

Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy

Conserving mid-Michigan's
natural, scenic, recreational
and agricultural lands

midmilandcons.org

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From the President

Paul Kindel

Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy (MMLC) has come to an important point in its development as a land conservancy. Until now MMLC has been occupied with responding to landowners who want to protect their lands with conservation easements and with acquiring selected tracts of land that the Conservancy owns and opens to the public as natural areas. We are now able to handle such requests promptly and knowledgeably. MMLC now needs to become more proactive. It needs to engage landowners of natural land and farmland and explain the importance and benefits of protecting their land and explain how such protection can be achieved. MMLC has started on this process. This winter the Board approved a 5-year strategic plan. The plan states that MMLC should change from an organization run by a volunteer board of directors to an organization run by staff following

the policies developed by the Board. The Board of Directors will change from one that does everything to one whose primary functions are determination of policy, organizational oversight, fundraising, and general leadership. Having staff will allow us to engage landowners proactively. This spring we received a 1-year grant from Freshwater Future of Michigan that will provide us with support for implementing our 5-year plan. Another important development for MMLC is that in July of this year MMLC was accepted into the accreditation program run by Land Trust Alliance (LTA), the national advocacy organization for land trusts (conservancies). This is the start of a lengthy and involved process for MMLC to become an accredited land conservancy through LTA. If we successfully complete this process, we would become an accredited land conservancy in 2019. The entire accreditation process takes about two years, and all aspects of the operations of a land conservancy are examined by LTA in the process.

THE EVOLVING STORY OF BUNKER NATURE PRESERVE



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THE EVOLVING STORY OF BUNKER NATURE PRESERVE, cont.

BACKGROUND

Paul Kindel

Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy (MMLC) owns four properties fee simple. All are being maintained as natural areas. The purpose of these natural areas is to have undisturbed places in our rural landscapes for native plants and animals to live in a natural environment and for people to enjoy such areas. All are open to the public. Walking trails for the public have or are being built on these properties.

This newsletter features Bunker Nature Preserve (BNP). We encourage people to visit the Preserve and walk the trails. BNP is located at 4349 Bunker Road, Aurelius Township, Ingham County, which is between Edgar and Aurelius Roads. It's about 5 miles southwest of Mason. Parking is available off Bunker Road in a cut-grass lot by the large wood MMLC sign. An unlocked cable may be across the parking lot entrance. Unhook the cable and set it aside.

Following is a history of BNP since MMLC became involved with the property.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS STEWARDS

Eckhart Dersch

It is with a profound sense of gratitude, commitment, and enthusiasm that Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy approaches its responsibility to be the best steward it can be of the Bunker Nature Preserve. In the four years since this 130-acre property was donated to MMLC, we have been able to make it accessible to the public by creating a small parking area and by developing a system of trails. In addition, we installed some unobtrusive signage, restored and enhanced three wetlands, conducted a controlled burn of the existing 20-acre prairie, planted 40 more acres to prairie grasses and flowers, and started programs to control invasive, non-native plant species. This will always be a work in progress because we are dealing with a dynamic natural system, and our stewardship of this land has just begun.

In pre-European settlement days the land of Bunker Nature Preserve was largely forested. Since then a series of significant man-made changes occurred, and these resulted in what we see today. Early settlers in the mid-1800s cleared the land of timber, drained its wetlands and farmed the better part of this area

The Beginning

It all began with a call from a representative of a landowner to MMLC in March of 2012. The caller asked if we would be interested in receiving a donation of a tract of land in Ingham County that the landowner owned. We enthusiastically and emphatically said "Yes". Later that month several board members and I visited the 130-acre tract and immediately saw the beauty of the land. It has an attractive blend of habitats – wetlands, prairies, and woods, and there is a gentle roll to the property. Three exceptional wetlands are on the property, one 12 acres, one 3.5 acres, both with open water, and a 2.5 acre wooded wetland, all interconnected. Also on the property was a partially completed house into which the landowner had planned to move. A change of plans caused the landowner to move out of the state. The landowner generously donated the property to MMLC. It was transferred to MMLC on June 13, 2013. Eckhart Dersch is the Preserve Steward for BNP.

throughout the 1900s. It was not until 2013 when a generous donor, having envisioned the transition of this land back to a more natural state, including prairie, wetland, and additional woodland, decided to transfer the land to MMLC for protection as a nature preserve in perpetuity.

Now, as the steward, we are constantly learning more about the fauna and flora of this property while at the same time we implement actions that will assure its purpose as a nature preserve. Today, the public is invited to visit this site and benefit from its rich educational features and enjoy its natural beauty.

