



Public Lands in *Well-Washed* Public Hands

By Charlie Booher

*"I am glad I will not
be young in a future
without wilderness."*

Aldo Leopold

As of this writing in early April, the world is fundamentally different from just a few weeks ago. Schools are canceled, parents are working from home and people are practicing social distancing on a scale bigger than we have ever seen in our lifetimes. While there are a number of concerns for human health and public safety, there are things that make this time more bearable — notably places to go outside that are free and open to all of us. From city parks and trails to national forest lands and wilderness areas, the wild places of this country are areas where we can all go to escape the monotony of our homes and apartments. They are places for our kids to play, for us to escape and for everyone to enjoy.

In this time, I have had the privilege to recreate on local, state and federal lands — places that would not exist without the foresight of those who came before us. Walking on well-maintained trails, rabbit hunting on state game areas and looking for sheds in local conservancies would not be possible without significant financial support from multiple authorities. As I travel to these places on foot and by car, I notice my familiar haunts are as full as I have ever seen them. People appear to be using public lands - keeping six feet apart - at rates that far exceed normal visitation.

It is in these times that the importance of our public lands shines through.

I am immensely grateful to live in a county, a state and a country where some of our leaders emphasize and prioritize public lands at the local, state and federal levels.

Before all of this got started, I voted in a local election where a number of millages were up for renewal. Where I attend school in Ingham County, citizens have voted in huge proportions to continue a millage of nearly \$3.5 million annually to provide for improved parks, trails and public places. On March 10 of this year, more than 55,000 people (of a total near 75,000) voted to prioritize the maintenance of county trails and parks. In the next three years, this will connect existing trails and create a contiguous route through many of our parks and conservancies. I have spent a great deal of time in these places over the last few weeks and I anticipate spending even more time there in the coming months, so I am continually grateful to those who had the foresight and willingness to set these places aside.

While these local measures are excellent and impactful for me, they only benefit my close neighbors and I. There are a number of programs

that exist for all of the people in Michigan and in the United States. As I walked and hunted in these times, I could not help but notice the signs that kept appearing - simple reminders of the programs and accounts that allow people like me to use lands held in the public trust. Here in Michigan, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) and the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) appear throughout. Both of these programs are unique in that they utilize royalties from the development of public oil and gas resources for public land acquisition and improvement.

More than one hundred years ago, the "Pine Barrens Country" that a young Ernest Hemingway called "wild as the devil" and "the greatest I've ever been in" became the Pigeon River Country State Forest. Today it is home to one of the largest free-roaming elk herds in the eastern United States and is the largest block of

