers and swimmers. Even small dams, like the Huroc Park Dam in Flat Rock or the Proud Lake Dam in Proud Lake State Recreation Area can be dangerous to some paddlers or children. Fatalities have occurred near several dams along the Huron in the past, and there have been several close calls that resulted in either rescue or medical treatment.

Most of the dam portages on the Huron River are in a functional condition for users without special access needs. There are 3 notorious exceptions that create known, pressing safety concerns and discourage recreation nearby:

- Hubbell (Milford Pond) Dam in Milford
- French Landing Dam in Van Buren Township
- Flat Rock Dam in Flat Rock

There are other portages in need of iterative improvement, but do not share the level of design flaw in the three listed above. Implementing safe, sustainable solutions at each of the above locations is a top priority for the water trail.

Proud Lake Dam, Proud Lake State Recreation Area

The Proud Lake Dam is barely a dam. During high flow periods it's possible for veteran paddlers to safely paddle right over it. During summer weekends however, it creates a popular wading spot, especially for families with young kids that enjoy the pooling right above the dam.

The areas immediately at the landing and launch points are often covered by private belongings; blankets, baskets, and chairs due to crowds of people. Inexperienced paddlers often attempt to find alternative ways around the crowds on less stable footing. Signage or awareness building in the park would likely be sufficient to resolve the issues at this location.

Milford Pond (Hubbell) Dam, Milford

The Hubbell Dam Portage is too narrow, creates congestions, is awkward for all paddlers and may be impossible to traverse for some. The upstream portage landing is too close to the dam, a boat even one back in a landing queue feels the tug of the current toward the dam, and this location commonly sees groups of 6 or more boats at once waiting to portage. The narrow, double railing design of the portage forces paddlers to land at an awkward, steep angle and drag their boat directly onto narrow rollers. For larger canoes, this creates a particularly awkward order of operations for getting two or more people safely out of the boat without getting significantly wet before the watercraft can be moved to the downstream side. Once on the downstream side, steep stairs and narrow rollers make lowering a loaded boat challenging. At the bottom of the stairs, the downstream launch is close enough to the dam and the current is sufficiently strong enough there to carry away a paddler's boat if not within a paddler's constant grip.

A comprehensive redesign of the landing, portage, and launch needs to be completed, and substantial funds need to be raised in partnership with interested parties to improve safety at this location.

Flook Dam, Dexter Township/Pinckney

Flook Dam has been the site of fatalities, injuries, and rescues. The portage around Flook Dam has been upgraded to make passage easier. The design of this particular portage has been cited as an excellent example of a safe, effective portage by several groups. Additional signage and safety lines were installed in 2018 to make the presence of the dam and the danger more obvious to paddlers, and is a good example for other dam owners to follow.

Kent Lake Dam, Island Lake State Recreation Area

The portage around the dam, while long and challenging for some users, is generally considered safe for the dominant user groups. Boat rails provide launch support downstream.

During low flow conditions, some novice paddlers have been seen getting dangerously close to travelling over the dam below an existing orange safety fence. Additional signage, or redesigned safety measures to prevent river users from getting close to the dam, getting trapped by the current, or going over the dam may be warranted.

Peninsular Paper Dam, Ypsilanti

The upstream portage access, which also serves as the only public access point for the impoundment, was redesigned with a floating dock. The downstream portage, and the stairway access leading to it, are in disrepair and are not suitable for novice paddlers or those seeking stability when launching a small boat. The downstream launch platform is crumbling with age and exposed rebar creates a hazard for paddlers making a big downward step into a canoe or kayak.

The stairs leading down to the downstream launch area are often cited as unsafe and require priority attention.

While the pending removal of Pen Dam will not likely directly affect the launch area or the abandoned powerhouse, the future assessment of the powerhouse structure and the park area nearby may have an effect, and may provide an opportunity for a comprehensive ADA-compliant redesign of both the upstream and downstream launch areas.

Several paddlers have cited the condition of Pen Park and the presence of Pen Dam as reasons they avoid paddling from Ann Arbor to Ypsilanti. Along with the portage at Superior Dam, the segmentation of the river is enough to make many paddlers end their trip at Geddes Dam (Dixboro Dam).

French Landing Dam, Van Buren Township

This location has re-emerged as a top priority due to pending work on the Iron Belle Trail that is planned to follow a route south of Belleville Lake. The agreed upon trail alignment will share a section of path with previously designed portage and access improvements. This provides an opportunity for a key trailhead at an intersection of a major land and water trail.