The Next Phase

Building on the first steps already taken by the donor to convert 20 acres of farmland to prairie vegetation and planting several thousand trees, MMLC embarked on a multi-faceted plan to provide public access and manage this ecologically significant nature preserve in a sustainable manner. Several steps have already been taken to accomplish these goals:

1. Removing a dwelling: In 2013 an early and extremely difficult decision was made to remove a partially completed home from the site after all other alternatives for using the structure had been exhausted. Even this was turned into a gain by making the lumber salvaged from the home available to returning veterans in the Ingham County region for construction of new homes. The house was disassembled and removed from the property in the winter of 2013 and spring of 2014. The site was graded and is currently regenerating nicely.

2. Entrance and parking: In 2015 and 2016, an area adjacent to Bunker Road, on which a former farm house stood, was marked and mowed to create a convenient parking area. A trailhead was also established for the evolving system of loop trails throughout the site.

3. Signage: In 2015, a new entrance sign was completed by Mason High School students who, with the guidance of their teacher, Jasen Filipiak, in the Wood I class, carried the project from a sketch on paper, to programming in AutoCAD, to conversion into G-code for final operation of a state-of-the-art, computer-driven router to precisely carve the letters into specially selected cypress boards. It was installed in July of 2015. With its many coats of marine varnish, the sign should last for many years.

4. Trail development: A system of loop trails was developed in 2015 and expanded in 2016. These trails, extending about 1.5 miles at this time, were designed to offer the visitor the best possible views and access to the nature preserve's many natural and scenic



Bunker Nature Preserve trails



Bunker Nature Preserve entry sign.

features. Currently, a neighbor who formerly lived on this property has generously agreed to mow the trails for us. This system of trails will grow as more land is converted to prairie and woodland from its former agricultural uses.

5. Wetland restoration: The most ambitious project to date was the restoration and enhancement of three large wetlands in 2015. With planning, engineering, and financial assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under their Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the Bunker Road Wetland and Grassland Project was launched. Guided by Jim Hazelman, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biologist, new outlets and water level control structures were installed and old agricultural tile drains were disabled in each of the wetlands. These wetlands are located in the north-central, west-central, and southwest areas of the nature preserve and cover about 18 acres. They provide much needed nesting, feeding, and resting opportunities for both resident and migratory birds, and a home for many amphibians and other water-dependent wildlife and plants. In combination with the surrounding prairie plantings, these wetlands are providing productive wildlife habitats and are a favorite viewing area for birders.

6. Controlled burn: In March 2017, we contracted with David Borneman of Restoring Nature With Fire, to conduct a professionally managed, controlled burn of the existing 20 acres of prairie planting. This burn is required to enhance prairie viability by controlling some invasive plants, adding nutrients to the soil, and promoting sunlight penetration. The vigor of returning prairie vegetation attests to the success of this operation. Also made obvious by the burn is that not all invasive plants can be controlled by fire alone. Eradi-



Wetland restoration in progress. Photo courtesy of Jim Hazelman, USFWS



Controlled burn at the Bunker Nature Preserve.

cation of Canada thistle and reed canary grass will be major continuing challenges.

7. Additional prairie planting: A second major project occurred in June 2017, when 42 acres of prairie grassland vegetation were planted in the central, northeast, and east-central fields where soybeans had been planted the previous year to help prepare the soil for the prairie planting. This project was substantially aided by planning, technical, and financial assistance under the same U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Program that assisted us with our wetland restoration project. This planting will require continuing attention

due to extreme dryness this summer and the need to prevent the return of non-prairie plants from residual seed stock remaining in the soil.

8. Invasive plant control: Not surprisingly a number of non-native and other invasive plants have been found on this site. They include garlic mustard, dames rocket, black swallow-wort, spotted knapweed, Canada thistle, reed canary grass, Japanese barberry, honeysuckle, autumn olive, and buckthorn. Except for Canada thistle and reed canary grass, their densities are relatively low. Volunteers have already helped us reduce the garlic mustard infestations. However, their seeds are viable for up to eight years, so they will be germinating for several years to come. With continuing help from volunteers we believed we will be able to hold most of these invasive plants in check or eliminate them.

9. Trail enhancements: At this writing Boy Scout Eagle candidate, Troy Sinnaeve Jr., is installing trail directional signage keyed to a trail map which he is also developing. In addition, he is building and installing three weather-resistant benches in strategic locations to provide resting and viewing places for visitors.

10. Site attributes: We have only begun to inven-

tory and understand the flora and fauna found in this nature preserve. The combination of open and wooded wetlands surrounded by upland prairie and wooded areas offers rich and diverse habitats for plants and animals



Clockwise from top left: purple coneflower, American rubyspot damselfly, tulip poplar flower, eastern amberwing dragonfly.