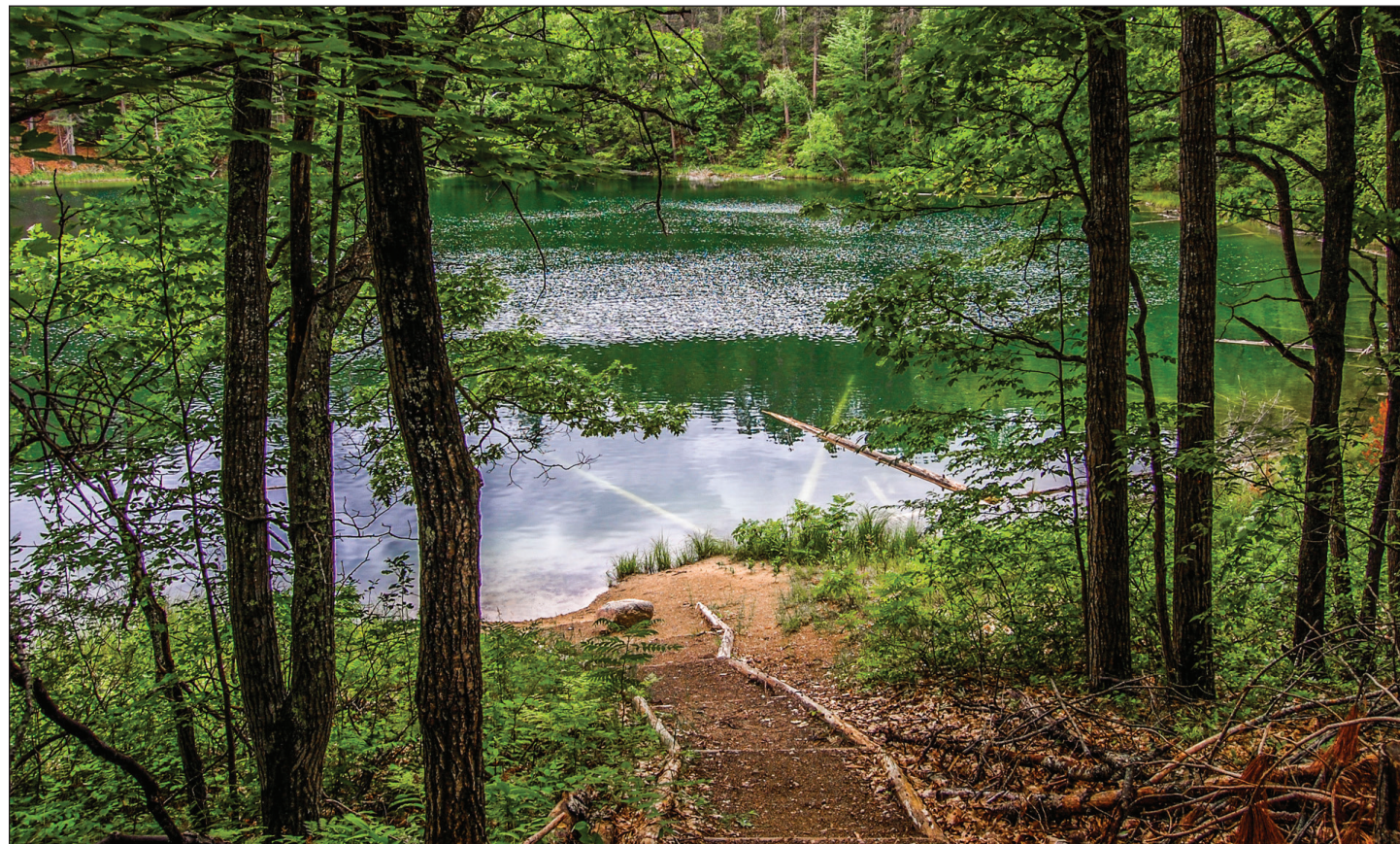
contiguous undeveloped land in the Lower Peninsula. This public land provides innumerable opportunities for recreation, but it is also the birthplace of one of Michigan's great tools for conservation.

In 1976, this state land was ensnared in a great debate over the development of oil, gas and mineral reserves. These practices would undoubtedly change the state of this ecosystem, but growing tension in the Middle East led U.S. leaders to increasingly tap into domestic energy resources.

At this time, the leaders of Michigan United Conservation Clubs, along with other organizations, organized to ensure that there would be a mechanism for these extractive industries to provide for outdoor recreation and to safeguard Michigan's natural resources. Thus, out of these negotiations, the MNRTF was born.

To this day, Michigan is the only state in the country with such a program. Since its inception, the

A trail through the Pigeon River Country State Forest (PRCSF) leads to this scenic view. In 1976, the PRCSF was ensnared in debate over the development of oil, gas and mineral reserves. It became the birthplace of the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund. Photo courtesy of Michigan Department of Natural Resources.



fund has contributed more than \$1.1 billion to more than 2,300 projects in every one of Michigan's 83 counties. These unique funds are used every year to provide better access to Michigan's public lands, making the trust fund one of the greatest tools for conservation and providing for so many of the opportunities that I have had and will have during this time of social isolation.

Federal funding through the LWCF also compliments these state and local dollars. Established by Congress in 1964, LWCF was a majorly popular, bipartisan commitment to protect natural areas and water resources, and to provide opportunities for outdoor recreation to all Americans.

Every year, this fund uses royalties from offshore oil and gas development to buy land for outdoor recreation. LWCF has provided money to help conserve some of Michigan's most special places and create access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. To date, Michigan has received nearly \$342.4 million from LWCF, funding projects at the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, within the Huron, Ottawa and Hiawatha National Forests, and along the

North Country National Scenic Trail. Over this 50-year history, LWCF has funded land projects in every state and has supported over 41,000 state and local park projects. All told, nearly \$19 billion has been appropriated from this fund since its creation - monies well spent to practice conservation and maintain our strong outdoor heritage. These