The portage is currently one of the most difficult on the entire river. Even experienced paddlers prefer to entirely bypass the dam and much of Belleville Lake because of it. French Landing also sits as a starting point for a desirable stretch of river that leads into Lower Huron Metropark. A revitalized portage and launch presents lots of opportunities for trips down river to Flat Rock or New Boston.

Based on suggestions from many veteran paddlers extremely familiar with this area, if a safe portage around the dam isn't feasible for construction, an alternative, longer portage route should be recommended through wayfinding signage, maps and online materials. Novice paddlers should be encouraged to launch at the North Fishing Pier within Lower Huron Metropark until a safe portage or launch site at French Landing can be built.

Flat Rock Dam Portage, Flat Rock

The Portage at Flat Rock is perhaps the highest safety priority along the entire water trail. It is the only spot on the river that can effectively break the Water Trail for continuous travel. Paddlers are required to call in advance to get through a fence on private property. While information explaining this requirement and how to prepare for it is available online and in the Paddler's Companion, many river users, particularly those paddling through from outside the watershed, may not realize that a locked gate is waiting for them. The owner, Flat Rock metals, does not have a night or weekend contact phone number for stranded paddlers, and no information is posted on their gate or fence line for paddlers stranded at a locked gate.

In several recorded cases, even paddlers that were diligent and called ahead have found themselves locked out. In all verified cases, this was due to honest miscommunication between multiple groups of paddlers and Flat Rock Metals. In a small number of cases, emergency responders have been called to unlock the gate for stranded paddlers. In many more cases, frustrated paddlers have been seen ascending the bank and crossing through private property on the other side of the river.

The landing surface is also solid concrete and quite steep. During wet weather, the surface is slippery, and even under fair conditions, the landing can be difficult to ascend without damaging a watercraft.

A gate-free portage is required to ensure safe, reliable public access. This will require a change of policy by Flat Rock Metals and action by Flat Rock city staff to find a suitable arrangement.

Access and Navigational Concerns

Lack of Universal Access

Currently, there is one available Universal Access Launch at Gallup Park in Ann Arbor. This amenity draws usership from much of southeastern Michigan because it is one of relatively few UALs in the region.

Several partner organizations have proposed designs for Universal Access Launches in key locations. This includes launches at Kensington Metropark on Kent Lake, Argo Pond in Ann Arbor, Lower Huron Metropark, and Hulls Trace at the mouth of the Huron River. Placing additional UALs in relative proximity to existing UALs is considered best practice. Placing them at locations close to automotive parking is also recommended.

In some sections of the river, such as Natural River Districts, the overall environmental impact and cost of Universal Access Launches should be considered. UALs are best placed in areas with existing high demand and where there is already existing access to the river.

Access Gaps

There are more than 50 formalized access points along the Huron and an even greater number of “social launches” that are functional, popular, safe, but are not officially recognized for maintenance by any party. Along most of the Huron River, river users are not far from access point. There are remaining areas, however, where gaps in access have led to user complaints, users being stranded on the river, or they have been unable to make it to next available privy without stopping.

In some cases, access points with privies have had their facilities closed and locked unpredictably for paddlers. The reasons are unclear, though weather, state budgetary concerns, insufficient park staffing. This issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all managing organizations posting relevant information regarding facilities closures, more paddlers and river corridor users were unaware that services were suspended. Partner organizations should make sure they are coordinating efforts to communicate facility closures.

Notable areas where additional public access should be considered are:

- The US-23 intersection, from Placeway in Island Lake State Recreation Area to Cedar Ridge Launch at Huron Meadows Metropark
- The Chain of Lakes, from Cedar Ridge to the DNR Launch off McGregor Road

- Lower Huron Metropark, from East Bend to Big Bend. An access point at the South Fishing Site (42.162,-83.412) was requested by several experienced paddlers.
- Downriver from Flat Rock to Lake Erie

Improved Access Point Safety

With the exception of UALs, the vast majority of access points along the river provide safe access for the overwhelmingly majority of river users at that location. The design of access points generally meets the needs of most paddlers in the context of their setting. There are some access points that would benefit from a parallel tiered launch design. These are most useful in places of moving water where coming straight at a launch is challenging or the flow of the river pulls a perpendicular boat sideways. One example of a parallel tiered launch is at Placeway, where wooden beams and fill soil and rocks create steps that make for easy entry and departure of a canoe or kayak, regardless of the water level. This launch design may be applicable and preferable at the Lower Huron Metropark South Fishing Site, where there are high banks and “straight-in” access is difficult. An example of a safe and comfortable access point is the launch at Rapids View in Hudson Mille Metropark, where the water is shallow, and the launch is out of the main flow channel.

