‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’

It’s a mantra we’ve come to live by here at the Conservation Resource Alliance (CRA). Successful strategies for partnerships, management, preparedness and, ultimately, getting the job done, bear repeating – over and over again.

2012 was the organization’s biggest budget year ever: $4 million-plus. 2013 is close behind at more than $3 million. Staff remains at the ready, in the best possible position, to turn available government funding – leveraged with private investment – into healthier rivers, rehabilitated wildlife corridors and land-use solutions that are good for all across northwest lower Michigan.

Our natural resources are better for it. Our communities are better for it, and we, as an organization, are that much stronger.
“A lot of people call us an environmental organization, but we’re really a conservation organization.”
– Amy Beyer, Executive Director

CRA’s ‘hat-hanging’ strategies:

■ Using scorecards for benchmarking, especially the financial operations: We keep a firm eye on the performance of the organization financially... that’s super important.

■ Making sure the organization can optimize its cost recovery: We’re very careful about how we do business... in a responsible and accountable manner.

■ And perhaps most importantly: A collaboration strategy that has been successful for 45 years. That’s how we expand our impact. That’s why we seem bigger than our nine-member staff.

Now that the private market is recovering, the organization is making itself ready with an upturn in stewardship. And when it does, CRA will keep on doing what it’s been doing since 1968: digging in and working hard for this region’s natural resources – for today and for future generations. This Impact Report illustrates just a few of the stories, challenges, and the passion for our special places that we have the privilege of sharing with you – our friends and partners.

Our Mighty Team
With combined service to CRA of over 100 years, our staff is the engine that powers the organization’s good work. Boots on the ground or in the board room, our team combines hard work, good science, and common sense to help us complete projects that are changing the region for the better.

Pictured right: Amy Beyer, Matt Thomas, Casey Ressl, Kimberly Balke, Chris Pierce, Eric Ellis, Nate Winkler, Jill Rowley, and Sue Antaya.
Which came first, the river or the road?

Thanks to more than 20 partners and $1.75 million in public and private funding, eight road/stream crossings in the Pere Marquette and Pine River watersheds now meet – and then go on their merry ways.

These aren’t just any rivers: both are designated National Wild and Scenic Rivers and state-designated Blue Ribbon Trout Streams and Natural Rivers. But eight outdated and dysfunctional road crossings had created excessive sediment from dirt roads and impounded its flow, prevented passage of fish and other stream species, changed the shape of the natural stream channel and created warm pools of water.

So when the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act came to Lake County in 2009, people got to work. The US Forest Service awarded CRA and the Lake County Road Commission $1.1 million in funds via the federal government’s stimulus plan and CRA and the Road Commission added over $650,000 in local match.

“This was about jobs and addressing natural resource issues,” says Bob Stuber, fisheries biologist for the Forest Service and project partner. “The marching orders we got from the Washington office were to look for opportunities where we could put people to work. They needed shovel-ready projects and CRA had an inventory of sites.”

The eight restored crossings completed between 2010 and 2012 not only kept the Lake County Road Commission crew busy for three summers, but also suppliers and subcontractors. That trickle-down effect was good for the rural county, which has one of the highest poverty rates in Michigan.
A Creek Finds Its Flow

More than a decade after the Flowing Well Trout Farm on the Manistee River’s north branch in Kalkaska County was shut down, the former fish hatchery’s impact has all but faded away. With the removal of the site’s buildings this year, the two-year restoration project will come to a successful close.

In 2011, a dozen small dams that had impounded the north branch and Flowing Well Creek were removed, restoring the river to its natural channels, unblocking fish passage and reversing the warming effect of the dams on water temperatures.

Why is this important? The north branch of the Manistee River is a unique cold, groundwater-fed tributary and a state-designated Natural River, providing habitat for numerous federal and state endangered and threatened species. After a serious infestation of whirling disease shut down the hatchery, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources acquired the land in 2008 with assistance from the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy. To help guide future stewardship efforts on the property, CRA worked with the Michigan Natural Features Inventory to conduct an inventory of natural communities, plants, mussels and breeding birds. On the list: two state-identified threatened bird species, the red-shouldered hawk and the Louisiana waterthrush.

All told, the project restored “natural movement” to 37 river miles, restored 100 acres of wetland habitat and 150 acres of riparian habitat, replaced five submerged culverts with a timber bridge and increased the native brook trout population.

“Through it all, CRA’s trusted relationships carried the initiative to success. There were so many sites and people involved, but it went very well and strong partnerships became even stronger.”

– Kim Balke, Biologist & Project Manager
Busy as Beavers: The Maple River Initiative

Watershed restoration is really a home improvement project. A river lacking woody debris is less than ideal. Enter CRA Biologist and Project Manager Chris Pierce, who adopted a bit of a beaver work style to fill a stretch of Emmet County’s Maple River with hand-placed high-quality habitats for trout and other aquatic species.

Utilizing woody debris from the forested corridor that lines this section of river, Pierce and volunteers installed forty large fish-cover structures – log jams, whole tree revetments for embankment support, and island structures – on a mile of stream specifically selected based on stream channel morphology, navigation, and recreational access.

If it sounds like a simple project, in essence it is. However, the instream woody debris will make the river system much more complex by providing cover for biological activity and protected areas for fish during high water and extreme seasonal temperatures, habitats for insects to thrive and bug-loving fish and other aquatic life to eat, protection of stream banks from erosion and improving habitat for minks, otters, turtles and frogs.

Funding for the project was led by land owner support, a grant from the Pat & Gill Clements Foundation, along with funding from Michigan and Chicago area Trout Unlimited chapters. This project is part of a larger initiative to restore the Maple River Watershed that includes “free spanning” – removing undersized culverts and replacing them with timber bridge structures to improve the hydrology of the river and passage of fish – and the future likely removal of the Lake Kathleen dam where the east and west branches of the river meet.

“The Maple River is such a cool resource; it’s worth a little extra effort to make it right.”
– Chris Pierce, Biologist & Project Manager
Charlie Brozofsky still sleeps in the same bedroom where he was born. That was over eighty years ago and he still loves the place that he and his family have called home since 1883.

Brozofsky is one of the property owners along the project site – near the middle stretch of Tamarack Creek, about two miles west of Honor. The goal is to get the stream, a tributary to Big Platte Lake, back to a channel that more closely resembles the one before construction of the nearby Tamarack Trout Farm in the 1960s by former owners of the property.

Out of operation for a decade, the trout farm raised rainbow trout from 1968 through 2003 in five holding and rearing ponds. Sitting idle, the ponds filled nearly to the brim with sediment containing significant concentrations of nutrients. A portion of the stream flow was diverted through the trout farm and the rest flowed around it through forested wetland. The problem was worsened by sediment collection along the stretch, from erosion likely caused by past improper livestock management and agricultural practices. The sediment build-up often leads to localized flooding during the winter and spring.

CRA is now working to restore the headwaters of Tamarack Creek by resolving the problems created by the former trout ponds and restoring surrounding wetland areas that were originally filled in – ultimately resulting in the reconnection of 2.5 miles of high-quality brook trout habitat.

“The importance of restoring native brook trout habitat cannot be overstated.”
– Nate Winkler, Biologist & Project Manager
The Boardman River: Undammed (Part One)

What is happening to the Boardman River is simply historic. With the removal of the Brown Bridge Dam in 2012, the uppermost dam on the river, a stream channel began returning to its natural state after 92 years of being dammed up.

“This is a giant project for CRA,” says Executive Director Amy Beyer.

In addition to CRA’s traditional role of providing technical and partnership expertise, the organization is also the fiduciary of the Boardman Dams River Project. CRA was selected by the Boardman Dams Implementation Team as the only staff of the eight agencies involved to do the “care and feeding” of the team.

Frank Dituri, of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians Natural Resources Department, heads up that team. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” says Dituri. “With all the diverse partners and agencies, everyone’s input is represented.”

He visits the Brown Bridge area several times a week. “It looks awesome,” he says. “It’s going to take a couple of growing seasons for the river to settle in. You’re seeing a system that’s been altered for more than 90 years. The whole river system is adjusting.”

Beyer says two things stand out to set this project apart: the overall philosophical goals and objectives of such a project and application of CRA’s partnership model.

“Cold water river systems of high quality – this one both a state Natural River and Blue Ribbon Trout Stream – are extremely rare in a global sense,” she says. “To free up the flow to regain the habitat and connections (160 miles worth) …that’s the holy grail of river work,” says Beyer. “We remain staunchly and passionately focused on that goal.”

And that includes not only its successes, but its failures, too – notably the breach of the temporary dewatering structure resulting in an unplanned rapid drawdown of the pond.

“That all pales in comparison to what we achieve at the end of it,” Beyer says. “That’s why we’re in it, why we don’t waiver. A cold water river system trumps everything.”
Brown Bridge Dam was the first of three historic hydro-electric dams on the river to go. Phase II of the project, the removal of the Boardman and Sabin Dams is slated for 2014-2015.

The Dams Project is affording CRA its first opportunity to apply its partnership collaborative model to something on this scale, Beyer notes. With differing opinions surrounding the Brown Bridge Dam removal, Beyer remembers wondering if this was going to be where the model fell apart, where everybody was only going to look out for themselves.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than run away from the problem, all the agencies came running to it, says Dituri. “It brought the team together in ways you couldn’t imagine.”

Brown Bridge Dam Removal & Restoration at a glance:

- Re-established 2.5 miles of river channel and 12.2 acres of floodplain
- Moved 260,000 cubic yards of sediment accumulated over the last 92 years
- Placed 985 linear feet of woody debris for bank stabilization and 5,100 linear feet for in-stream habitat
- Total cost: $4.4 million
- Total project time: 5 months

“This is a milestone for CRA... seeing the partnership model in its highest version.”
– Amy Beyer, Executive Director
"Working with passionate landowners is just plain fun. A real win-win."

– Eric Ellis, Wildlife Habitat Biologist
If You Grow Trees, They Will Come

Cliff Both may not actually hug trees, but he comes pretty darn close.

“I do baby ’em,” says Both, who lives in Cedar. “And I can’t believe how they’re growing.” Over the last four years, the private property owner has worked with CRA to plant some 220 trees on his property to improve the wildlife habitat.

Every spring, through a gift facilitated by the Leelanau County nonprofit Saving Birds Thru Habitat, CRA distributes some 2,500 native tree species to individuals and groups to rehabilitate wild areas that are lacking resources integral for survival.

“Take a field of autumn olive, which insects can’t eat, and replace it with chokecherry trees and see how that ripples through the food web,” says Biologist and Project Manager Eric Ellis.

Native trees not only grow better in their native environments, they also support other native life, including insects – a critically important food source for songbirds and gamebirds in caring for their young – and provide habitat for other wildlife to thrive. The species selected included fragrant sumac, Alleghany serviceberry, magenta crabapple and Washington hawthorn. The trees are purchased with a grant from Fairmount Minerals, an international sand mining company that uses a tree planting initiative as its carbon offset program.

Nearly half of Both’s 26-acre property is adjacent to the Cedar swamp, where he says sandhill cranes now mate every spring. He also regularly sees indigo buntings on his property. The rehabilitated wildlife corridor now frequently includes deer, turkeys and American kestrels.
CRA’s Board and Financial Team have navigated us through challenging economic times while maintaining a super-high level of impact. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the historic federal initiative launched in 2010 to restore the Great Lakes ecosystem, has dramatically impacted CRA’s accomplishments and financial activity. Our team has stretched, and individual, foundation, and corporate partners have kept pace, offering an unprecedented return on the investment of public and private dollars. We feel deeply indebted to the contractors, communities, and agency partners who are highly motivated to restore healthy waterways and habitat. Road commissions and municipal governments are generously contributing staff and resources; federal and state agencies are assisting with funding agreements, permitting, and reporting on a record number of high quality projects throughout northern Michigan. Watershed volunteers and landowners have stepped up to show their true capacity for local management, offering leadership, local fundraising, manpower and equipment. Never in CRA’s history has the local partnership model paid off more.

