

# Friends of the St. Clair River

## Annual Report

2020

The Year of  
Pausing,  
Pivoting and  
Pandemic  
Programming



Showing 40 miles of love to the St. Clair River and its watersheds since 2007



**Our Story //** Friends of the St. Clair River staff have been getting their feet wet and hands dirty around Michigan's Thumb Coast for over a decade. That's thirteen years of pulling on waders, fighting off mosquitoes and ticks, maneuvering thorny bushes, hiking hundreds of miles, and handling the tiniest seeds and largest fish to restore the highest priority landscapes and streams. Since our inception in 2007, we have become the region's largest environmental nonprofit. Our Board of Directors, staff and volunteers value the rich natural resources of our watershed and are committed to improving the quality of life for all people, plants and wildlife within its boundaries.



## Message from our President

As we reflect on 2020, a year of cancellations, one thing stands out... nature was not canceled. There was a greater need for the outdoors due to the pandemic, but the need has always been great. We witnessed that in ways we have not before.

Throughout the year we asked ourselves many times, how do we conduct land stewardship and water quality monitoring without people? Nothing takes the place of face-to-face engagement and hands on work. Our staff were resilient and resourceful and found ways to continue providing services by shifting into action mode with virtual programming, self-guided programs and instructional videos. The year was an innovative challenge as much as a health challenge!

We know that the more people use our natural resources - like those that use land trails, water trails, and green spaces - they are more likely to become advocates for it. Now more than ever, people need a place to go to be inspired by nature. With outdoor recreation on the rise, we know we'll come out the other side of this with more individuals ready and willing to support conservation.

We've met so many wonderful new people in a virtual space this year and we will not abandon what we've learned. Thank you for continuing to support Michigan's Thumb Coast's rivers, trails and green spaces!

*Sheri J. Faust*  
Sheri J. Faust



## Who We Are

### Mission

Inspire citizen action through stewardship, monitoring and education to restore, protect and enhance the St. Clair River and its watersheds.



### Vision

We will remain a highly visible champion for St. Clair River watershed programs, issues, research, policies and partnerships using sound research, respected advocacy and innovative education. We believe that the St. Clair River and its watersheds should be a thriving ecosystem that is protected to maximize environmental, social, recreational, and economic values and services.

## Board of Directors & Staff

Sheri Faust, *President*

Dan Danner, *Treasurer*

Carrie Dollar, *Secretary*

Directors: Tiffany Francis, Doreen Kephart, Penelope Peck, Don Rice, Gordon Ruttan, Linda Schoonover, Kelsey Smith Solack, Alyssa Winters



Blake Short,  
Science  
Communication  
Intern

Amy Meeker-Taylor,  
Environmental  
Educator



Staff:

Amy Meeker-Taylor, Environmental Educator

Kirsten Lyons, Stewardship Director

Blake Short, Science Communication Intern

Kirsten Lyons, Stewardship Director



## Proud Member of the Following Organizations

Anchor Bay Chamber of Commerce  
Blue Water Area Chamber of Commerce  
Freshwater Future  
Marine City Chamber of Commerce  
Michigan Association of Non Profits

Michigan Festivals & Events Association  
River Network  
St. Clair Chamber of Commerce  
St. Clair County Economic Development Alliance



# Setting A Course For Success: 2020 Program Highlights

Friends of the St. Clair River's environmental stewardship and education programs are stronger because of the resources and assistance provided through our generous network. Because of your support, we can commit the energy and expertise necessary to partner with schools, families and communities to build programs that make a positive impact on people, plants and wildlife.



## Remediated Pollution in the St. Clair River

We worked to understand community concerns of tap water that comes from the St. Clair River. The Area of Concern is closer to being restored because production of delivered water is protected from spills, so it meets safe drinking water parameters.



## Restored A Healthy Habitat

We converted a former building and parking lot on the Blue Water River Walk to a thriving habitat by planting fifteen native trees with forty volunteers. Thank you to the project sponsors for helping add more life to this former industrial site: DTE Foundation, Community Foundation of St. Clair County, ReLeaf Michigan and Owen Tree Service.