Other access points along the river, such as the launch below Kent Lake Dam, suffer from specific conditions like large boulders, debris, or erosion that make launching less safe. Such improvements to access points will need to be evaluated on a place-by-place basis continually, as conditions nearby can change over the course of as little as a few years.

Navigational Planning Concerns

In several locations along the river, novice paddlers or tubers have underestimated how long their trip would take and have found their groups stranded on the river. In some cases, this has required emergency services for rescue. In others, it’s resulted in users abandoning their boats or tubes while leaving litter behind. This issue has been most significant downriver from Flat Rock.

A recognizable, standardized design for water trail navigational signage and information should be followed. Many water trail partners express the need for more navigational and interpretive signage that goes beyond the baseline recommendations of the Huron River Watershed Council. The Huron River Watershed Council designed the current water trail signage with input from stakeholders. This design should be shared with other partners to standardize design as much as possible, making it easier for paddlers to spot relevant signage. Likewise, water trail partner organizations should adhere to HRWT signage design whenever possible.

Woody Debris and Transient Navigational Obstructions

Woody debris can cause significant, and sometimes critical concern for the safety of paddlers or damage to infrastructure. Woody debris is, however, the result of natural processes of a healthy river. It creates habitat for many aquatic species and can protect shorelines from rapid erosion. HRWC will continue to pursue a woody debris management strategy that conducts the minimal amount of intervention to protect paddlers while considering the context and location of individual issues. A fallen tree in a challenging stretch frequented by only veteran paddlers, for example, will be trimmed and managed less than a tree across a major, popular corridor used by novice paddlers.

The US-23 stretch from Placeway to Cedar Ridge suffers from regular seasonal accumulation of both small-diameter and large-diameter woody debris that makes passage difficult for experienced paddlers

and impossible for novice paddlers or those with special access needs. While this stretch is generally regarded as one of the most aesthetic and peaceful along the water trail, it should currently be recommended only to experienced, prepared paddlers. The flow conditions of the river affect the ability to pass this section. During high flow, it's often possible to pass over obstructions, but there is also a greater risk of paddler's getting trapped behind strainers.

In some cases, construction or other transient obstructions or infrastructure failures have resulted in river blockages. Water Trail partner organizations should inform other organizations as soon as they are aware of such temporary disruptions in water travel.

HRWC continues to coordinate with the Huron River Water Trail Ambassadors and woody debris management teams. However, a sustainable, long-term framework for recruiting and growing these programs is needed to make sure the entirety of the river is covered.

Communication Among Water Trail Partner Communities and Organizations

Livery operators, various nonprofits, local law enforcement agencies, public health departments, and emergency service providers each have their own standards and procedures for notifying river corridor users when a transient hazard emerges. Retail businesses that serve river recreation interests are also often omitted from such discussions. Improvements are needed for greater coordination of communication, material sharing, standardization of messaging, and notification of other water trail partners when hazards are identified. There is not currently a well-established system for communicating hazards between livery operators, non-profits, riverfront owners, and first responders.

Hazard Reporting Systems

As Water Trail partners evaluate reverse 9-1-1 systems, Apps that report hazards, communication of water trail closures, and protocols for reporting to county Sheriff's departments, they should communicate their actions to other water trail partner organizations.

Coordination of Events

Many water trail partners have emphasized the importance of cooperative recreation events for spreading relevant messaging across networks of water trail users. Interest in co-hosted events, or collaboratively promoted recreational ideas is high, providing an opportunity to share information among partners and trail users.

Water Quality

Due to its course through urban and agricultural settings, the Huron River is subject to recurring, transient contamination, seasonal loading of contaminants, and temporarily harmful conditions. It is also contaminated with PFAS at levels below existing health guidelines. Livery operations have been affected, as have recreational fishing, due to a state-issued Do Not Eat Fish Advisory currently in place.

The challenges will require broad efforts that encompass the entire watershed and many communities. Water Trail partners should continue to share information regarding the risks of PFAS and other potential health risks to inform river users.