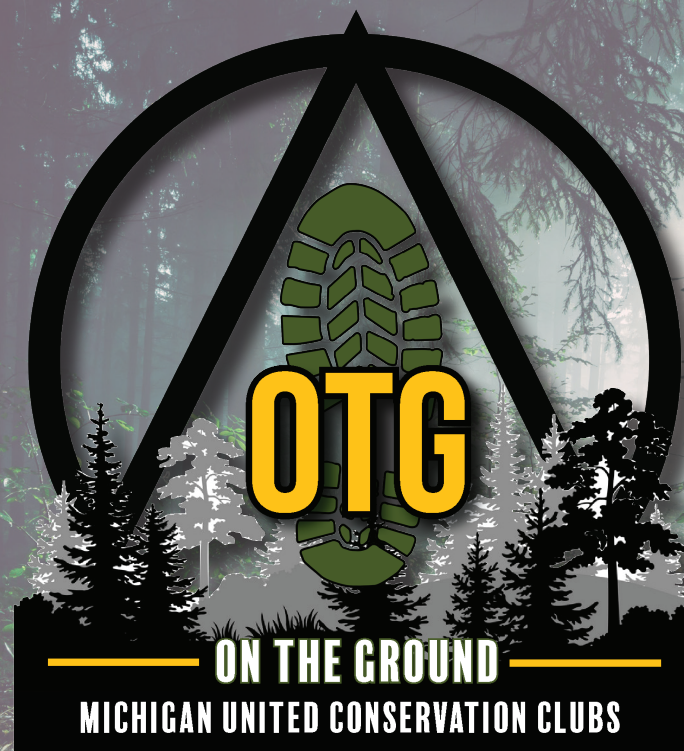
The Lansing River Trail is maintained by the Ingham County Parks and Trails Fund through millages passed by voters. Photo courtesy of the City of Lansing.



funds provided countless hours of outdoor recreation for me during the time of social distancing, in places that will be maintained in the public trust in perpetuity because of these funds.

I certainly hope that by the time you are reading this we are in a different stage of this global pandemic - one in which we might return to restaurants, bars and our offices. When we do return, please think about the places that we so often take for granted. Go enjoy them when you have the time. And remember, when they are under threat, do whatever you can to support and defend them. Call your member of the state legislature to support robust funding of the MNRTF or email your Member of Congress and express your support for full funding of LWCF. MUCC continually advocates for all of these programs through advocacy work at the local, state and federal levels, as well as memberships in important coalitions that gather diverse stakeholders on behalf of this cause.

As conservationists, we benefit from these programs every day, and we must continue to create and protect them for the sake of our future.



The Power of Partnership in Conservation

By Makhayla LaButte

At first glance, it might appear that we all may have a separate stake in the effort to conserve and protect Michigan's natural resources. It's quite natural to assume that birders and bird hunters couldn't be farther apart on the spectrum when measuring conservation goals, or that anglers and kayakers share little more than the water they recreate on in common. However, to take such a narrow view towards the conservation of Michigan's natural resources not only creates an unnecessary, harmful rift between different user groups, but it becomes detrimental to the health of the very resources we claim to love by leading to inaction and disengagement.

Even if we were to separate ourselves as consumptive and non-consumptive users (in other words, hunters, anglers and trappers and non-hunters, anglers and trappers), we would still have an abundance of common ground to stand on.

Where one individual views the restoration of native grasslands as a win for popular game birds like ring-necked pheasants and wild turkeys, another may see the revival of native floral species that benefit pollinators, songbirds and contributes to air and water quality improvements. Both of these perspectives are correct. So why do many people view them as separate accomplishments?

The truth is that successful conservation stems from the combined input and effort of unique and independent stakeholders that often have different priorities. However, like all great conservation success stories, both large and small, it takes collaboration and compromise to reach a common goal.

The On the Ground (OTG) program is an excellent example of the power that comes from diverse partnerships in conservation. OTG is Michigan United Conservation Clubs' (MUCC) volunteer wildlife habitat improvement program and is funded through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Michigan

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Wildlife Division.

Through this program, more than 3,000 volunteers have improved wildlife habitat on public land during weekend projects that involve building brush piles, removing invasive trees, restoring grassland habitat through native flower and grass plantings, installing fish-spawning structures, hinge-cutting trees for deer and snowshoe hare, installing wood duck nest boxes, regenerating aspen stands, performing river clean-ups and planting a variety of trees for wildlife food and cover. The OTG program provides outdoor enthusiasts of all kinds the opportunity to practice good stewardship of their public lands and give back to the resources that have provided them with so much. The work completed by MUCC volunteers and DNR wildlife professionals shows the general public that Michiganders are true conservationists. We benefit a wide variety of game and non-game wildlife species, enhance local ecosystems and demonstrate how



hunting license dollars are put to use.

