

Growing Stronger

2021 ANNUAL REPORT



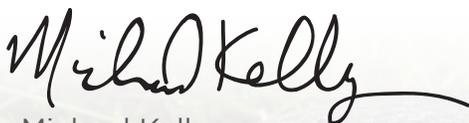
Dear Friends:

The old saying “you can’t see the forest for the trees” cautions us against focusing too much on the smallest of details, because we might miss the larger plan, principles, or objectives. In preparing the 2021 Saginaw Bay WIN Annual Report, this concept became especially clear because many of the projects we supported in the past year had a forestry component. Interestingly, having multiple projects with trees and forests at their core was not intentional, but rather a serendipitous culmination of efforts that WIN has supported in the past with partners who had long-term objectives and high-level concepts with regional quality of life, habitat restoration, and sustainability as guiding themes.

Reading through the annual report, you’ll learn of a passionate group of folks along the Shiawassee River who spent more than a decade working to remove a dangerous dam, and continue to work at the site to restore a native forest that was lost to the dam project more than 150 years ago. You’ll also learn about a local land conservancy working to analyze and restore the tree canopy in some of our urban areas, as well as a regional nature center that is looking at their forest and trying to protect it from non-native invaders. Finally, you’ll read about a project that isn’t related to forestry, but does focus on the long-term picture of restoring our native lake sturgeon population, the latest of many projects WIN has supported involving dam removal, stream restoration, and education.

Seeing the forest, rather than just the trees, has been a hallmark of WIN’s work for more than 20 years. Supporting local projects that are connected in a regional way builds that key sustainability relationship between the environment, the economy, and our communities. WIN continues to make strong progress across our objectives, thanks to the continued support of our funding partners and committees. Striving to see the forest, we continue our work moving into 2022.

I hope you enjoy this look back at 2021.



Michael Kelly
The Conservation Fund



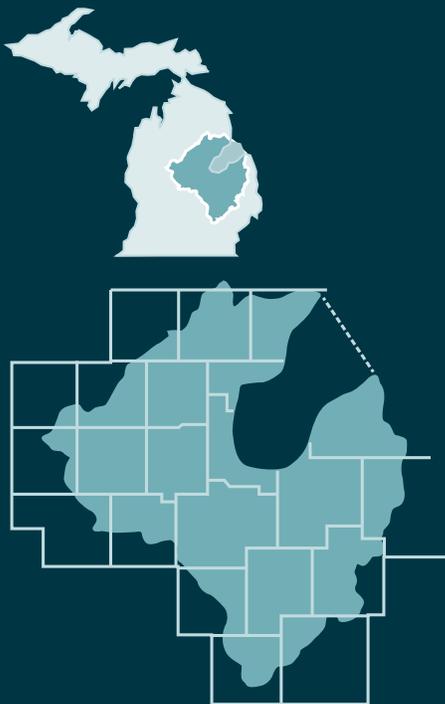
WIN Partners

A committed group of 12 foundations support WIN with financial contributions and technical support. They are:

Bay Area Community Foundation
Consumers Energy Foundation
Cook Family Foundation
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
The Dow Chemical Company Foundation
Harry A. and Margaret D. Towsley Foundation
Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation
Midland Area Community Foundation
Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation
S.C. Johnson Fund
Saginaw Bay Foundation
Saginaw Community Foundation

Where Is the Saginaw Bay Watershed?

The Saginaw Bay Watershed region contains rich resources in agriculture, forestry, industry, and recreation. As the state's largest watershed, it encompasses nearly 8,700 square miles in all or part of 22 counties in central Michigan. Approximately 15 percent of the state's waterways drain into the Saginaw Bay.



Growing Stronger

The idea of “growing stronger” has a lot of meanings, many of which resonate with Saginaw Bay WIN’s perspective that growth is as important to the projects we fund as eventual success. Maybe even more important.