Identified Stewardship Priorities

The increased popularity of recreation on the Huron River has also exacerbated the need for stewardship from river users and guidance from partner stakeholder organizations.

Previously identified stewardship concerns fall into the following categories:

- Environmental damage due to inappropriate behavior of river users
- Vandalism, mistreatment, and misuse of public or private property
- Littering
- Behavior unbefitting the traditional uses of specific river sections (such as high speed craft near paddlers or noise in traditional fishing waters)
- The transmission of invasive species

To address these concerns, the following general stewardship priorities have been identified:

- Work to standardize stewardship messaging and core materials across water trail partner organizations
- Expand the number of collaborative stewardship events among partner organizations
- Continue and expand the Water Trail Ambassador's program
- Build public awareness, especially in highly disrupted sections of river
- Discourage problematic practices such as the use of disposable refreshment containers, foam coolers, and the consumption of alcohol
- Remove practical barriers to better behavior, especially in highly disrupted sections of river

Vandalism, Mistreatment of Property, and Inappropriate Disposal of Waste

Vandalism, mistreatment of property, or misuse of assets is common in public areas. No access point or element of infrastructure is immune. There are however, several locations that have disproportionate rates or severity of mistreatment. This includes:

- Proud Lake to Island Lake State Recreation Area
- Dexter Barton Pond in Ann Arbor
- Argo Pond to Gallup Park in Ann Arbor
- Ypsilanti parks with river access
- Flat Rock to Lake Erie

Proud Lake to Island Lake State Recreation Area

While fair weather weekends during the summer paddling season see a high volume of river users, A disproportionate level of trash and abuse has not been reported. Some navigational signs have been stolen or defaced, and canoe campsites are sometimes mistreated.

Near Proud Lake, some semi-permanent campsites have been established during some years by people who are homeless. These dwellings often include unsecured materials that end up as trash in the river when unattended.

Many novice river users occupy this stretch of river along with veteran paddlers and anglers, increasing tensions about paddling etiquette. Improving paddlers' awareness of the river code of conduct is warranted here, as is the case along most of the water trail.

Dexter to Gallup Park

A popular junction of land access and recreational amenities is near the intersection of Mast Road with Huron River Drive in Dexter Township. In past seasons, illegal parking near a steeply embanked wetland immediately downriver from the Mast Road Bridge, with river users, primarily tubers, walking through the wetland to the river damaged the nearby natural area, created traffic hazards, and left behind significant amounts of litter. On rare occasions, human waste has been found on private property downriver of Delhi Metropark.

While on the river, large groups commonly behaved in a way that made families and other river users uncomfortable. This included frequent use of foul language, littering, and excessive noise. The behavior linked to many of the complaints was often associated with alcohol consumption.

Argo Pond to Gallup Park, Ann Arbor

This is one of the busiest recreational stretches of river in the State of Michigan. The Liveries at Argo and Gallup park serve more visitors every year than any other livery operation. This success has brought predictable challenges to nearby neighborhoods and property adjacent to the river. Overcrowding at liveries, river access points, and on the river are common issues. Importantly, this overcrowding is only partially caused by livery operations. Most of the increase in recreational use has been due to paddlers with their own kayaks or tubers with their own tubes.

While litter and minor environmental damage noticeably increases with greater river usage, the damage has not been disproportional to river use in this stretch. Many organizations within Ann Arbor have been active in conducting regular river cleanups that have alleviated the damage done by others.

Ypsilanti

Peninsular Park near Peninsular Paper Dam requires priority maintenance, repair, and ongoing stewardship attention. In addition to safety concerns related directly to river access. Offensive graffiti and harmful litter, including used medical items, has been found repeatedly by several users. The overall condition of the park dissuades river users from accessing the river or travelling through Pen Park.

Frog Island Park in Ypsilanti is home to the former location of a mural painted to represent the demographic makeup of Ypsilanti and help inspire diverse usership and care for the river. Starting in late 2018, the wall and mural facing the river was severely vandalized with hate messages. Later, it was vandalized with territorial messages perceived as threatening by some local residents. Due to weather, anticipated costs, and lack of certainty that the mural could be protected from repeated vandalism in the future, the mural was painted over in part and has not been restored.

The launch area adjacent to the mural is featured during Ypsilanti Fall River Day and is a particularly good spot for families wanting to explore Ypsilanti's stretch of river above Ford Lake.

