

COASTAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS COMMUNITY LEADER ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK



Photos: MDNR

Dr. Barbara Avers
Dr. Heather Triezenberg

BACKGROUND

The project team (e.g., researchers, MSU Extension-Sea Grant educators, MDNR WD contact, and MSU faculty) selected two study areas for in-depth community engagement to further explore mutual goals and opportunities for wildlife management and coastal community development. The Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) were selected on the basis of current or likelihood for ongoing partnerships, and interest of local community leaders or Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Wildlife Division (WD) staff. They were Pointe Mouillee State Game Area along Lake Erie and Nayanquing Point State Wildlife Area along Lake Huron. While various stakeholder engagement approaches and events occurred through the entirety of this project, this report summarizes the results of a specific survey. The objective was to invite stakeholders to share their input about coastal WMA conservation and community planning and development, as well as perspectives on current engagement and collaboration opportunities.

METHODS

We created an anonymous open-ended survey (Patton, 2022) for distribution in the communities using a modified tailored design method (Dillman et al. 2009). The goal of the survey was to invite stakeholders to share their perspectives about coastal WMA conservation and community planning and development. We received MSU IRB approval (#7601) and distributed it in May 2022, inviting input through June 30, 2022. Invitations went to registrants at the two community meetings held in each study site location (Pointe Mouillee State Game Area and Nayanquing Point State Wildlife Area) and included waterfowl hunters, local elected officials or professional staff, local leaders from non-governmental organizations, and others. We received 15 responses that all appear to be from respondents interested in Pointe Mouillee Wildlife Management Area.

RESULTS

The survey questions and response data are available in Appendix 1. Selected themes along with supporting text provided by respondents are listed below:

Successful WMA conservation or coastal community planning and development requires

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Habitat restoration partnerships	Habitat restoration in coastal communities and bi-national remediation plans for restoring wildlife habitat and coastal amenities, and joint wetlands conservation efforts.
Pursuing joint funding	Ability to work together and obtain funding for projects to rebuild shorelines and protect migratory birds and needed habitat.
Engagement with waterfowlers and other users.	Sharing the lands for other users beyond waterfowl hunters, such as bird watchers and the public for the diversity of species...coordinating for local waterfowl festivals.

Wishes for future conservation, recreation, planning, or community development for WMA and/or coastal communities

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
WMA focus on habitat and hunting	Keep wildlife management areas, especially in Southeast Michigan with a variety of other public lands for different types of recreation, focused on wildlife habitat and its restoration. Keep the unique qualities and use (e.g., hunting) of WMA's preserved. Improvements made should focus on the wildlife habitat and increasing hunting opportunities.
Beneficial use restoration	Delisting all 14 areas of concerns and restoring beneficial use impairments in Michigan.
Coastal shoreline management	Restore backwater barriers (Lake Erie especially). Work with Coastal Zone Management Act for enforcement.
Value of large scale nature area	Retain wilderness values across the board.

Community benefits from WMA or other nature-based assets

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Value to community	Communities that harbor wildlife and wilderness are very fortunate. People and wildlife need open spaces to renew their connection with nature.
Hedonic value to property owners	Belief that property values are higher near nature-based assets.
Access to nature	Universal access locations and walkways for disabled and veterans who wish to hunt or fish.

Desires for community members or visitors to interact with WMA and/or community

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Collaboration	For Pointe Mouillee, the community has interacted with MDNR WD for nearly 75 years for the Pointe Mouillee Waterfowl Festival. Patronize local events such as the Pointe Mouillee Waterfowl Festival.
Stewardship	Leave no trace practices. Be involved with volunteer clean-up days.
Education	Understand how delicate the 4040 acres of Pointe Mouillee WMA is and how they want to see future generations enjoy the pristine habitat.
Sporting or recreation	Describe waterfowl hunting as a sport that requires training and hard work, rather than recreation.

Improving MDNR WMA and community collaborations

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Education	Educate the local community on fragile ecosystems, impacts of coastal waters on shorelines, migratory birds, food sources, diseases, in addition to hunting.
Friends group	Having a “Friends” group to support the Wildlife Management Area is very helpful. Community leaders can serve on the Friends Council to help provide necessities for the WMA. Local elected officials are important partners to help local organizations achieve their goals.
Infrastructure	Improve community roads and infrastructure around the WMA.
Planning/zoning/permitting	Save remaining coastal wetlands.
Funding	Funding from state or federal sources to stop erosion of the shorelines adjacent habitat areas.

Issues preventing community and MDNR WMA collaborations

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Funding	Funding.
Uncertainty around MDNR intentions	We don’t know what the MDNR is wanting to impose on the WMA.
Lack of community engagement	Lack of activity! Something has to be going on out there. MDNR needs to promote “Friends Organizations” to be a catalyst between the WMA and the community. (Similar to the USFWS with NWR for funding and volunteers.)

Overlapping or possible joint common goals for WMAs and communities

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Habitat management	Preserving habitats, addressing shoreline erosion issues, and an educational understanding of the impacts of the past and future. Limiting foot traffic to focus on habitat restoration and wildlife refuge functions.
Community-WMA partnerships	Communities have recreation plans, master plans, and non-profit service groups. Saving wetlands when creating master plans for the community. Providing recreational opportunities for hunting, viewing, fishing, hiking, etc.
Workforce development	On the job training via state of Michigan internships at WMA through the local school system could be encouraged to provide seasonal work experience to youth.

Possible actions where WMAs and communities collaborate to achieve goals

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Community education	Educate communities on how fragile ecosystems are, such as breeding times, food sources and their threats (e.g., plant disease). Train young people and adults in outdoor recreation, interpretation, and other skills.
Utilizing community planning and zoning	Include wetland areas in master planning and zoning restrictions.
Securing adequate funding	Collaborate on funding and grant writing.
Social learning	Better understanding of local community interests that are not clear to traditional hunting and WMA stakeholders.
Develop guidance frameworks	Adapt the Wetland Management for Waterfowl Handbook for Michigan ecosystems.

Learning outcomes about local community and/or WMA and possible collaborations

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Many visitors, few leaders	Most of the general public only come to visit WMA, while there are a few very concerned leaders.
Funding and partnerships	Private, Corporate, and Community Foundations can assist WMAs. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund is a good example.
Importance of connections with communities	Non-profit organizations, such as the International Wildlife Refuge Alliance and Friends organizations make positive connections with surrounding communities.
Importance of knowing about uniqueness of place	People can work together once they are aware of the importance of wetlands for flood control and water quality.

Reflections on how community leaders and WMA staff could engage or collaborate

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Empower people	Engagement is just a matter of finding out who does what in the community and trying to get them to collaborate. Local service groups might be willing to cooperate.
Be upfront about interests	The traditional WMA stakeholders would like to know more about community leaders' interests.
Facilitate social learning	These are the groups that show the most interest in collaboration. There is potential, but at this point most everything has been about just getting the conversation started.
Education	A coastal habitat educational program is needed, like Hunters Safety.
Invite people to talk about natural resources	City and township officials probably already understand the value of natural resources within their area. They could be persuaded to include WMA resources within their deliberations.

Other comments

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES
Economic or commercial development pressures	We can't let economics overshadow habitats. Wildlife deserves a break from commercial development.
Impact of federal funding	The Great Lakes and their coastal dynamics are a precious natural resource. Every effort must be made throughout the Great Lakes Region to preserve habitat for fish and wildlife. Restoration efforts under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) have already achieved a cost/benefit ratio of 3 to 1 across the entire region and will continue to do so. \$3.00 benefit derived from each \$1.00 spent for remediation or habitat restoration. We nearly lost much of these natural wonders and many have been severely impacted; but, now MWAs are part of the on-going effort to rectify the problem and let Nature take its course.

DISCUSSION

Upon review of the themes from the data, below are the highlights from this phase of the project: Implications for MNDR actions: (1) consider facilitating local or statewide "Friends" groups or other service groups to access private, corporate, and community foundation resources for common interests, including joint funding; and (2) work with communities to brainstorm and envision new ways that they might reach out and ask MDNR WD for assistance, collaboration, or co-creation for the stewardship and benefit of local WMAs.

Implications for local communities: (1) identify local infrastructure needs to access WMAs, and communicate with MDNR about those needs; (2) utilize community plans (master plans, zoning, recreation plans) for wetland protection; and (3) facilitate and communicate about which recreation activities are allowable on different types of lands.

Implications for both MDNR WD and local communities: (1) joint project planning and funding acquisition; and (2) develop, implement, and promote local education programs for the unique aspects of coastal wetland habitat and its benefits for erosion mitigation, habitat, refuge, flood protection, etc.

While the place-based education (PBE) framework (Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, 2017) is currently applied within the context of Great Lakes stewardship, it may be a useful approach to explore here. Generally, it focuses on (1) uniqueness of place, (2) science as inquiry, (3) school-community partnerships, and (4) develop capacity for incorporating youth voice (GLSI, 2017). It could be adapted to focus on (1) uniqueness of WMAs, (2) science and management as a process, (3) MDNR WD WMA-community partnerships, and (4) developing capacity for collaboration. Youth, via schools or nonformal education programs, or adults could be the learner and partner with MDNR WD WMAs.

To support a PBE model within a MDNR WD WMA context, the following would be valuable:

- Professional learning opportunities to focus on the uniqueness of the place, as well as science and management as a process;
- Establishing, inheriting, or facilitating partnerships;
- Unique institutional needs to MDNR WD WMAs and local community governments, including hunting focus;
- Seed funds to support project implementation.

Finally, developing relationships and learning through working together (e.g., social learning and relational leadership development) were key themes that emerged from the reflections on learning, engagement, and collaboration.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey questions

1. What is working really well for the WMA conservation or adjacent coastal community planning and development?
2. What is your wish for the future of the WMA and/or adjacent coastal communities related to conservation, recreation, planning, or community development?
3. How does the adjacent community benefit from the WMA and/or other nature-based assets?
4. How would you like community members or visitors to interact with the WMA and/or the community?
5. How can the community and MDNR WMA better work together?
6. What issues may prevent the community and MNDR WMA from working together?
7. What are the overlapping, as well as possible joint common goals for WMAs and communities?
8. What are possible actions that WMAs and local communities might collaborate on to achieve their goals?
9. What are your reflections of what was learned about adjacent communities and/or WMAs and collaboration possibilities through this process?
10. What are your reflections on how WMA staff and community leaders could engage or collaborate together?
11. Other comments:

Contacts

Dr. Barbara Avers

Waterfowl and Wetlands Specialist, Michigan Department of Natural Resources - Wildlife Division; Adjunct Assistant Professor MSU Fisheries and Wildlife Department

aversb@michigan.gov | (517) 930-1163

Dr. Heather Triezenberg

Associate Director and Extension Program Leader, Michigan Sea Grant, MSU Extension; Extension Specialist MSU Fisheries and Wildlife Department

vanden64@msu.edu | (517) 353-5508

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