As many are aware, the OTG program's volunteer events are rarely easy or convenient. They require driving to distant and often obscure locations, performing manual labor and, sometimes, even braving the elements. All this is done in the name of conservation. Volunteerism is one of the most selfless acts an individual can participate in, and the OTG program seems to bring out the most dedicated and passionate outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen that Michigan has to offer.

When being interviewed for a Michigan Out-of-Doors TV episode showcasing the OTG program this February, one of OTG's veteran volunteers and an avid outdoorsman, Wayne Hanson, discussed why he has been involved with the program since its inception in 2013. "I spend all that money buying licenses, so I have to come out and take care of my

land," Wayne said, referring to the public land the project was being completed on. "[OTG] is a good way to get out and meet people you might not associate with when you're out hunting, and it's a good way to see how your hunting dollars are being spent."

To achieve its conservation mission, OTG partners with the DNR and groups like Metro-West Steelheaders,



Steelhead Manifesto, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Ruffed Grouse Society, the National Wildlife Federation and MI Birds; business and media partners such as Mike Avery Outdoor Magazine, Consumers Energy and the Michigan Wildlife Council; and numerous local conservation clubs, land conservancies, conservation districts, college environmental clubs, local school districts and youth groups. As you can imagine, each of these stakeholders brings unique goals and ideas regarding conservation to the table. And the diversity of its volunteers is what makes the OTG program so

successful. During OTG projects, hunters, anglers, trappers, birders, hikers, kayakers, foragers, naturalists and countless other conservationists of all ages join forces to improve wildlife habitat on public land that helps sustain their way of life. Oftentimes, volunteers bring family and friends to projects and use the day to connect with fellow conservationists. In order to continue the legacy of conservation, including one's family and friends in conservation-minded activities is critical. Teaching them to hunt, fish or trap are all important components of preserving our outdoor heritage, but teaching them to give

back to their natural resources is paramount. It is not uncommon to hear hunters and non-hunters engage in exciting discussions, sharing stories and a passion for Michigan's wild places that remind us all that conservation is as diverse and complex as the individuals who participate in it. Even after 151 habitat improvement projects impacting more than 2,200 acres, the OTG program is proudest of its role as a unifying force for the entire conservation community. Since 2013, this program has grown from six pilot projects with the DNR and local conservation club chapters to a statewide example of the strong unity between various natural resource user groups and the conservation ethic that unites all of us.

As we move into a future filled with uncertainty regarding the health of many of our natural resources and a declining hunting community, it is more important than ever before that we invite our fellow conservationists to play an active role in the caretaking of our natural resources. Today, I encourage you to extend a welcoming hand to your fellow conservationists, new and old, consumptive and non-consumptive, and take part in volunteer opportunities that benefit the wildlife, lands and the waters you love.

A large thank you goes out to the many volunteers and conservation partners the OTG program has had the privilege of improving wildlife habitat on public land with — from the remote wilderness of the Upper Peninsula to the bustling suburbs of Southeast Michigan, and all points in between.

Are you interested in getting involved? Visit mucc.org/on-the-ground, facebook.com/muccotg or contact MUCC Habitat Volunteer Coordinator Makhayla LaButte via email at mlabutte@mucc.org.



Michigan United Conservation Clubs



OUR HISTORY

Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) is the largest statewide conservation organization in the nation. With more than 200 affiliated clubs and 40,000 members, MUCC has represented millions of conservationists since 1937. Whether it's the halls of the Capitol or on your favorite stream, MUCC is the insider for your outdoor traditions.

OUR MISSION

Uniting citizens to conserve, protect and enhance Michigan's natural resources and outdoor heritage.

OUR FUTURE

MUCC protects our natural resources while educating the next generation of conservation stewards.

WHY SHOULD I JOIN MUCC?

- Receive one year of MUCC's official publication, Michigan Out-of-Doors.
- Support MUCC's education programs.
- Support efforts to conserve Michigan's natural resources.
- Support efforts to pass policy based on sound science.



☐ **Yes!** I'd like to become a member of MUCC!

Mail this to:
2101 Wood St., Lansing, MI 48912

Date _____

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Membership Categories

All members will receive a subscription to Michigan Out-of-Doors magazine.

☐ 1 Year _____ \$35

☐ 2 Years _____ \$60

☐ Life Membership (per person) _____ \$1,000

Method of Payment

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