Flat Rock to Lake Erie

The river sections downriver of Flat Rock to Lake Erie have seen an uptick in the number of river users leaving litter behind along the trail. Human waste has been left on private property, abandoned inner tubes have been found, and some homeowners have complained that river users cross their property without permission to get picked up along the river. Complaints of excessive noise, primarily from music

players or large groups, have been regular, as have complaints of debilitating drunkenness and loud, foul language.

Erosion near Flat Rock

Erosion concerns have been raised by park users of Huroc Park and landowners farther downriver. In the explored cases thus far, the erosion concerns are the liability of the property owners. High water levels since 2018 have contributed to accelerated erosion of launch surfaces and river banks in many areas, as is also the case along much of the river.

Washtenaw County Gap in Canoe/Kayak Campsites

The Huron River Water Trail currently has 4 designated campground areas with multiple campsites each, spanning reasonable travel options through Oakland, Livingston, and Wayne Counties. There is no designated canoe campground in Washtenaw County or adjacent areas of the water trail in Livingston and Wayne Counties. This deficiency is made clear throughout partner and HRWT materials online and in print.

HRWC facilitated a recent assessment to find feasible campsite locations in Washtenaw County, but none were identified within reasonable fiscal constraints or that didn't require significant land acquisition.

The gap in campsites leads paddlers to require additional access points, boat storage, and lodging options. Aside from dissuading veteran paddlers that want to paddle through the entire water trail continually without leaving the river corridor, the lack of campsites exacerbates additional stewardship challenges. On occasion, paddlers have camped on private property without permission, and in rarer circumstances, have left behind significant amounts of trash and human waste.

A reassessment of campsite options, or an effort to find alternative lodging and storage options for paddlers is needed.

Management and Resistance to Invasive Species

Invasive species are plants and animals that originally come from another area of the world, and can easily become established in our ecosystems. Infamous aquatic invasive species include zebra mussels, starry stonewort, New Zealand mudsnails, the sea lamprey, round gobies, Eurasian water milfoil, and the Asian carp. Some terrestrial species are honeysuckle, common buckthorn, garlic mustard, dame's rocket, and autumn olive.

Invasive species grow fast and dense, crowding out native species. Often, they can damage human health and the economy.

The Huron River is vulnerable to the spread of many invasive species. To date, most invasive species have been confined to specific areas of the watershed or specific parts of the Huron River. The river is vulnerable, however, because so many users are coming from other parts of the Midwest to enjoy it, and because many users of the Huron also vacation or use waterways elsewhere. Invasive species from those areas can be brought back to the Huron, or vice versa.

Many parts of the Huron are also suitable for large boats with ballast, a common invasive species transmission pathway. Small boats, however, including canoes, kayaks, and stand up paddleboards, can also transmit invasive species.

Water Trail partner organizations should coordinate messaging, community outreach, and materials to build public awareness to reduce the transmission of invasive species.

Woody Debris and Transient Navigational Obstructions

As discussed above with regard to safety, the US-23 stretch from Placeway to Cedar Ridge suffers from regular seasonal accumulation of both small-diameter and large-diameter woody debris that makes passage difficult for experienced paddlers and impossible for novice paddlers or those with special access needs. This particular stretch is intentionally managed for woody debris as minimally as possible since limited access points nearby make it a destination and refuge for more experienced paddlers that are more comfortable navigating obstacles. On the other hand, limited river access in this stretch in particular has made cleanups and stewardship of woody debris challenging, even in cases when the obstructions have been severe. While this is the most commonly cited area in need of greater woody debris management and navigational stewardship, many other sections of the river would benefit from a broader network of water trail ambassadors that can report transient stewardship concerns to HRWC and other partners.

Need to Expand Water Trail Maintenance Teams and Water Trail Ambassadors

The Water Trail Ambassador's program, currently managed by the Huron River Watershed Council, provides avid paddlers an opportunity to serve trail maintenance by identifying issues on pre-determined sections of river. This program has been highly successful, but likely needs to be expanded to fill in gaps in coverage of the river, both geographically and throughout the paddling season.

The currently promoted options for engagement are limited, and there is not a defined set of practices visible to water trail partner organizations. An expansion of the Water Trail Ambassador's Program to be more inclusive of volunteer interests, lifestyles, and capacities is warranted, as is a self-contained "toolkit" for partner organizations and prospective ambassadors interested in getting involved.

Communication Among Water Trail Partner Communities and Organizations

Improvements are needed for greater coordination of communication, standardization of messaging, and notification of other water trail partners as relevant events, stewardship initiatives, or funding opportunities become timely.