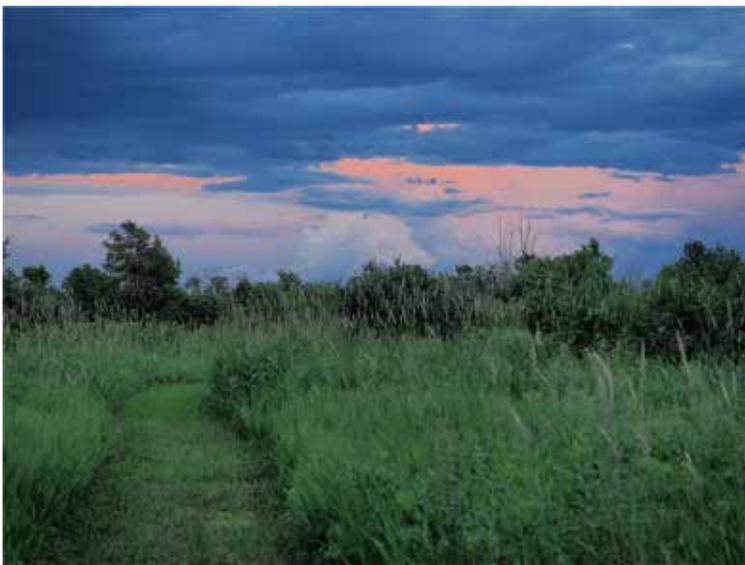
on this site. This provides us with an opportunity for interesting, continuing, and exciting discoveries, as we learn more about this site and as nature too, continues to discover and thrive in this dynamic area. So far, we are learning more every year about known inhabitants such as the monarch butterfly, pheasant, grouse, owls, sandhill crane, great blue heron, egrets, kingfishers, migrating and resident ducks and geese, fox, and coyote. A number of bat species reside on the property, including evidence of the listed Indiana bat. We also have evidence that the listed northern long-eared bat appears to migrate through this site. In addition, there

are a number of vernal pools on the preserve which, as yet, have not been fully explored. In time we will know even more about the habitats, inhabitants, and other special features of our preserve.

The Future

In the near future we will continue to make this an increasingly user- and wildlife-friendly place for learning, enjoyment, and relaxation. At the same time, we will do our best to make substantial gains against the invasive plant colonies, and recruit interested volunteers who are willing to help. And of course, we will continue our commitment to manage the existing established prairie and especially move forward to do what we can to help the newly planted prairie reach its potential. We expect to learn new things about the dynamics of this preserve every step of the way.

In the more distant future we envision this nature preserve becoming an ever more valuable and rare feature of our mid-Michigan landscape, where it will be seen as an island wisely preserved and protected in the midst of increasingly intensive agriculture and residential development. The beneficiaries of our planning and work today will be the coming generations of people, plants, and animals – in perpetuity.



Bunker Nature Preserve sunrise. Photo courtesy of Mary Dove.

The Conservancy Movement

Paul Kindel

The protection of land by land conservancies (trusts) I call The Conservancy Movement. What is the goal of this movement, what methods are used to achieve the goal, what has the movement accomplished, why has it flourished, and what should the goals of the movement be in the immediate future.

The goal of the conservancy movement is to protect the conservation values of natural land and farmland in the United States. What are the conservation values of natural land and farmland? These conservation values are: (i) the forests, woods, wetlands, prairies, shrublands, and other habitats on these lands, (ii) the native plants and animals on these lands, and (iii) the soils of these lands.

The majority of land protected by the conservancy movement is through conservation easements. Clearly the conservation easement is highly important for the conservancy movement. A conservation easement is a written, legal document between a landowner and a qualified acceptor organization that protects the conservation values of the land by restricting activities on the land that harm these values. Conservation easements are being used throughout the United States to protect lands. According to the 2016 Annual Report of the Land Trust Alliance, 56 million acres of land in United States have been protected by local, regional, state, and national land trusts as of the end of 2015. Nine (9) million acres have been protected since 2010, a 19% increase. Fifty-six (56) million acres is approxi-

mately 1.5 times the land mass of the State of Michigan. This protection has been accomplished mainly through the use of conservation easements or their equivalent. These numbers do not include land protected by conservation easements held by government agencies. Land conservancies have also protected a significant amount of land by acquiring the land fee simple, that is, acquiring outright ownership of the land. This method of land protection is considerably more expensive than the use of conservation easements since all the rights of the land are purchased. In both types of protection the goal is the same, protection of the conservation values of the land.

