



After only three years of grass roots efforts, the St. Clair Lake-Six Mile Lake Natural Area now boasts 4,000 feet of shoreline and 145 acres that include some of the richest ecological diversity in the region.

ST. CLAIR LAKE - SIX MILE LAKE NATURAL AREA

Efforts to protect a unique, fragile wetland system near Ellsworth have brought two conservancies and a grassroots group of organizers together to engineer a continuing success story on Antrim County's Chain of Lakes.

Now called the St. Clair Lake-Six Mile Lake Natural Area, this important preserve protects 2,000 feet of frontage on St. Clair Creek, an additional 2,000 feet of pristine shoreline on the navigable Sinclair River and was recently expanded to include 145 acres.

Efforts to save this ecologically significant area on the "upper chain" began just over three years ago when the Little Traverse Conservancy and the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy joined hands with a group of concerned citizens led by JoAnne Beemon. "We couldn't believe such wilderness existed so close to Charlevoix," Beemon explained.

The natural area actually straddles the Charlevoix-Antrim County line and led to the first collaboration of the two conservancies. "By preserving key tracts of land that make up the headwaters of the Chain of Lakes system," explained Tom Bailey, Executive Director of the Little Traverse Conservancy, "We can protect the water quality of the lakes downstream and have a positive impact on the entire watershed."

Glen Chown, Executive Director of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy describes the area as "one of the most diverse wetlands I've ever seen, anywhere, with undisturbed plant communities and diversity of species."

Fund raising efforts to secure the area began early in 1993. By that September, the group had raised \$17,000 to begin purchasing critical areas. Beemon said over 400 people donated when the campaign began. Bake sales, benefit concerts, walk-a-thons, school benefits, and annual Earth Day activities have been the mainstay of fundraising efforts. Once the preserve was established, the local group and Beemon worked to acquire adjacent properties and expand the area.

With development pressures increasing, properties adjacent to the existing natural area have become a priority for protection. Four separate parcels have now been acquired, the most recent being a 60-acre parcel in South Arm Township. Half of the

acquisition were provided through a gift from Tad and Brenda Malpass of East Jordan in cooperation with the Charlevoix Community Foundation. The remainder of the money was donated anonymously.

The area is known to local residents as a place where one can view mink, otter, herons, kingfishers, and an occasional bald eagle. This wetland offers a refuge for migrating waterfowl and numerous bird species seeking a secluded area free of human intrusion.

A mosaic of important habitat types are found in this preserve including marshlands, hardwood/conifer swamp forests, and shrub-dominated wetlands. The pristine shoreline is carpeted with an abundance of wild roses, cardinal flowers, ferns, and a diverse array of colorful marsh plants.

"This glorious river frontage is known and loved by all who enter the quiet majesty of this river sanctuary for plants and wildlife," Beemon said. "If something is important, you simply cannot accept anything but victory."

The Friends of St. Clair Lake-Six Mile Lake Natural Area Steering Committee is comprised of Cherie Hogan, Michele Nerone, Phil Ohmer, Harold Shirey, Ron Tschudy and Beemon.

Annual Earth Day activities at the preserve on April 20 included a March for Parks (with proceeds going to the group's Land Acquisition Fund), a classic Mort Neff fishing film, trolley tours of the natural area and lunch at the Wooden Shoe Park in nearby Ellsworth.

Efforts to protect additional property in the area continue. "We have an opportunity to secure an additional 4,000 feet of river frontage," Beemon explained. "A \$50 donation will enable us to purchase a foot of pristine marsh meadow and lush cedar lined river gardens of wild iris, cattail, waterlilies, ferns and cardinal flower."

Bailey noted that Beemon and the steering committee deserve a great deal of credit for the success of this project. "The folks on this committee, led by JoAnne's enthusiasm and can-do spirit, have accomplished the impossible," he said.

For more information on the St. Clair Lake-Six Mile Lake Natural Area call the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy at 929-7911



Citizen activism has fueled the preservation efforts in the Upper Chain, led in part by these members of the Steering Committee, from left, Phil Ohmer, Ron Tschudy, Michelle Nerone and JoAnne Beemon.

Chain Reaction

Citizen activism pays off on the Upper Chain as preserve expands.

Ron Tschudy lives in the land of rustic cabins, open fields, thick woods, and beautiful small lakes. It is here where Antrim County's Chain of Lakes begins in a more remote area locals call "the upper chain."

"I've canoed these waters with my son. I've experienced them first hand," Tschudy explained. "When I saw more buildings going up along Six Mile Lake Road and problems with growth and development in the area I decided to get involved. This is a relatively unknown and hidden area that is now being discovered."

About four or five years ago Tschudy began attending the meetings of the Six Mile Lake Association and found others living on or near the lake were also concerned. Eventually the Friends of St. Clair Lake and Six Mile Lake Steering Committee was formed. "This is a group of like-minded people with a simple goal—preserve the area," Tschudy explained.

Through his involvement with this group Tschudy became a board member of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy. "When our group hooked up with the Conservancy good things started to happen," he said. "They have provided a steady hand in this effort."

At this point the group has already protected 145-acres and has identified three additional parcels that still need to be secured. "We've been able to generate enough credibility and momentum that large donors are stepping forward to help out."

Tschudy says the leadership and enthusiasm provided by JoAnne Beemon has been instrumental in the success of the project. "JoAnne is the kite and we are the tail," he said. "We have no paid staff, we're just a group of volunteers with a can-do attitude. There's a lot of innocent enthusiasm in this grassroots effort."

By Greg Reisig

trees, hold field trips, sponsor Earth Day activities, sell t-shirts, and acquire the necessary funds to protect the entire river corridor.

Tschudy says there is much more work to be done on the upper chain and throughout the watershed. "Each of these small lakes is connected by a river," he explained. "These are the areas that have not been developed because they are too wet. I'm hopeful that these areas can also be preserved in a fashion similar to what we've done up here."

He also talks about the need for people to canoe these lakes and rivers and experience them first hand. "My next goal is to get involved in a watershed-wide effort. Good things always happen when like-minded people come together to form a grassroots effort."

For Ron Tschudy and other citizens who live on or near Antrim County's 14-lake Chain of Lakes the clock is ticking and there's still much work to be done.