Many water trail partners have emphasized the importance of cooperative recreation events for spreading relevant messaging across networks of water trail users. Interest in co-hosted events or collaboratively promoted recreational ideas is high, providing an opportunity to share information among partners and trail users.

Many partner organizations and communities present educational materials and workshops throughout the year. Great collaboration around educational events, particularly those with a stewardship or conservation message, is needed.

Resources and Guidelines

To standardize messaging and guidance as much as possible, it's recommended water trail partners and area businesses that serve river recreation interests use the materials described in this section.

Safety Guidelines from the American Canoe Association

Huron River Water Trail Partners should follow safety guidelines established by the American Canoe Association (ACA). ACA educational resources are available at <https://www.americancanoe.org/page/Resources>.

The two main reasons that river users get into trouble on the Huron River are:

- They aren't wearing a life jacket (also called a PFD or portable floatation device)
- They overestimate their skills, underestimate the river, or are not sufficiently prepared

Safe paddling requires preparation, proper equipment, and experience. Canoeing and kayaking, even in seemingly calm waters, can be dangerous. The river creates constantly changing conditions and hazards such as strainers (brush piles and log jams that allow the current to flow through while holding you).

In many sections of the river, rocks or old concrete fragments visible above water during most of the paddling season can be submerged during higher flow conditions. Striking a rock or similar obstacle can puncture a boat and leave paddlers stranded, if not worse. For this reason, water trail partners should recommend paddlers venture through natural river areas with plastic kayaks or aluminum canoes at a responsible, manageable speed. Fiberglass hulls are vulnerable to many obstacles on the river.

HRWT partners should instruct river users to follow these tips for a safe trip down the river:

- Always wear a properly fitting life jacket when on the water. Adjust it to be snug and comfortable. It should not lift up when pulled by the shoulders.
- Impairment equals accidents. Do not go paddling if you should not be driving. Drinks and drugs are even more hazardous on the water.
- Know your limits. If you aren't comfortable in the conditions you are in, return to shore.
- Know whether and where hazards and mandatory portages exist.
- Choose a trip length appropriate for the time available, such as limited daylight in the winter.
- Dress appropriately for weather and water conditions, including air and water temperatures. Avoid hypothermia and carry spare dry clothes.
- River footwear is advised, especially in whitewater sections. Broken glass and other debris is a common hazard, especially in urban stretches or where alcohol is regularly consumed.
- Know how to get help in case of an emergency, including escape trails and roads near the river.
- Beware of flow levels and the recommended flow amounts for the section to be paddled.

River conditions are available through a link on the Huron River Water Trail website. Check [HERE](#).

Share the River Code from American Whitewater

Water Trail partners should make it clear that users of the Huron River Water Trail agree to abide by the Share the River [code of conduct from American Whitewater](#). Whether interacting with local residents or other river users such as anglers and boaters, paddlers have a responsibility to be good ambassadors of

the paddling community. Use the following common sense guidelines on the river and when traveling to and using river access areas:

- Be a competent swimmer with the ability to handle oneself underwater, in moving water or current
- Drive courteously and within the speed limit (Good driving etiquette, particularly in residential areas, is essential for maintaining positive relationships with those that live near paddling destinations)
- Park in designated areas making sure not to block driveways or interfere with traffic
- Change clothes discreetly
- Do not play loud music
- Be courteous to other river users at all times
- Follow the laws and rules of the area you are using
- Look after the natural environment – avoid damaging the riverbanks and vegetation.
- Protect native species and habitats – use dry or disinfected equipment
- Take a few moments to pick up litter left by others
- Leave no trace

Leave No Trace 7 Core Principles

The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics [has established 7 core principles](#) that have been widely adopted around the globe. The National Park Service, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation, and many other municipalities and organizations adhere to the standards of Leave no trace. For consistency of messaging and continuity of engagement, water trail partners should promote and follow the principles of Leave No Trace translated for river corridors.

Plan Ahead and Prepare

- Learn about river-specific issues, regulations and permits.
- Use a river guidebook and a map (a Paddler's Companion, or the online Huron River Water Trail Map) to plan your trip.
- Schedule your trip so that you encounter appropriate river flows for your group's ability.
 - River conditions are available through a link on the Huron River Water Trail website. Check [HERE](#).
- Prepare for extreme weather, hazards and emergencies.
- Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use; visit in small groups.
- Repackage food to minimize waste.
- Know river skills and carry the necessary equipment to minimize your impact.

