



## **Bettering The Betsie - By Bob Butz**

Four years, over a half-million dollars, and hundreds of man-hours later, fishing's future on one northern Michigan River now looks a whole lot brighter.

Good times. Bad times. Don Tanner has seen it all. A past president of the Michigan River Guides Association and owner of Clay Bank Outfitters—specializing in Betsie River steelhead, trout, and salmon fishing—Tanner is a homegrown river rat to the core. His ties to the Betsie go back long before the first great salmon runs (what Tanner calls the “Coho craze”) of the early 70s. Way back to the time when the Betsie River was pretty much unrecognizable when compared to the scenic wilderness waterway it is today.

“My mom grew up on the banks of the Betsie back when every farmer along its length used to wash and water their cattle in the river.”

As Tanner now remembers it with his fisherman's perspective, the Betsie was a giant sand trap back then. The banks were torn up and trampled, with many bends and hillsides stripped down to the bare, crumbling sand and earth. These were the scars left from a hundred years before when loggers had dragged, rolled, and muscled great logs into the river—timber by the steamship full—for transport downstream. Not to mention the river was downright dirty, the main sewage line emptying into Lake Michigan for every homestead from Elberta on inland.

“Nobody along the river knew anything about digging septic systems,” says Tanner. And then, he adds, came the hydroelectric dams—namely the Homestead and Thompsonville dams—with their water holding ponds. That water, when periodically released all at once, surged downstream off and on for years. These regular deluges collapsed

riverbanks, washed silt and sand downstream like a hundreds of little brown water floods that covered over precious stretches of gravel bottom that trout, steelhead, and salmon need to spawn.

Today, these fish, especially steelhead, are the backbone of Tanner's business. His grandfather was a charter boat captain, running big water tours out of Frankfort Harbor, back in the height of the early salmon days.

“Working with him, that's how I got a taste for guiding,” says Tanner. “But I ended up taking my interest up the river instead.”

Now Tanner not only works over 120 days a year on the Betsie River; he lives there year round, too, on a little piece of waterfront not far away from where his mother grew up. With ties to the river as deep as Tanner's it was no surprise that he helped form the Betsie River Restoration Committee some 20 years ago when the crumbling Thompsonville dam suddenly collapsed.

Hard to calculate the exact tonnage of mud and sediment washed downstream in that tiny disaster. But Tanner says that, until recently, the evidence of this along with the last century's worth of abuse could easily be spotted by even an untrained observer on virtually every mile of the Betsie.

Not so anymore. Last September, the Betsie River Watershed Restoration Committee including project partners like the Benzie County Road Commission, local Trout Unlimited chapters, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians and the Michigan DNR and DEQ, concluded a four-year, \$675,000 Clean Michigan Initiative project organized and led by the Conservation Resource Alliance (CRA).

“There's a real love for this river among the people here,” says Tanner, adding that this love and willingness to right

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## ***Bettering The Betsie - Continued***

the environmental wrongs of the past was the very thing that led to the Betsie being second in Michigan to become a designated Natural River in 1973.

"When the list of rivers being considered for the Natural Rivers program was announced, the Betsie wasn't even on the top-ten list," remembers Tanner. "But the community banded together and petitioned the state to not only get it added to the list but also get the designation won."

That same sort of loyalty and local support is the same stuff that kicked off the 2001 CRA plan to stabilize 13 eroding stream banks, replace three rundown road/stream crossings on the Little Betsie and Dair Creek, and restore a degraded creek. All of this work prevented 305 tons of sediment from entering the main river every year.

CRA announced the completion of the effort as a new watermark in what kind of powerful and positive change communities can affect when they work together around one unifying goal. Not everyone, however, believes the Betsie—or any other river, for that matter—needs the help.

"There are conflicted views among some people—especially some of my fellow fishing guides—that bank erosion is a natural process and that the river should be left alone," says Tanner. "They believe nature should simply take its course. But I believe the work here was necessary. The massive logging operations and other damage people unknowingly did to the river over the years wasn't natural."

By Tanner's estimation—a man who owes his livelihood to a healthy river ecosystem—the work he, CRA, and scores of volunteers performed was simply making amends for so many years of neglect. In other words, the Betsie River now in 2005 might be considered in a more natural state than it was fifty years ago.

"The houses you do see along the river are not built right on the water. They're set back. Most are completely out of sight. This gives the river a real wilderness feel when you're floating downstream," says Tanner, adding that the river also now runs colder than before. That's good for fish reproduction. Why? Less erosion and more tall trees along the riverbanks shade newly exposed gravel beds that steelhead, salmon, and trout need to spawn.

Are the fall salmon and spring steelhead runs better than they were 20 years ago?