## Relocated Protected Animals

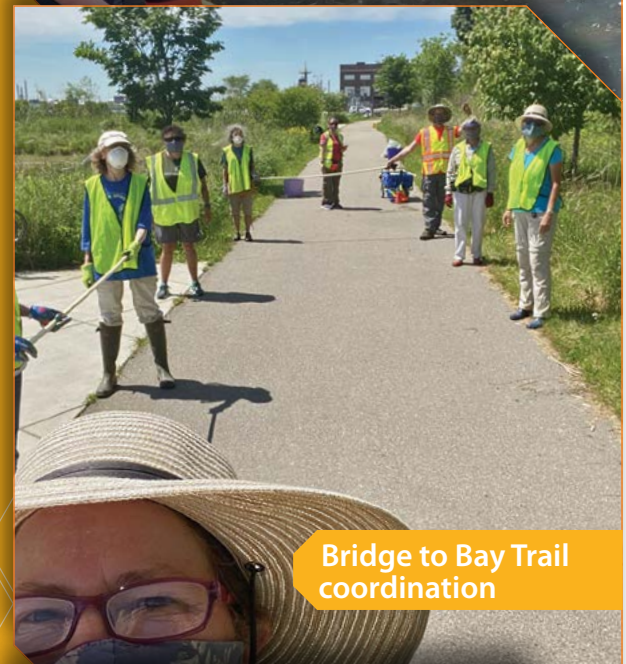
We took part in a mussel-moving mission on the Belle River to relocate 2,000 threatened and endangered native freshwater mussels. Mussels filter large amounts of water, are highly sensitive to environmental changes, and require clean water to survive.



Relocating mussels

## Supported Bridge To Bay Trail Coordination

We tapped into an opportunity that is enhancing our ecosystems, corridors and recreation. Trails are a meaningful way we engage residents in stewardship of our natural resources, and they are tangible connections to the intangible, like conservation and sense of community.



Bridge to Bay Trail coordination

## Settled Into Our New Office

We moved in with the Marine City Chamber of Commerce which allowed us to get to know our watershed neighbors and support Belle River and Bridge To Bay Trail projects in Marine City.

## Cultivated Student Scientists

We provided 630 fifth grade students across six school districts with free Sturgeon Science School classroom programs. It's one thing to have students read about endangered wildlife, it's another experience entirely when they get to see the wildlife up close and personal.



Cultivating students

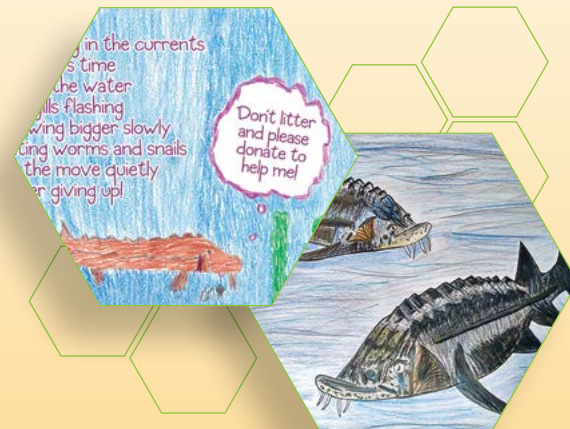
## 2021 Look Forward //

- : Hire our first Executive Director
- : Secure a new, permanent office space
- : Lead Bridge To Bay Trail projects
- : Hire a Restoration Coordinator
- : Expand our Internship program



# Community Education

We educate youth about protecting the unique natural resources that make our region a wonderful place to live. We see the value in letting students take the lead in tackling environmental issues in their own communities. Putting environmental education into action that combines classroom lessons and field trips helps students learn how to care for the communities where they live.



