

ST. CLAIR-SIX MILE AND THE CHAIN OF LAKES

For any number of reasons, the Chain of Lakes watershed is one of the most important in the entire region. The Chain, which begins in central Antrim County and empties into Grand Traverse Bay in Elk Rapids, includes 14 interconnected lakes and rivers that drain approximately 500 square miles.

The Chain includes Elk and Torch lakes, two of the largest and deepest inland lakes in the state. Its discharge, at 180 billion gallons per year, makes up 60 percent of the surface water that flows into Grand Traverse Bay.

Protection efforts there began long before GTRLC was formed. Grassroots efforts in the 1970s resulted in the state-owned Skegemog Lake Wildlife Area and the Grass River Natural Area, owned mostly by Antrim County. The Michigan chapter of The Nature Conservancy helped with the Skegemog effort and later transferred management responsibilities to GTRLC. Grass River is managed by a nonprofit organization of the same name.

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Through a combination of well-placed conservation easements and preserves, GTRLC went on to protect nearly 7,000 acres throughout the Chain’s watershed. It all began in 1993 when GTRLC teamed up with the Little Traverse Conservancy to protect a special place now known as the St. Clair Lake-Six Mile Lake Natural Area.

Chown only half-jokingly refers to this preserve as the “Amazon of the North” due to its rich biodiversity and undeveloped riverine habitat. It includes land on both sides of the river that connects St. Clair and Six Mile lakes in northern Antrim County. It began with a 17-acre parcel and was expanded to its current size of 255 acres as contiguous landowners agreed to sell land.









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From left to right, JoAnne Beemon, Walter & Mary Lawmaster and Cherie Hogan during the fundraising campaign.

A local woman named JoAnne Beemon proved to be the “spark plug” for that effort, Chown said. Since that area of the chain straddles the Antrim-Charlevoix county lines, Beemon approached both GTRLC and the Little Traverse Conservancy, which serves Charlevoix, in an attempt to protect land in the area.

“She just thought the area was really cool from an ecological perspective, and it certainly is,” Chown said. “Ecologically and aesthetically, there’s no other place like it in the entire Chain of Lakes.”

Beemon drove home the point that more of the chain needed to be protected. Despite the successful efforts in the lower reaches, the headwaters were vulnerable.

“You’ve got Skegemog in the lower chain, Grass River in the middle of the chain, but there was nothing in the upper chain,” Chown said. “Joanne had a vision for the whole area.”

Beemon and a citizens committee worked with both conservancies to raise funds. Although Walter and Mary Lawmaster of Indiana provided a large donation in honor of their late son, the bulk of the \$17,000 raised for the initial parcel was collected through textbook community-driven fundraising, with bake sales, T-shirt sales and neighbor-to-neighbor conversations all playing a role.

Cherie Hogan, president of the Six Mile Lake Association, worked closely with Beemon and others to protect the first piece, along with many additions thereafter. She vividly recalls the feeling of knowing the goal was reached and the first piece of the natural area would be protected.

“We were all pretty emotional about it. I don’t have any children, and I felt that this absolutely would be one of the most important things I ever did in my life,” she said. “As silly as that sounds, it was that important to me, and it certainly was very important to the rest of the group. We had our hearts and souls in this.”

Hogan remains grateful for Chown’s support, especially when fundraising got particularly tough.

“I will never forget Glen’s constant support and encouragement for a bunch of crazy visionaries trying to make a difference in a tiny riverway connecting two small lakes in the Upper Chain of Lakes. I think because Glen never gave up on us, we never gave up on ourselves,” she said. “Glen never got discouraged, and no matter what he always encouraged us – Just keep trying, just keep getting out there, it will come.”

After purchasing the initial 17 acres from a man named Alan Forbes, GTRLC and LTC added nine additions throughout the 1990s and three additions since. These extra pieces involved more citizen-driven fundraising and many kitchen table conversations in the homes of a very diverse group of landowners, Chown said.

“Each landowner had a different take on that area and why it was important, but I think each of them appreciated being part of a larger vision,” he said. “They really were all characters with wildly different political and cultural views, but I think it’s clear they all understood that this was a fragile and unique place.”

Each addition was heartwarming for its own reasons, Hogan said. Everyone came together for a common goal.

“Every bit of this is an amazing story,” she said. “The whole thing.”

St. Clair-Six Mile is one of several preserves and protection projects completed by GTRLC along the Chain. Others include the Golden Days Loon Preserve and nearby loon nursery on the north arm of Lake Bellaire, the W.L. Criger Wetland Nature Sanctuary on Torch Lake, the Palastra-Holm Nature Preserve on Elk Lake, the Arnold and Shirley Bauer & Pamela L. Polaczyk Nature Preserve near the Chain’s headwaters and several critical conservation easements.