56 million acres of land in United States have been protected by local, regional, state, and national land trusts as of the end of 2015

Protecting the conservation values of land by conservation easements is a desirable way to protect land for a number of

reasons. One reason is that it is voluntary on the part of both parties, landowner and land conservancy. In addition, when a conservation easement is placed on land, the land remains in private ownership, it stays on the tax rolls, and it can be sold on the open market at the most favorable offer. The landowner retains all the rights associated with land ownership except those rights that can harm the conservation values of the land. Landowners like conservation easements because they give them peace of mind knowing that the conservation values of their land will be protected now and into the future, in perpetuity. Conservation easements are much stronger than zoning in protecting the conservation values of land. Conservation ease-

DONATION IN APPRECIATION

THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE MADE GIFTS TO THE CONSERVANCY IN APPRECIATION OF ANOTHER PERSON OR GROUP OF PEOPLE

Maria and Andrew Lapinski-LaFaive:

In appreciation of the teachers at MacDonald Middle School, East Lansing.

ments typically can only be changed or dissolved by the process of eminent domain, a process that is more public, involves considerably more steps, and is given much more scrutiny than a zoning change, and it often involves the legal system.

In addition to being an excellent way to protect the conservation values of land, the conservancy movement has also flourished because of a strong organizational structure. It starts at the national level with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA). LTA is the national advocacy organization for local and regional land conservancies. There are approximately 1,700 land conservancies in United States. LTA has developed a number of important programs for land conservancies. One is the accreditation program. Its purpose is to improve the quality of operations of land conservancies. As of February of 2017, 372 land trusts have been accredited and they hold 77% of the conserved land held by all land trusts. It also produces and distributes a variety of programs that assist land trusts in improving their operations. These cover topics such as preparing conservation easements, acquisition of land, interacting with communities, financial issues, fund raising, and board membership. LTA has also founded Terrafirma. This is an insurance organization that assists land conservancies with legal issues that arise when the conservation values of their conserved lands are threatened. It provides the financial and legal support to defend the conserved land of member land conservancies that may be or are being violated or are under legal challenge. It has been in existence for four years and has been very successful. The formation of Terrafirma is another indication of the commitment that land conservancies have for protecting the land they promise to protect. LTA also interacts well with Con-

gress. It has successfully worked with both houses to pass excellent tax incentives that encourage landowners to protect their land. It has also worked successfully to make funds in the Farm Bill and the Land and Water Conservation Fund more accessible to land conservancies for purchasing conservation easements.

Two important goals exist for land conservancies in the immediate years ahead. One is to increase the rate of protecting land with conservation values. The second is to improve the quality of operations of land conservancies.

Will the conservancy movement succeed in protecting an adequate portion of the remaining natural land and farmland in the United States? Based on LTA analyses, our country is currently losing 4,100 acres of natural land and farmland each day. This is 1.5 million acres/year. Our population continues to increase, development continues to expand, and now, increasing, additional threats are coming from the development of renewable energy sources, from further development of non-renewable energy sources, and from transmission systems for energy. However, these threats can be met if there is an interested and committed citizenry. Citizens must demand the protection of such lands. They must make their voices heard persistently and widely. It can be done. Let's hope it happens.

A central question remains unanswered. How much total natural land and farm and ranch land in the United States should be protected? The answer is complex because it depends on many factors, such as, aesthetic, economic, environmental, tax benefits, recreational, quality of life, and cultural. However, it is a question that needs our immediate attention.

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN MMLC FOR 2018 NOW AND SAVE MMLC SOME FUNDS

In November of each year MMLC sends a letter to all members asking them to renew their membership for the next year. We will do this again this year. However, there is an alternate way you can renew your membership that will save MMLC money and save the membership committee their time. The alternative way is to use the self-addressed letter enclosed in this newsletter to renew your membership. If you send your membership in the enclosed, self-addressed envelope and we receive your renewal by the first week of November, we will not need to send you a letter in November requesting renewal for 2018. However, regardless of when and how you renew your membership, you will, of course, receive our Annual Report – 2017 and all other communications we send in 2018 concerning MMLC activities. -Paul Kindel

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Get Involved!

We welcome your involvement and support! Join us in our efforts to protect Michigan's natural areas, wildlife habitat, scenic lands, farmlands, and recreational lands so rural landscapes are protected.

Become a member. Volunteer.

Considered protecting your land with MMLC.

Contact us to learn about opportunities to get involved and about different options for protecting your land.

Additional information is on our website, www.midmilandcons.org. You can contact us by e-mail at kindel@msu.edu or by telephone at 517-332-3091.

You may also donate online by using the secure PayPal™ system at our website.

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