## Sturgeon Story Contest

This year's contest winners were Melissa, a 13-year-old homeschool student and Conner, a 9-year-old from Armada. We were able to raise over \$400 from this virtual contest which supports free Sturgeon Science School field trips for hundreds of 5th grade students.



Sturgeon Story Contest Photo: Runner up, Noah and first place winner, Connor.

"The boys were so glad to receive their gifts! Please pass on our appreciation to the board members for acknowledging them even during this tough time."  
- The McLear Family, Sturgeon Story Contest participants

## 2021 Look Forward //

- : Implement the Great Lakes Floor Map classroom program
- : Create a Sturgeon Story Contest calendar
- : Expand virtual and self-guided programming

## Watershed Challenge

We created a twelve-week challenge with thirty activities designed for participants to get their hands wet and boots dirty to learn, explore, share, and reflect on our watershed. Over 50 participants discovered what a watershed is, why they are important, and what they could do to protect water quality.

## Mission: WET

We put these unique backpack kits in the hands of 25 local families to delve into the fascinating freshwater world of ponds, creeks, rivers and streams. Aquatic habitats are filled with intriguing life and the backpack helped families explore that diversity together. Discoveries included mayflies, dragonflies, caddisflies, water striders, snails, clams and more!



"We are very excited to begin our exploration! What a wonderful project your organization has created! Thank you again."  
- Stacie, Mission: WET citizen scientist

## Oh, the Places You'll Go!

### Lake Sturgeon Adoption Program

"My five-year-old adopted a three-year-old Sturgeon when he was three, and still loves it! Whenever we pass the North Channel, he gets super excited that his fish is out there somewhere! Thank you for igniting his passion!"  
- Jessica, sturgeon enthusiast

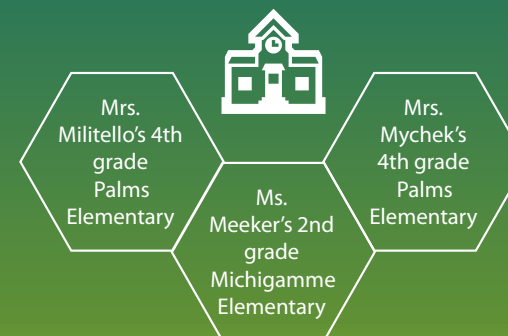
## Community Adoptions

Where did the adopted sturgeon travel to?



## Classroom Adoptions

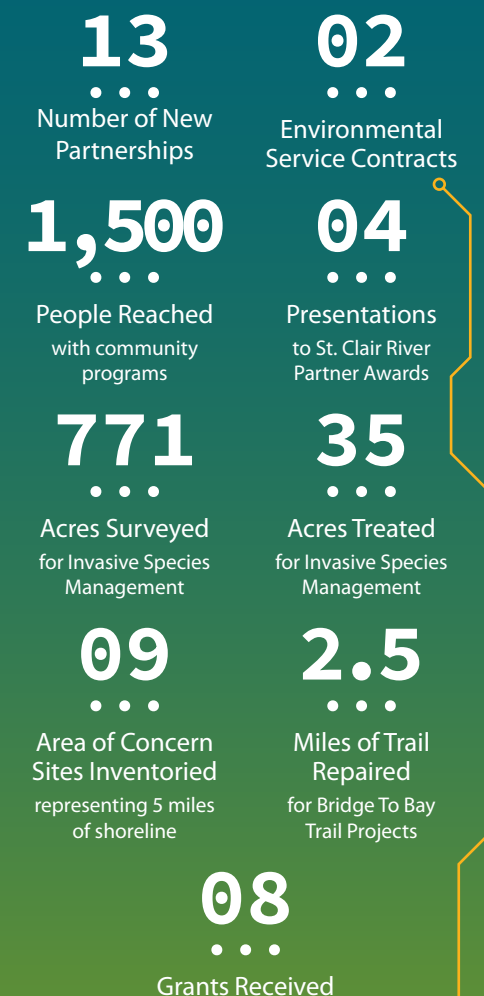
All classes learn about Lake Sturgeon with a presentation from our Environmental Educator and receive periodic updates on their sturgeon's travels around the Great Lakes.