[Click here for more information on Plan Ahead and Prepare](#)

Use Durable Surfaces When Camping or Getting To and From the Water Trail

- Durable Surfaces include rock, gravel, and sand.
- Focus activity where vegetation is absent.
- Concentrate use on existing trails and campsites.
- Select a campsite large enough for your group.
- When on day hikes in the river corridor, walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when muddy.

- Leave campsites clean and natural looking.

[Click here for more information on Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces](#)

Dispose of Waste Properly

- Pack it in, pack it out.
- Urinate and defecate only in maintained toilets, or use another approved method to pack out human waste, toilet paper and tampons. Check local regulations.
- Pack out all small food particles and small pieces of trash.

[Click here for more information on Dispose of Waste Properly](#)

Leave What You Find

- Appreciate structures, artifacts, art and other natural objects, but leave them undisturbed.
- Do not build structures or dig trenches on shore or in the river.
- Avoid introducing non-native species, including live bait, by cleaning equipment between trips.

[Click here for more information on Leave What You Find](#)

Minimize Campfire Impacts

- Avoid use of campfires and open flames unless absolutely necessary. When possible, use a portable stove instead. Contact campsite providers for proper wood use and campfire management.
- When campfires are necessary, burn all wood and charcoal to ash. Carry out ash with other garbage.
- When campfires are necessary, use a fire pan or designated fire ring for open fires and charcoal.
- When campfires are necessary, elevate fire pan and use a fire blanket to catch embers.

[Click here for more information on Minimize Campfire Impacts](#)

Respect Wildlife

- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them.
- Never feed wildlife; it damages their health, alters natural behavior and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
- Protect wildlife by storing food and trash securely.
- Control pets or leave them at home.

[Click here for more information on Respect Wildlife](#)

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Communicate with other river visitors about your floating and camping plans.
- Leave larger camps for larger groups.
- Non-motorized crafts usually have right-of-way over powerboats; slower boats should keep to the right.
- Let nature's sounds prevail. Keep noise, music, and conversation to a minimal volume.

[More information on Be Considerate of Other Visitors](#)

Inclusivity Challenges

Cutting across both stewardship and safety concerns throughout many stretches of the water trail are concerns regarding inclusivity. Universal Access, as described above, is one key infrastructural element, but the issue demands broader attention from partner organizations. HRWC and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources have been examining issues of diversity, equity and inclusion, and plan to expand these efforts in the future. Collaboration with and between these organizational efforts is needed among many water trail organizations and communities.

While recreational use of the water trail and the river corridor has become more ethnically diverse over time, it is still used by predominantly Caucasians of mixed socioeconomic background. Families with limited financial capacity are also underrepresented. Washtenaw County recently assessed its geographical needs for greater presence of county parks and services. It identified two communities with connection to river activities: Ypsilanti and Whitmore Lake. This aligns with water trails partners' sense that Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, and Belleville are underserved on the water trail. Rural communities in Livingston County and down river of Belleville Lake are also underserved. These areas warrant increased focus in programming, interpretive infrastructure, water trail access, and livery service. Practical barriers for recreation, such as distance to safe access points without motor vehicles, or the costs of renting small watercraft, need to be assessed along the water trail.

The contamination of the river with PFAS has also exposed a concern that safety signage and communication materials are less effective at reaching populations that do not speak English or are not fluent in English. In several areas in Ann Arbor, area residents are predominantly of Asian descent and often recently relocated to the United States, many people have been observed apparently sustenance fishing next to signs that warn residents not to eat the fish. This raises health concerns as well as cultural heritage concerns. For many cultures, fishing to feed yourself and your family are felt to be a natural right and help people connect to their ethnic identity. That connection is especially important for people living in a new, unfamiliar place.

Acknowledgements

The following Huron River Water Trail partner organizations and communities contributed directly to the review of this assessment:

City of Ann Arbor, Department of Parks and Recreations

City of Ypsilanti, Parks Commission

Friends of Island Lake State Recreation Area

Great Lakes Paddlers

Heavner Canoe & Kayak Rental

Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority

Individual Huron River Watershed Council members

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

REI staff from the Ann Arbor and Northville, MI store locations

Skips Huron River Canoe Livery

Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

Other Huron River Water Trail partner organizations and communities provided guidance and feedback through informal communication.

Funding for this assessment was provided by REI.