"I wouldn't say that," says Tanner. "Nothing could really compare to those days." The sheer number of fish—it was overwhelming. "Unnatural," according to Tanner. Now, the thing he and the Betsie River Restoration Committee—in cooperation with CRA—are looking to do is maintain the work they've done on the Betsie River and tackle new projects like bridge replacements, woody debris installation, and Dair Creek dam removal.

"It's about maintaining balance. There's still work to do on Dair Creek and the Little Betsie," says Tanner. "A lot of spawning activity takes place in these tributaries."

Tanner would like to see more natural salmon and steelhead reproduction on the Betsie, which would mean less dependency on hatchery-raised fish. Provided the river is kept clean and running cold, he believes such a thing is possible down the line now that the Betsie is a waterway back on track.

*"Bob Butz, full-time freelance writer and former magazine editor, has been writing about nature and the environment for 15 years. He is a contributing editor to TRAVERSE: Northern Michigan's Magazine and past contributing editor to Sports Afield. His by-line has appeared in the New York Times, National Wildlife, Outdoor Life, Field & Stream, Outside, and numerous others. He has also authored two books, the latest entitled Beast of Never, Cat of God: The search for the eastern puma."*



***A dozen individuals enjoyed a beautiful day on the Betsie River in September. Landowners and partners came together to float the river and look at completed projects and new sites needing restoration. CRA Biologist Kim Balke said "We are pleased to see that sites stabilized 15 years ago now appear natural, with sandy slopes completely revegetated and plants growing over the fieldstone." If you are interested in joining us for a fun day on the river, look for our float trip invitations next summer!***

## ***Biennial Celebration Recognizes Outstanding Partners***



***CRA Director, Amy Beyer and Board Member, Dick Redmond welcome MDNR Director, Becky Humphries.***

Setting the tone for a great gathering of like-minded conservation partners, Michigan Department of Natural Resources Director, Beck Humphries, delivered the keynote address at CRA's biennial meeting in October. Reminding over 100 guests that Michigan is blessed with some of the most abundant and valuable natural resources anywhere, Becky also noted that outdoor recreation, sport fishing, and hunting are multi-billion dollar industries that help fuel Michigan's economy. She recognized the Wild Link initiative for engaging private landowners as stewards working to restore and maintain critically important wildlife corridors.

In addition to sharing some great food and outstanding local wines provided by Bel Lago winery, incomparable music from Glen Wolff, Don Julin, and Angelo Meli, the dramatic backdrop of Grand Traverse Bay view from NMC's Great Lakes Campus building, CRA was proud to recognize a number of key 2005 partners. The DTE Energy Foundation's generous support and participation in CRA coordinated projects is a perfect example of how to get more done by working with people for a common cause. CRA's Outstanding River Care Partner was awarded to DTE Energy Foundation for their



***Anne Kaminski accepts the Outstanding Volunteer Award from CRA Board Member, Keith Charters.***

commitment as a community leader making a difference for conservation in northern Michigan. Dirk Shorter was given the Outstanding Wild Link Partner for his strong advocacy and participation in the development of our wildlife corridor pilot project in Emmet County. Much of CRA's long-term success is the direct of strong relationships with agencies that share vision, expertise, and resources to benefit natural resources. We also find good friends within these organizations that make our job easier and more fun. Sharing CRA's Outstanding Agency Partner this year was Tom Rozich, MDNR Regional Fisheries Biologist and River Care Steering Committee liaison, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Craig Czarnecki, Heather Rawlings, and Stewart Cogswell. Tom offered his thoughts about CRA, "We can always count on CRA to be out there where the river meets the bank and the road crosses the stream to accomplish what needs to be accomplished to restore and protect our resources. Well done CRA!" The backbone of all CRA projects really is the thousands of volunteers that give generously, work tirelessly, and help inspire others to get involved.



***Big Sable Chairman Jim Miller joined CRA staff in taking the hands-on approach to streambank stabilization. Plans for the eroding bank near Freesoil included rock placement in August, installation of terraces in September and tree planting by the committee in the spring. The stabilization project was funded through a grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service with matching contributions from the Big Sable Restoration Committee. Thanks for your hard work, Jim!***

# Thank you for your recent support of CRA, River Care™ and Wild-Link™

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## DTE Energy Foundation Invests in River Care

Staying on a problem until it's fixed has been how CRA has been able to accomplish so much over the last 37 years. Entire watersheds are being healed. The work is often long and hard, but well worth the effort. This long-term commitment is also being demonstrated by one of CRA's very best partners, the DTE Energy Foundation. With the help from another \$150,000 three year grant from DTE Energy, priority River Care projects will receive needed funding and progress throughout our region will continue. Coordinating the engineering phase required to consider the removal of the Green River Dam on the Jordan River Watershed is a great example of how this investment will be put to work.