WIN-funded projects focus on helping communities in the Saginaw Bay Watershed grow stronger environmentally, economically, and socially. The diversity of projects we support, as well as the organizations that champion them, helps ensure that innovative solutions for a variety of challenges in the watershed get the attention and support needed to grow and succeed.

WIN’s support also helps other funding organizations see real potential for growth. That’s because we place confidence in projects that have the commitment, collaboration, and unified vision to make a difference in the Saginaw Bay Watershed. Other funders, experts, and volunteers look at a “grant of approval” from WIN as a welcome invitation to join a wave of progress.

Growth is also transformative. The projects WIN funds bring positive change to the people, wildlife, and ecosystems affected by them. That’s always inspiring, especially to other leaders and visionaries who want to transform their conservation ideas into sustainable action.

WIN-funded projects grow stronger and realize success by being part of an effective and growing network of environmental trailblazers, experts, professionals, and funding organizations dedicated to caring for and protecting the watershed.

In 2021, Saginaw Bay WIN proudly awarded grants to:

Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative - *Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy*

CNC Land Restoration and Recovery Project - *Chippewa Nature Center*

Light Me Up LED Capital Improvement Campaign - *Greater Midland Community Centers*

Restoring the Shiawassee River and Enhancing Public Access - *Springfield Charter Township*

Riverside Park Development and Water Trailhead Project - *City of Caseville*

Shiatown Restoration and Reforestation Project - *Saginaw County and Friends of the Shiawassee River*

Tracking Young Lake Sturgeon Project - *The Conservation Fund and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

West Branch Tittabawassee River Dam Removal - *Huron Pines*



Photo credit: Zachary Branigan

Embarking on Tree Equity

Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative

Trees in Michigan are like the ocean at the beach. It's hard to imagine one without the other, and who would want to? Trees are so much more than landscape. They provide environmental and health benefits that go beyond their aesthetic value, especially in urban areas. Rooted in the belief that a strong "urban forest" improves life and health for everyone, the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy (SBLC) is embarking on the Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative.

Tree canopies in the Great Lakes Bay Region have declined significantly because of a variety of natural and manmade causes such as the emerald ash borer and development. In Saginaw and Bay City, different neighborhoods have responded differently to this loss. Many residents don't have the resources to replace dead trees on their property. The Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative will help improve "tree equity" in both cities by providing a reliable and economical source of healthy trees.

The Arbor Day Foundation and American Forests suggest that a 40 percent tree canopy is the goal for moderate-sized communities like those in the

Saginaw Bay Watershed. According to the SBLC's initial analysis using the Arbor Day Foundation's i-Tree tool, Saginaw has a tree canopy of 23 percent and Bay City just 17 percent. There's clearly room for improvement.

Planting an Idea

Through its Pollinator Project, the SBLC has spent five years remediating blight, slowing illegal dumping, and planting millions of wildflowers on vacant lots throughout Saginaw and Bay City. Those successful efforts led the SBLC and community leaders to wonder what else is possible.

"There was a lot of interest in urban gardens. Which is a great idea but much more involved than many people realize. In our area, there currently isn't the infrastructure to handle gardening issues like irrigation, harvesting, and distribution," says Zachary Branigan, executive director of the SBLC. "Knowing that there are a variety of beneficial plants other than vegetables, we thought why not develop a 'tree factory' to repurpose some of the vacant land identified through our Pollinator Project."

“Over the years, we’ve learned that our projects get better when we work with WIN. Their deep institutional knowledge and conservation experts help us improve our projects in ways we couldn’t achieve without their unique input.”

— Zachary Branigan, Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

LOCAL CHAMPION:
Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

WIN GRANT AWARD:
\$15,000

Photo credit: Zachary Branigan



Photo credit: Zachary Branigan



Photo credit: Zachary Branigan



The Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative is a simple, yet elegant, solution to the need for more trees in urban areas and efforts to repurpose vacant lots. The initiative will create a sustainable source of trees that will help increase the tree canopy and improve tree equity in these Saginaw Bay Watershed communities.