## Creating a Lasting Impact

We are investing more than ever in the people and places that are vital to the economic and environmental well-being of Michigan's Thumb Coast, that makes this a place people want to call home, and that more people want to protect. Our work includes everything from river restoration and invasive species removal to environmental education. Here's a glimpse of how we got things done in 2020.

## Getting It Done in 2020





# Covering More Ground With Community Science

With 837 square miles in St. Clair County to inventory and monitor, Friends of the St. Clair River staff can use all the help we can get. That’s why we train volunteers to equip them with the knowledge to monitor and record data, and report their findings.

We use plants and animals as bio-indicators to assess the quality of our environment. Different species have different levels of susceptibility to pollution, so we get an idea of water quality by observing which species are present or absent.

We use this data gathered from citizen scientists to guide our management actions. The more information we have, the easier it is to prioritize where to focus our efforts and allocate the resources necessary to make the biggest impact.

## Wetland Wanderings

We host summer exploration programs at Wetlands County Park for families to dig in the mud searching for macroinvertebrates --- the small aquatic insects part of the food chain. The wetlands are assigned a water quality score ranging from excellent to poor depending on the type and number of insects found. Our 2020 data showed an increase in species diversity and abundance and we continue to find species, such as mayfly, that prefer clean water.



*“This is going to be a phenomenal asset for everyone involved. Friends of the St. Clair River will obtain more information about our local waterways, and students will learn the connection between water chemistry, macroinvertebrate communities, and what that means for the overall ecosystem.”*  
- Lynnea, St. Clair County Community College Instructor



*“It’s rewarding to know I’m doing something to make sure butterflies are here, long into the future.”*  
- Cindy, Enthusiastic Butterfly Volunteer

## Michigan Butterfly Network

Our butterfly monitoring program engages volunteers by assessing butterfly populations along monitoring routes in urban and natural areas. This helps us evaluate habitat quality and how land care practices are impacting our watershed because butterflies are indicators of ecosystem health. The results of monitoring the last five years indicate butterflies are thriving in most areas of the county with more than fifty species of butterflies identified.

### 2021 Look Forward //

- : Launch a microplastics water quality monitoring program
- : Lead winter stonefly searches in local rivers
- : Implement invasive species and native plant mapping and monitoring

# Into The Wild: Land Stewardship

We take a proactive approach to land stewardship. Diverse communities of native plants and animals are more resilient to environmental changes, and by acting quickly, we can control invasive plants before they are established.

Our process includes inventorying habitats from the rural countryside to the urban shoreline to reporting existing and emerging invasive plant species, and prioritizing actions based on this carefully collected data.

Since our Stewardship Program was established in 2015, Friends of the St. Clair River has significantly increased our organizational assets. Building partnerships has expanded the scope of our work with new program areas like community engagement and restoration. It has also led to a larger environmental impact.

In 2020, our Stewards worked in small, socially-distanced groups making progress on digging, chopping and yanking invasive plants and cultivating native plants. The value of their work lies in their passion, knowledge and dedication. We saw volunteers step up whether it was pulling invasive garlic mustard, counting butterflies, moving endangered freshwater mussels, or cleaning storm drains.

## The Stewardship Network Spring Invasive Species Challenge

We removed nearly 1,500 pounds of invasive species like Garlic Mustard and Dames Rocket spending over 130 hours in three St. Clair County parks.

## Better Together

We partnered with the Blue Water YMCA “Y Togetherhood” volunteers on three occasions at the Blue Water River Walk to clean the trail and collect and sow native plant seeds.



### 2021 Look Forward //

- : Become a native plant resource
- : Expand Lake St Clair Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area offerings
- : Offer the MSU Extension Michigan Conservation Stewards program



## 2020 Financial Overview

Your belief in our mission helped us do great work in 2020. We extend our deepest thanks to the agencies, foundations, businesses, organizations and individuals who made our work possible in 2020. Your donations protect, enhance and restore the most special places across St. Clair County. Our work can't happen without your support.

