



**Huron  
Pines**

# **Lake Huron Forever**

*Healthy Water.  
Protected Places.  
Vibrant Communities.*



# LAKE HURON FOREVER

**On June 17 and 18, municipal leaders, community advocates, tribal partners, educators, artists and conservation professionals came together in Alpena, Michigan to celebrate Lake Huron at the international One Water Gathering.**

The two-day workshop featured over 20 speakers from across Michigan and Ontario giving talks on a range of topics, all with a focus on Great Lakes protection and community vibrancy. The gathering opened with a welcome and blessing from Joseph Sowmick, Elder for the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe.

The One Water Gathering was part of the broader Lake Huron Forever initiative which was originally formed by a committee of international partners. From its inception, Lake Huron Forever sought to include all voices and all nations, United States, Canada and sovereign tribal nations.

Huron Pines has been working with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe on the Lake Huron Forever initiative since 2019, and we were honored to attend a Saginaw Chippewa event this spring to celebrate graduates of the Washtenaw Master Rain Gardener program. Huron Pines attended the celebration to help out and to share information on water quality and green infrastructure, and will take part in the program again this fall.

“It was important to us to have the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe represented at the gathering as a way to acknowledge and honor the land history and original stewards of the area,” said Water Program Director Samantha Nellis. “Joseph Sowmick was the perfect representative because he has a strong connection with water and so much traditional knowledge to share.”

In his address, Sowmick acknowledged the lands and waters where the conference was taking place, and shared the principles of the Seven Grandfather Teachings—Love, Respect, Bravery, Truth, Honesty, Humility and Wisdom—which members of his tribe are encouraged to follow throughout their lives. He emphasized the importance of humility as the foundation for the other teachings.



**“May we always remain good stewards of the land and water we share together.”**

“We’re spiritual beings having a human experience,” he said. “We’re children of the creator, and we’re here for a purpose.”

“It was an honor to share a traditional prayer and cultural teaching with my brothers and sisters and I was blessed as a Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Elder to see First Nations Canadians taking part in the ceremonies.” Sowmick continued. “So many times we look at the banks of Lake Huron from our own perspective and the communities that live there, but seeing our friends from Wikwemikong and Owen Sound present truly highlights we are together in protecting our freshwater resources generously gifted to us by a loving Creator. May we always remain good stewards of the land and water we share together.”

*Front and back cover: Thunder Bay at sunset.*



## We're in This Together

Ensuring the long-term health of Lake Huron – one of the largest bodies of fresh water on Earth – is essential in securing a healthy, sustainable future for the communities along her shores.

During his keynote address, Great Lakes Protection Fund Executive Director David Rankin reminded us how fortunate we are to have this vast resource at our doorstep.

“One third of one percent of water on the planet is surface fresh water,” he said, gesturing eastward from his podium. “The good news for us is that 20 percent of that is right down the street.”

The One Water Gathering showed us that we do not confront this challenge of protecting Lake Huron alone. Existing on both sides of the lake are networks of dedicated individuals and organizations who understand the importance of healthy water and are contributing valuable resources and innovative solutions to this fundamental cause.

“We continue to build an ongoing inventory of creative projects to improve the health of communities around Lake Huron,” said Stuart Reid, Executive Director of Community Foundation Grey Bruce.

Though we are separated by more than a hundred miles of water, One Water Gathering was a reminder we're all in this together – and that it's the very water which binds us together.

“The challenges ahead call for passionate heroes and patient perseverance,” said Rob Collier, retired President of the Council of Michigan Foundations, in his closing address.

*Left: Joseph Sowmick, Elder for the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, opens the One Water Gathering with an address and blessing.*

*Above: Members of the Canadian delegation Jo Anne Harbinson, Jeff Graham, Barry Randall, Alyssa Bourassa, and Erinn Lawrie at the Friday evening reception.*

*Center Right: Great Lakes Protection Fund Executive Director David Rankin*

*Bottom Right: Community Foundation Grey Bruce Executive Director Stuart Reid*





# Creating a Lake Huron Forever Community

**Our vision at Huron Pines is conservation driven by engaged, empowered communities. We are watching that vision come to life in our work to protect the Great Lakes through the Lake Huron Forever initiative.**

Au Gres became the first Lake Huron Forever community in January, when its city council pledged to protect Lake Huron by improving the ways it manages stormwater, invasive species and chemical hazards while inspiring its community members to action. While this was the culmination of our decade-long partnership with the small town situated on Saginaw Bay, it marks only the beginning for the Lake Huron Forever initiative, and Au Gres is a shining example of its potential.

Huron Pines first partnered with Au Gres ten years ago by involving students there in place-based education and natural resource protection efforts on nearby Big Charity Island. Today, students of Au Gres-Sims Schools still visit the Michigan Islands National Wildlife Refuge twice per school year to monitor a population of federally-threatened Pitcher's thistle growing on the island's dune shoreline. The trip to this protected land is made possible thanks to a partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who manage the refuge.

Over the years, Huron Pines has conducted a stormwater assessment to guide Au Gres' efforts to capture and reduce stormwater runoff into the Au Gres River and Lake Huron, attended council meetings, facilitated community discussions and served as a resource for ongoing student- and municipal-led infrastructure projects.

The latest in a series of green infrastructure projects was completed this May. Students and public works staff installed two native-plant bioswales — one near a public playground; the other on school property — to divert, capture and filter stormwater runoff from two city streets. These student-designed rain gardens use a combination of soil, gravel and deep-rooted native plants, some of which students grew from seed in their own greenhouse, to filter and absorb stormwater before it reaches nearby waterways. Two similar bioswales were installed by students and volunteers at Au Gres Riverside Park in 2020.

"They've come full circle," environmental science teacher Luke Freeman said of his students' efforts to install rain gardens while educating their

community about stormwater. "I'm really proud of this group. They're making a difference and demonstrating that they are able to be leaders."

When he addressed an audience at One Water Gathering, City Manager Dale Wiltse referenced this project as an example of the good which has come from our longstanding partnership and, more recently, the Lake Huron Forever initiative.

"Most of our council members grew up around the city, Saginaw Bay or Lake Huron, and we have seen the lake go through changes," Wiltse said. "We know this pledge is not for today, it's for our children and grandchildren. We're a community of 900 residents who partnered with half a dozen environmental science kids and put together what we feel is one heck of a program for our community. If the city of Au Gres can do it with our resources, and with the help of Huron Pines and their partners, every community should step forward and take the pledge. Let's all work together."

The spring bioswale project was funded in part by Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network, Bay Area Community Foundation and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Sustain Our Great Lakes program.

**"We know this pledge is not for today, it's for our children and grandchildren. We're a community of 900 residents who partnered with half a dozen environmental science kids and put together what we feel is one heck of a program for our community."**

*Above: Luke Freeman, teacher at Au Gres-Sims Schools, installs native plants in a bioswale alongside his environmental science students.*

*Left, clockwise from top: Crews construct a bioswale rain garden in Au Gres; Diane Fong, President and CEO of Bay Area Community Foundation, presents a street sign to Au Gres City Manager, Dale Wiltse, at the One Water Gathering; native plants, freshly installed by students; the street sign displayed on US-23; Au Gres seniors Natalie Hoadley (l) and Regan Bunker plant a bioswale along Michigan Avenue.*





# Experiencing Lake Huron Firsthand

On day two of the conference, participants toured protected lands that support threatened and endangered species found only on the Lake Huron coast with visits to Besser Nature Area and Alpena's North Point Peninsula.

At Besser Nature Area, Canadian partners from the Lake Huron Coastal Centre discussed the approaches they take to dune restoration on their Ontario shoreline. Attendees were also able to hike through an old growth forest, explore the geological features of the land, view a shipwreck off the coast and observe federally-threatened Pitcher's thistle plants.

At North Point, the group visited coastal dunes, cobblestone shorelines and cedar forests. This limestone prominence is a relic of the glacial forces which carved Thunder Bay and the Great Lakes thousands of years ago, and is a critical stopover site for migratory birds.

Among the group touring North Point that morning was Spencer High, an artist from Grand Rapids who presented at the conference on Cultivating a Community of Conservationists by sharing his personal experience leading group birding hikes on Sunday mornings around the Grand Rapids area.

"We're all mutually discovering nature and learning from one another," he explained in his talk. "My personal entry point into conservation was through birds, but each person has their own spark moment and a different idea of what nature means to them."

Providing an opportunity for people to explore these critical ecosystems first-hand was an integral part of the One Water Gathering experience.

## In the Field

The sites selected for the field trip excursions were examples of the types of landscapes Huron Pines prioritizes for protection and stewardship – places with critical ecosystems that are also exceptional assets to their communities. This summer, our stewardship teams are working on habitat protection and restoration projects across our heartland and coastal regions.

At the southern rim of Thunder Bay lies Negwegon State Park, a gem of undeveloped coastal dunes and the epicenter of critically

important forested wetlands. Because rare habitats like these also tend to hold rare plants and wildlife, Negwegon is home to some of Michigan's most threatened species, making the 4,100-acre park a vital part of Huron Pines' stewardship efforts. Throughout 2021, Huron Pines' Stewardship Team treated invasive plants across 43 acres and 9 miles of coastline to preserve the natural formation of dunes, protect native habitats and maintain recreational access.

**"My personal entry point into conservation was through birds, but each person has their own spark moment and a different idea of what nature means to them."**

Additionally, the team surveyed 3,727 acres in and around the park to track the distribution of invasive species to guide our ongoing stewardship in 2022 and beyond.

"Negwegon is the kind of place where these threatened and endangered species still have a hold, so it's important we maintain their habitats that aren't really found anywhere else," said Logan Hawley, Coastal Stewardship Team Lead for Huron Pines.

Similar efforts are happening at Thompson Harbor State Park to the north in Presque Isle County, and Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area near Oscoda, both areas which provide vital wildlife habitat and water filtration for Lake Huron.

## One Water, One Vision

Bringing people together for a common cause was just the beginning of what we hope will be a lasting commitment to do good work for Lake Huron and the resources that make the Great Lakes region stand apart.

"It's a reminder I work in one small corner of the Lake Huron watershed, and of all the great work that's happening elsewhere," Rebecca McNitt, Conservation Program Associate with The Nature Conservancy, said about her experience at the conference. "It's a reminder we're all in this together."



One of the objectives of the conference was to facilitate peer-to-peer learning by bringing people together who share a common goal, but come from different vantage points, career fields and geographies. It was both a celebration of what people have already accomplished and a way to begin setting the groundwork for what can be achieved when we come together for the greater good of the lake.

“Our commitment goes beyond a single project or conference,” said Brad Jensen, Executive Director of Huron Pines. “We want to use this positive momentum to inspire a movement that everyone can embrace for the sake of our shared waters.”

*Left: Huron Pines surveys a shoreline forest in Presque Isle County where dwarf lake iris, Michigan’s state wildflower, was on full display in May.*

*Clockwise from top: Conference participants explore the shoreline of North Point Preserve; Amber Hubbard, Coastal Stewardship Coordinator at Huron Pines, snaps a photo of scarlet paintbrush in bloom on a rocky stretch of Lake Huron shoreline; Madalyn Saddler and Amber Hubbard with Huron Pines remove invasive frog-bit from Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary; A volunteer rakes invasive European frog-bit from the waters of Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary in June as part of ongoing treatments there.*





CONNECT WITH US



HURONPINES.ORG