“Planting and growing trees is something we know and do very well. We have experts on staff who are certified and degreed conservation professionals. And we have wonderful municipal and community connections that will support the initiative,” says Branigan. “This project is a natural fit with our expertise and mission, as well as WIN’s mission.”

Growing a Promise

Funding from Saginaw Bay WIN will help buy and install trees on vacant lots and contribute to the establishment of SBLC’s tree nurseries. Repurposing the land will bring trees to private and public property in a new way, one that engages people and improves overall health and tree equity.

“Our goal is to develop a sustainable, self-replenishing source of trees for Saginaw and Bay City,” says Branigan. “Using vacant land to grow tree species native to Michigan elevates formerly blighted properties, while reducing the barriers of cost and availability that keep many people from planting trees.”

The SBLC has the infrastructure to manage the project already in place, including expertise, administration, equipment, and labor. In addition, the Better Branches Regional Tree Initiative will engage the community by inviting volunteers to work alongside paid employees. Young people will have opportunities to learn environmental lessons about the importance of trees and tree equity through educational outreach and local youth summer employment programs.

When the trees are deemed ready to transplant from the Better Branches nurseries, SBLC will offer them, along with guidance for proper planting and care, for free or at low-cost through its established network of area leader partners from faith-based groups, municipalities, farmers’ markets, and others.

“So far, the response from the community for the Better Branches project is universally positive. Our vision is strengthened by people who care about and engage in the nurseries. With community involvement, these once-vacant lots can be productive again, growing and supplying trees for years to come,” says Branigan.

Our Vision

As stewards of the Saginaw Bay Watershed, we value our shared, unique resources, and together we will balance economic, environmental, and social priorities to enhance the quality of life for this and future generations.





Defending Nature

CNC Land Restoration and Recovery Project

“Burn” and “mow” may not sound like usual activities for the Chippewa Nature Center (CNC). But when plant invaders get established and create havoc for native species, strategic “destructive” action is exactly what good environmental stewardship looks like. The CNC Land Restoration and Recovery project will defend native species against invasive plants and help return the land to a healthier state – even though it may look a little destructive in the process.

Invasive species, especially common buckthorn, have taken over in areas of CNC’s 1,500-acre property, harming the native plants and animals. That invasion, along with historical disruption from farming, gravel mining, and industry, has decreased the environmental quality of the area.

“Our land management goal at CNC is to produce and maintain ecosystems that are healthy and diverse. The Land Restoration and Recovery project helps us further that goal by restoring key areas of our property to their native ecosystem,” says Dennis Pilaske, CNC executive director. “Planned forestry mowing and prescribed burns will remove invasive

plant species and open up these areas to native wildlife use and more visitor engagement.”

Saginaw Bay WIN’s funding enhances a 2022-2023 Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) grant awarded to CNC for land improvement. This financial support highlights the importance of restoring the land’s native ecosystem by eradicating invasive species. It’s an issue that some CNC visitors may not fully understand.

“I’ve had conversations with hikers here. And it’s clear some people do not know which plants are invasive or the problems they create for native wildlife,” says Tom Lenon, CNC director of Land and Facilities. “This project has educational benefits along with environmental ones. We have another opportunity to teach about and encourage environmental stewardship.”

Ready, Set, Mow

Invasive species take hold and don’t let go. It doesn’t take long for plants like buckthorn to flourish, which leads to a lack of plant diversity and quality food for native wildlife. Many of the mammals, reptiles,

“WIN support for our projects adds value to the other funding we receive. It’s great to have the WIN team so accessible and willing to share their expertise. WIN is always a big champion of our projects.”

— Dennis Pilaske, Chippewa Nature Center

LOCAL CHAMPION:
Chippewa Nature Center

WIN GRANT AWARD:
\$14,975



amphibians, insects, and birds that make CNC their home have been negatively impacted by buckhorn proliferation in wooded wetlands.