### Grants and Awards

**\$122,058**

St. Clair River Area of Concern // \$62,000 : Funds work for Friends of the St. Clair River and St. Clair County Health Department for restoration of the Fish Consumption and Drinking Water Consumption pollution impairments in the St. Clair River

Bridge To Bay Trail Coordination // \$22,908 : Support provided by Community Foundation of St. Clair County for on-the-ground trail projects and day-to-day project management

Lake St. Clair Cooperative Invasive Species Management // \$22,000 : Funding to prevent, detect, eradicate and control terrestrial and aquatic invasive species in St. Clair County

DTE Foundation // \$5,000 : Support to create, expand and sustain our services

Michigan Small Business Award // \$5,000 : Provided by the Michigan Strategic Fund to assist small businesses that suffered economic distress due to COVID-19

Enbridge // \$2,000 : General operating support

Michigan Association for Environmental Professionals // \$1,900 : Support for the Mission WET program

Community Foundation of St. Clair County Women's Initiative // \$1,250 : This philanthropic event collectively granted \$10,000 to local non-profits

### Blue Water Sturgeon Festival Sponsorships

**\$18,750**

Cargill Inc., DTE Foundation, Gun Lake Tribe, Domtar, Marysville Ethanol, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, SEMCO Gas Corporation

### GivingTuesday Events

**\$4,235**

### Sponsors & Partners

Blue Water YMCA; City of Port Huron Parks & Recreation, Eighth Day Media; Friends of the St. Clair River - Canada; Lake St. Clair Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area; Michigan Butterfly Network; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; ReLeaf Michigan; St. Clair County Health Department; St. Clair County Parks and Recreation; St. Clair River Binational Public Advisory Council; Six Rivers Land Conservancy; Sturgeon For Tomorrow - St. Clair River / Detroit River

#### 2021 Look Forward //

- : Participate in Community Foundation of St. Clair County's The Big Give
- : Launch a corporate giving program
- : Hold a Lake Sturgeon VIP fundraising event

## St. Clair River Area of Concern 2020 Partnership Awards

It takes an international community to be the guardians of the St Clair River and these partners have made important contributions to that work. They have elevated St. Clair River restoration allowing us to highlight and promote this magnificent resource. Congratulations to our 2020 St. Clair River Area of Concern Award Recipients!



### Blueways of St. Clair

#### St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning

Commission is a champion for St. Clair County's Blueway Trail system and Michigan's first National Water Trail, the Island Loop. They took water trails from its infancy to a successful program with seventeen mapped water trails.

#### U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)

##### Great Lakes Science Center

Under the guidance of Dr. Edward Roseman, Ph.D. Research Fishery Biologist, his team is responsible for the building and monitoring of three fish spawning reefs in the St. Clair River. This has enhanced the St. Clair River's habitat for several fish species, especially the Lake Sturgeon.

### St. Clair County

#### Parks and Recreation Commission

They contributed funds to build the one-mile paved path along the Blue Water River Walk and purchase adjoining land to develop the new Wetlands County Park. They support habitat projects by providing maintenance and monitoring which ensures their long-term success.

### Herpetological

#### Resource and Management (HRM)

They performed ecological monitoring before, during and after many successful wildlife habitat restoration projects. They installed creature features such as frog and snake hibernacula, near-shore mudpuppy habitat, and fish and bird elements.



Blueways partner



USGS partner



St. Clair County partner



HRM partner

*"Thank you so much for this incredible honor! We want to thank you for seeing the value of amphibians and reptiles and the work HRM does." - David A. Mifsud*





**Friends of the St. Clair River**  
Michigan's Thumb Coast Watershed Organization  
[www.scriver.org](http://www.scriver.org)



*Friends of the St. Clair River is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization*