

A “PEARL” IN BENZIE COUNTY

Heartwarming community efforts to save a piece of land are not uncommon in GTRLC’s history. Indeed, every project completed by the conservancy needed some degree of community support to make it happen. From raising funds to raising awareness, local citizens have always been integral to GTRLC’s protection efforts.

But what happened in Benzie County’s Almira Township beginning in 1998 is one of the finest examples of a local community truly coming together for a common goal, despite somewhat of a bumpy start.

Pearl Lake is a relatively shallow body of water situated about five miles northwest of Lake Ann, the largest community in Almira Township. On a map, it’s just one of dozens of lakes that dot vast expanses of woods and farmland in Benzie County. But locals and visitors familiar with its wonders know it’s more than your average lake.

For starters, it’s one of the only places in the entire state of Michigan where osprey, bald eagles and loons have been confirmed to nest in the same vicinity. The wetlands surrounding the shallow, spring-fed lake also teem with a variety of other birds, reptiles and amphibians. The lake, of course, also inspired generations of locals who fished and swam in its waters or enjoyed a peaceful evening on its shores.

“For a lot of people, this had been their own little paradise for a lot of years,” said George Daisy, who found himself at the forefront of a grassroots effort to protect the lake.

PHOTO BY NATE RICHARDSON



Daisy, now 81, moved up from downstate and built a home on Pearl Lake in 1995. By the time he got there, a divide was growing between those who lived on the lake – the majority of whom were, like Daisy, relative newcomers to the township – and those whose families had been in the area for generations. Some locals perceived the outsiders as rich elitists who threatened to spoil the area.

When a proposal to develop much of the south bay's shoreline into 97 home sites popped up in 1997, those who already lived on the lake were alarmed. Much of the lake remained undeveloped, and a housing project of that size – 250 acres with more than 2,000 feet of shoreline – would certainly alter the character of the lake. Pearl Lake doesn't have a major inlet or outlet, making it particularly susceptible to the potential damage of development.

But, Daisy said, many longtime locals didn't exactly rally to the cause, at least initially.

"A lot of the locals said, 'Well, the rich people have Pearl Lake, so the rich people can be the ones to save it,'" he said. "There was definitely some tension there."

Chown knew the score. A development as big as the one proposed would have a profound impact on not only wildlife habitat, but the lake's water quality as well. The shallow lake has no major inlet or outlet, and its kettle pothole wetlands would be particularly sensitive to contamination and pollutants.

"This would have been a real disaster," he said. "That lake, in particular, could not have handled it."

This seemed to be another good fit for a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant. After months of fruitless negotiations with the development partnership that owned the property, GTRLC was able to secure a purchase price of \$1.19 million, down a bit from the initial \$1.35 million requested by the partnership.

But locals would still need to raise nearly \$300,000 above and beyond the \$890,000 trust fund grant for the project. Daisy, who represented one of two homeowner associations on the lake, teamed up with Barry Harper, who represented the other. Their "Save Pearl Lake" group worked hard to connect with deep-rooted local residents, who eventually embraced the protection effort in earnest.

"A lot of friendships were made," Daisy said. "It really was something special."

"Once we got acquainted with everyone and stated our case, things were different – instead of being 'our' lake, this became everybody's lake," Daisy said. "You needed to give the locals just a bit of

leadership, and then get the heck out of their way. They get most of the credit here."

About \$150,000 had been raised or pledged by the time the trust fund grant was approved in December of 1998, and the rest was secured in less than a year. Longtime GTRLC supporters at the Oleson Foundation kicked in \$22,500, but the bulk came in small pieces as the Almira community came together to get to the finish line one dollar at a time.



From left to right, George Daisy, Helen White, Heather Shumaker and Barry Harper.

"The thing about this is it was totally grassroots," Chown said. "The impetus was coming from this close-knit, fantastic group of citizens who saw a threat and wanted to respond. They were doing auctions, special dinners at the Elks Club, benefit concerts, you name it."

Harper and Daisy look back fondly at the effort to save Pearl Lake, which

remains as beautiful as ever. It is owned by the state, which merged it in with the adjacent Pere Marquette State Forest.

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"It really was a true community effort," Harper said. "It made me feel great. I worked probably 50 hours a week in 40 years of business, and that was nothing compared to this, but it worked and it was really worth it."



Surrounded by friends and family, Beatrice Goin cuts the ribbon at the Ransom Lake dedication.

GTRLC was instrumental in the process, Daisy said.

“I can tell you we couldn’t have done it without Glen and Heather and the conservancy,” he said, referring to then-land protection specialist Heather Shumaker. “The conservancy really was a guiding force that gave us direction.”

Shumaker, who now works as a writer, has fond memories of the Pearl Lake protection effort.

“It created this whole new set of land conservationists in Almira Township,” she said. “And not only did they come together and knock the socks off Pearl Lake, but then they went on to protect Ransom Lake as well.”

The Ransom process began a few years later. Again with the assistance of GTRLC, the township secured a \$860,000 MNRTF grant to purchase a 220-acre parcel from the Goin family, which had owned the property since the 1940s. The ecologically significant property completely surrounds peaceful Ransom Lake.

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Daisy and many of the same players from Pearl Lake – this time calling themselves Almira Citizens for Preservation – were instrumental in raising matching funds.

“It was a complete community experience,” Shumaker said of the two projects. “Pearl Lake started it, but Ransom Lake solidified it. It brought so many people together. It was joyous, it was emotional, and I think it did wonders for that area.”

Much later, in 2008, GTRLC again helped the township acquire a third trust fund grant to create a small public beach on Lake Ann.

“It was a very special part of our history getting those three projects accomplished,” Chown said.