Aggressive invaders require the strategic management practices defined in the Land Restoration and Recovery project. With WIN’s funding, CNC hired licensed contractors to forestry mow more than 15 acres of land to kill the buckthorn and perform a prescribed burn on an additional 17 acres to improve grasslands habitat. After these mechanical management practices are complete, CNC crews will hand cut regrowth and spot treat with herbicide for several years to keep areas under control.

The natural beauty of the ecosystem will shine as additional restoration efforts take root, including planting native species of wildflowers, grasses, trees, and shrubs in these areas. Finally, animals will thrive in the improved habitat with a little help from volunteers who will assemble and install new wood duck boxes, bat houses, and snake boards.

Appreciating the Restored Ecosystem

The Land Restoration and Recovery project will benefit human visitors as well as CNC’s native species.

“This part of CNC isn’t used by the public because of the thick and thorny buckthorn growing along the trails. People just travel through but don’t stay to enjoy,”



says Lenon. “When the project is finished, visitors will be able to appreciate the plants and animals that live in the newly opened habitat.”

The Land Restoration and Recovery project will feature prominently in CNC programming, educating visitors about natural resources, the native species that live in the wooded wetlands, and the importance of having a diversity of wildlife. The restored area will also give visitors opportunities to engage personally in the environment through activities like bird hikes and helping CNC employees tag Blanding’s turtles, a species of special concern in Michigan.

“Because the mowing and burning look destructive and can be confusing, we have signs that explain what we’re doing and why. Once visitors know the objective, they are excited and extremely positive about our stewardship effort,” says Pilaske. “The Land Restoration and Recovery project helps us show visitors successful stewardship in action.”

WIN Funding Process

WIN follows a unique, interactive process for awarding grant funding for projects and initiatives. Throughout the community-based review process, individuals from many organizations take part by reviewing project applications and offering their expertise on a variety of topics.

WIN awards grant funding twice each year; there are no grant deadlines. If you have a project to submit for funding consideration, contact WIN at (989) 892-9171 for an application.



Photo credit: USFWS

Fish for Answers

Tracking Young Lake Sturgeon Project

Inquiring minds want to know ... what's the real story behind this elusive clique? Where do they hang out? What are their plans? How far do they go? O.k., it's not exactly the latest hot celeb gossip. Yet, being in the know about this elusive species – lake sturgeon – will make a significant difference in restoration efforts for this native fish in the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

The new tracking project funded by The Conservation Fund and the Great Lakes Fishery Trust (GLFT) will use technology – an acoustic “selfie” – to shed light on the lifestyles of the barbeled and scuted.

“Lake sturgeon have become great ambassadors for aquatic stewardship in the Saginaw Bay Watershed. The reintroduction of fingerling sturgeon released into four Saginaw River tributaries has brought people together to learn about and root for this state-threatened species,” says Justin Chiotti, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) fish biologist. “But so far, we don't have a lot of data about the fish after they are released. We need more information to help fine-tune lake sturgeon restoration efforts.”



On Tracking

The goal of the Saginaw Bay lake sturgeon restoration project is to create a self-sustaining, genetically diverse adult population that could provide recreational fishing opportunities in Saginaw Bay. Although the project is off to a great start, project managers are making decisions based on information that may not reflect real-world conditions. And short-term results are hard to determine without accurate data about the fish.

The Tracking Young Lake Sturgeon project designed by the USFWS, Great Lakes Acoustic Telemetry Observation System (GLATOS), Michigan State University, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and U.S. Geological Survey is hoping to fill in those data gaps.

For the next two years of the Saginaw Bay lake sturgeon restoration effort, the group will implant acoustic transmitters into 160 fingerlings each year before they are released. Purchased with WIN and GLFT funding, the Innovasea Systems Inc. acoustic transmitters will be able to provide data for about a year after they've been implanted.

Stationary acoustic receivers will be deployed in the Cass, Flint, Shiawassee, and Tittabawassee rivers

“Working with WIN gives us a sense of being part of a conservation community. WIN is not only a good partner and collaborator, but it also provides an immediate connection to a larger conservation network in the Saginaw Bay Watershed.”

— Justin Chiotti, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

LOCAL CHAMPIONS:
The Conservation Fund and U.S. Fish
and Wildlife Service

WIN GRANT AWARD:
\$28,000

Photo credit: GLATOS



Photo credit: USFWS



Photo credit: Jorden McKenna,
University of Toledo



during the summer of 2022. Using these receivers, along with an array of receivers in Saginaw Bay operated by GLATOS project partners, the group will be able to track the fingerlings as they travel – and “ping” the receivers – through the river system and into the Bay.

The lake sturgeon restoration project in the Saginaw River watershed is unique. It is the only restoration effort in Lake Huron’s tributaries using fingerling sturgeon reared from two sources: the traditional Genoa National Fish Hatchery in Wisconsin and the Black River Streamside Rearing Facility in Michigan.

“With the tracking system, we will have an opportunity to compare these two sources, as well as follow the fingerlings’ activity in the different rivers and Bay,” says Chiotti. “While we love hearing recent stories from anglers who have caught and released lake sturgeon, we need data from the fish to improve restoration efforts.”

Fish Stories

Many “fish stories” are full of exaggeration – sorry, anglers – and can’t alone be relied on for successful restoration management. The data gathered through the Tracking Young Lake Sturgeon project are a different story since they come from reliable – and unbiased – acoustic data collected in the rivers and Saginaw Bay.

As lake sturgeon implanted with the acoustic transmitters ping the receivers, researchers will use the data to determine how far and where the lake sturgeon travel, how long they stay in various habitat, when they enter the Saginaw Bay, and their survival rate the first year after release.

Sharing the Stealth

The tracking results and acoustic receiver system from the Tracking Young Lake Sturgeon project are designed to be shared with:

- **Lake Sturgeon Restoration Management** – data will be used to guide the Saginaw Bay lake sturgeon restoration project to help ensure long-term goals for repopulation
- **Other Projects** – movement and survival data can be collected by other projects, like one proposed to monitor walleye
- **Education** – fish movement information will be incorporated into the Sturgeon in the Classroom and other school programs to teach students about sturgeon behavior and habitat

“The more we know about lake sturgeon in the wild, the better our efforts to restore their population will be,” says Chiotti. “I’m excited to share what we learn with all the people who care about and are working to bring this important native species back to the Saginaw Bay Watershed.”

Photo credit: USFWS

WIN’s Guiding Principles

- Provide a pleasant and healthy environment
- Conserve historic, cultural, and natural resources
- Integrate economic prosperity, ecology, and aesthetics
- Use land and infrastructure effectively
- Continually evaluate and refine shared vision and goals



Welcome Back

Shiatown Restoration and Reforestation Project



An adage states “what you’ve never had, you never miss.” That may not be true in all cases. Consider the former Shiatown Dam site: no one has experienced the forest that once existed there or realized the benefits of its undisturbed, diverse environment. And yet that is a real loss. The Shiatown Restoration and Reforestation project is creating a peek into what people and wildlife have been missing at that spot on the Shiawassee River for more than 150 years.

“Historically, this area was a forest with a canopy of native trees that lined the Shiawassee River until Euro-American settlers arrived. As they cleared the forest and dammed the river, they changed the environment, sometimes unknowingly in negative ways,” says Phil Hathaway, consultant for Shiawassee County Parks and Recreation Commission and project director for the Friends of the Shiawassee River (FOSR). “In 2021, we started the final phase of restoration at the Shiatown dam site by planting trees and shrubs to reintroduce that original native forest.”