Our guiding strategies have always been ambitious goals, balanced with a careful guard over the organization’s ability to sustain itself. We expect in the next few years, with strong support from our individual contributors, to maintain staffing and support levels, and to deliver the river restoration, community infrastructure, and wildlife habitat results CRA is known for.

**CRA’s Financial Team:**

- **Mark Hepler** – Board Treasurer
- **Dick Redmond, Bill Sundstrom, Pat Kelly** – Board Finance Committee
- **Diane VanderVeen** – Contract CFO
- **Glenn Hirt** – Investment Advisor

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**CRA Annual Budget**

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CRA’s open-books financial policy means that all information is available to contributors and partners. Feel free to request a copy of these resources from CRA’s office: Audit reports and Financial Statements, Annual Workplans, Investment Policies, and River Care Fund and Program Guidelines.
Measurable Impacts

CRA and our partners have big dreams for conservation results in northern Michigan, beginning with our vision to reconnect 600 miles of stream and restore the habitat in 5,000 miles of high-value corridors that offer important resilience to the Great Lakes. Our financial plan identifies ambitious “to do” lists, with associated costs, from the Pere Marquette and Muskegon watersheds, up to the tip of the mitten. The past two years have been our biggest celebration yet, with a record number of projects being accomplished throughout northern Michigan:

■ Working in 16 watersheds and 15 counties, we helped partners replace 21 degraded culverts and bridges and removed or modified 5 dams, freeing up hundreds of miles for fish to migrate.

■ We expanded our highly successful partnership “experiment,” to reach outside CRA’s traditional area, funding projects to improve the treasured streams of northeast Michigan and the Upper Peninsula, enjoying the talents and impacts of our partners at Huron Pines and The Nature Conservancy. These folks removed small dams, improved stream habitat, and replaced failing or inadequate road crossings on the Two Hearted, Pigeon, Black, and Sturgeon rivers, to name a few.

■ We advised and assisted landowners in critical wildlife corridors with projects like native prairie restoration, woodcock and ruffed grouse habitat, and breeding boxes for chimney swifts.

■ Always heeding the challenge to ensure our work is truly accomplishing real conservation goals, making the type of difference it is designed for, we carried out an ambitious and scientifically robust monitoring program involving reptiles, amphibians, aquatic insects, fish, and river morphology. Our staff is being called on to present these findings at national and international gatherings to help inform future projects.

EXPENSES

2011 Total $1,866,000  2012 Total $4,611,000

River Restoration & Community Infrastructure
89% $8,155,999
Planning & Consulting Services
7% $322,770
Landowner & Site Services
2% $92,223
Operation, Administrative & Fundraising
2% $92,223

SUPPORT

2011 Total $1,947,000  2012 Total $4,841,000

Federal Grants & Contracts
80% $15,555,999
Private Contributions
14% $683,410
State & Local Grants & Contracts
4% $484,100
Investment Income
2% $96,820

RIVER CARE PERMANENT FUND
$1,028,156 balance as of 12/31/2012
CRA Board of Directors – Leadership – Passion - Empowerment

CRA is led by a nine-member board comprised of individuals with a range of expertise and backgrounds, but joined by one very important thing – a respect and love for northern Michigan’s natural resources.

What I like about CRA is...

Dan - we are doing real work on the ground.
Pat - the fact that actual projects “get done” rather than just get talked about.
Mark - the dedication of the people involved.
Sue - the people and their passion for the environment.
Christine - we accomplish real improvements to our environment.
Keith - we have over 45 years of experience and partnerships that help navigate the bureaucracies.
Michael - we’re an “action-oriented” organization with a true conservation focus.
Dick - how much work CRA can accomplish with a small staff. Very impressive.
Bill - we’re an organization of great people consistently achieving great outcomes.
Healthy rivers and wildlife habitat mean a healthy Great Lakes state and quality experiences for all of us to enjoy. We’re proud of the impact that we have made with your support and excited about the work that lies ahead - restoring free flowing rivers, protecting wildlife diversity and spectacular landscapes. We are energized by our friends and our neighbors. Committed people make big dreams come true and every single supporter finds a positive way to give back to northern Michigan through CRA’s good work. We need your involvement, passion, and support. Let’s keep working together to care for and protect these places we love.

We’re all in this together.