## Welcome Chris!

Recently, CRA added Biologist Chris Pierce to its staff. Chris graduated with a Bachelors of Science degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Management from MSU. He will serve as Project Manager for rivers such as the Big Sable, Bear Creek, Maple, Carp, and Big Manistee and provide support for Wild Link. Chris is an avid outdoor adventurer and enjoys spending time with his family: Clare, Riley and Mastiff Kenai.

## Membership Busters By Matt Thomas, CRA Development Coordinator

Every year as we approach the end of the calendar, the CRA staff and Board take a look back to size up what we got done, the impact for the resource, what worked and what didn't, and where do we go from here. The one constant that surfaces year after year is that there are literally thousands of individuals that contribute in some meaningful way to help us change the future of northern Michigan for the better. I want every one of this legion of friends and partners to become supporting members of CRA. Why not? Wouldn't it be great to count on even a little financial help for all this good work from every watershed volunteer, landowner, club member, fisherman, hunter, paddler, birder, agency partner, business, and politician that are already involved with our projects? Yes it would. Our annual fundraising goals would be met and the woods and waters we all love would be well cared for.

I know that there will always be a few folks from this army of conservationists that just won't join. Lots of reasons for this.

As a fundraiser, I hear them all. Most make sense on some level, but there are a few that fall into a category that I call "Membership Myths".

### Myth #1 – My contribution won't make a difference.

YES IT WILL! As I said, there are thousands of like-minded people that care. Even small donations add up! (Larger ones add up even faster)

### Myth #2 – If I send some money in, I'll never hear back until they want more money.

You will hear from CRA. Our quarterly Catalyst newsletter lets you know what's going on and we'll invite you to participate in work bees, float trips, and some very fun events!

### Myth #3 – My donation will just be used for overhead expenses and salaries.

CRA does have a small paid staff (7 full-time, 2 part-time), but we're out there doing real work, with less than 10% of our budget going to administrative costs. We all hear "lean and mean" but at CRA, your gift goes to work supporting sustainable projects.

So it's time again for me to tell you that we need your help. Please bust these misconceptions by joining or renewing your supporting membership with CRA. You can respond with the materials recently sent to you, clip and return the membership form from this newsletter with your gift, or join online at [www.rivercare.org](http://www.rivercare.org). And if you happened to be one of the folks that received duplicate requests in the mail, please accept our apology for this glitch and pass the extra along to someone else that you think might be interested. Thank you all for helping!

### Natural Disasters Delay Manistee Project

Due to a number of factors, including hurricane Katrina, the tree lift project on the Manistee River below Hodenpyl dam was postponed. Heavy lift helicopters were difficult to come by in the weeks following the hurricane, and forest fires competed for those that were available. We look forward to completing the sixth and final year of the project in September 2006.

#### Yes! I Want to Support CRA & Practical Conservation!

Enclosed is my CRA Membership contribution:

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Credit card payments are also accepted on line at: [rivercare.org](http://rivercare.org)

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Thank You For Your Support!





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## Stewardship Spotlight

Who hasn't heard of the home appliance giant Whirlpool Corporation? But not everyone knows that they maintain a corporate retreat on the Baldwin River and have become a lead supporter of CRA's Pere Marquette Headwaters Project with a \$20,000 donation. The Pere Marquette is a state-designated Natural River, federally designated Wild and Scenic River, and Blue Ribbon Trout Stream. It is also one of the last remaining large, free-flowing streams on the continent. Its main tributaries are highly utilized for salmon, steelhead and trout fishing, canoeing, camping, hiking, hunting and other outdoor activities. The Pere Marquette River was the first stream in the United States to receive brown trout plants from Germany and the first of those plants happened on the Baldwin River, the second largest tributary to the Pere Marquette.

The Baldwin River has been plagued by a combination of severe erosion problems since the logging era. Because the Baldwin comprises a large amount of the Pere Marquette



headwaters, erosion here impacts the entire watershed downstream. Funding from Whirlpool and other partners has made possible an aggressive attack on the problems plaguing the Baldwin River, helping to stabilize 14 sites over the last 3 years, preventing 100 tons of sand from entering the river annually.

Perhaps one of Whirlpool's core beliefs best speaks to their involvement in this project, "At Whirlpool we strongly believe in the principles of Corporate Responsibility - of achieving success in ways that honor ethical values and respect people, communities and the natural environment. Equal to protecting the health and safety of our employees, we consider environmental stewardship among our most important business responsibilities. This belief is only reinforced as our operations extend to virtually every corner of the globe."

Thank you to the Whirlpool Corporation for helping make a difference!