A Land Challenge

Removing the dilapidated Shiatown dam was a big undertaking, though an extremely important one for human safety and environmental quality. Because it was once a hydroelectric dam, the remaining structure was large, requiring extensive excavation and restoration of the river channel and land by an ecological consulting contractor.

When the dam was removed, the contractor also planted rye grass along the banks of the river. While it became a pleasant destination for Shiatown County Park visitors and paddlers on the Shiawassee River National Water Trail, the FOSR still had more work to do.

“It has taken a long time to get to this final part of the project. With the Shiawassee River at its foundation, the site restoration opens environmental, recreational, and economic opportunities in the area,” says Hathaway. “The FOSR is continuing to work with the Shiawassee County Parks and Recreation Commission to complete the last step to rehabilitate the site. Planting trees and shrubs – and caring for them as they get established – will create a more historically natural setting and address broader environmental goals.”

“WIN respects and understands the value of professional volunteer efforts, which is reflected in decisions about grant amounts. WIN is also efficient in its proposal evaluations and able to offer advice for improving projects, thanks to the expertise of its members.”

— Phil Hathaway, Friends of the Shiawassee River

LOCAL CHAMPIONS:
Shiawassee County and Friends
of the Shiawassee River

WIN GRANT AWARD:
\$12,000



The Final Phase

In the fall of 2021, the final stage of restoring the two-acre Shiatown dam site began. Using funding from Saginaw Bay WIN and other organizations to purchase the plants, FOSR and other volunteers planted 62 trees and shrubs at the Shiatown County Park and along the Shiawassee River. In the spring of 2022, another 28 trees and shrubs will be added to the growing forest.

The new forest of native plants will provide both beauty and long-lasting environmental benefits, including strengthening plant diversity in the area and sequestering carbon to help offset climate change.

“We worked with a registered forester who chose 18 different tree species that are native to Michigan. That will help ensure the plants thrive in our climate and promote plant diversity appropriate for the ecosystem,” says Hathaway. “I’m excited to see these native plants – like alder, beech, maple, oak, hickory, and my personal favorite, tulip tree – growing along the river.”

An Uncommon Approach

Much of the final phase of the Shiatown Restoration and Reforestation project is common sense environmental practice. However, the project involves some uncommon – but still common sense – work as well.

To start, the native trees planted by FOSR volunteers are not tiny saplings needing years to grow before they are noticeable. The new trees are 1-1/2 inches in diameter, creating a “jump start” for reforestation at the Shiatown County Park.

“After we planted the trees last fall, the area looked like a park overnight. You start to see what the full

tree canopy will ultimately look like. And because they are larger trees, the foliage will fill in nicely in just a few years,” says Hathaway. “We will label the different trees and shrubs so people, especially students, can learn about them and the importance of having native plant diversity in an ecosystem.”

In addition, the Shiawassee County Parks and Recreation Commission had the foresight to adopt a five-year maintenance plan to help ensure the new plants survive. Providing funding for an employee to care for and maintain the plants is critical to project success and shows the community’s full commitment to reforestation.

“Since the trees were planted last fall, we’ve gotten all the positive feedback you could hope for. People are amazed at how different – how beautiful – the site looks after the dam removal and all the restoration work that’s been done,” says Hathaway. “The project is a great example for the public to see how a once-disturbed landscape can be rehabilitated into a healthy ecosystem successfully.”

About the Saginaw Bay Watershed

- Home to more than 90 fish species, 138 endangered or threatened species, and 1.4 million people
- Includes more than 175 inland lakes
- Contains about 7,000 miles of rivers and streams
- Path for migrating song birds and waterfowl on the Mississippi Flyway
- Significant agricultural and industrial resources supporting Michigan’s economy



Contact Us

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The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network is facilitated through a partnership of The Dow Chemical Company Foundation, The Conservation Fund, and local and regional organizations dedicated to promoting the concepts of sustainability in the Saginaw Bay Watershed.



— THE —
CONSERVATION FUND