

West Michigan Conservation Network: Strategic Plan

I. Goal/Mission Statement

[Short] The West Michigan Conservation Network is a diverse partnership of organizations and people conserving and enhancing our natural communities.

[Medium] The West Michigan Conservation Network is an effective, diverse, and sustainable partnership of environmental groups, educational institutions, governmental organizations, and private citizens working to conserve and enhance our natural communities through ecosystem restoration and public education.

[Long] The West Michigan Conservation Network (WMCN or “The Network”) is a partnership of environmental groups, educational institutions, governmental organizations, and private citizens working to conserve and enhance our natural communities. WMCN will achieve this goal by:

1. Maintaining and/or improving the health and resilience of natural communities by implementing and facilitating ecosystem restoration, utilizing invasive species management and other complementary approaches¹.
2. Increasing public environmental understanding to encourage shared value for vibrant, functional ecosystems as well as increasing partner capacity and expertise to benefit all regional conservation work.
3. Supporting sustainable organizational structure and function through partner engagement, internal and external Network communication, and project management.

II. Scope

Geographic Scope

The geographic scope of this organization encompasses seven counties in Michigan’s western Lower Peninsula: Allegan, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newago, Oceana, and Ottawa Counties, and specifically, the natural lands contained within those geo-political boundaries.

Strategic Scope

The ultimate goal of the West Michigan Network is sustainably healthy natural habitat, benefiting not only native organisms but the people of the West Michigan region. As invasive species have been identified as the second greatest threat to native systems², the organization has traditionally used management and education regarding the threat those species pose as a primary set of strategies. Carrying out sustainable invasive species control, especially with regard to Early Detection and Response (EDR) species³, is viewed as possibly the most critical part of preserving the biodiversity, function, and ecosystem resilience that defines a high-quality natural area.

It is equally important to recognize that ecological degradation, resulting from the introduction and proliferation of invasive species or otherwise, causes substantial harm to human well-being. Impacted function of natural

¹ For the purposes of this document, invasive species management is defined as the prevention, control, and monitoring of invasive species. This document will use the Michigan Department of Natural Resources definition of invasive species: Invasive species are non-native species that have the potential to become established and the potential to spread widely and cause ecological or economic harm or pose a risk to human health.

² Wilson, Edward O. "Threats to biodiversity." *Scientific American* 261.3 (1989): 108-116.

³ EDR species are defined as those that significantly threaten natural system structure and function, yet are just beginning to appear on the landscape and therefore not widespread or well-established.

systems reduces their ability to provide critical ecosystem services such as water filtration, disease control, and stormwater management. These impacts also extend to human-use benefits, including recreation, natural resource usage, and aesthetic value.

As such, the strategic scope of the West Michigan Conservation Network has for many years primarily focused on addressing the threat of invasive species, specifically terrestrial invasive plants. The group's origins date back to 2006 with the creation of the West Michigan Cluster of The Stewardship Network, whose primary focus was on the management of invasive terrestrial plant species. Over time the inclusion of supporting components such as outreach and education gained more attention and in 2016 the growth of the West Michigan Cluster (and the associated increase in partners, components, and topic areas) required the formation of a new "umbrella organization", the WMCN, to more fully encompass the broader suite of conservation work in the region⁴. The West Michigan Cluster, and by association The Stewardship Network, remain a core partner in the WMCN, with an expertise and strategic focus in the Learning and Engagement subcommittee.

One emerging topic of interest helping drive the need for an updated structure model was (and is) the need to increase public understanding of broader environmental and conservation topics in an unbiased, non-confrontational way. The Network offers a unique platform to provide that type of educational opportunity in a unified and simultaneously distributed fashion. It is likely that a large portion of the region is underserved on new and relevant topics due simply to geographical distance, something an eight-county partnership can help mitigate. The Network also has the advantage of wide-ranging membership foci, broadening the scope of possible topics, expertise, and perspectives.

The Network also is uniquely positioned to quickly and easily survey the majority of conservation entities in the region and evaluate the needs for training, tools, and other capacity building. Overcoming those gaps is also more efficient at the Network level, as partner trainings and workshops can easily attract qualified instructors given the wide audience they will be able to reach.

Additionally, the Network has now reached a size and project workload that requires a more rigorous framework for action. An organizational structure must be developed to handle delegation of responsibilities and streamline implementation. Partners must be evaluated for their strategic strengths and level of interest in various project opportunities, and be kept up to date on the vast set of activities going on at all times. It is also of increasing importance that partners understand both what the Network offers them and what they can uniquely do for the Network.

Finally, there is always a need to champion the successes the Network has achieved in a fashion commiserate with the scale of those achievements. A high-level annual report will increase partner support, provide opportunities for funding, and track progress toward outcomes. Annual meetings focused on organization function (rather than current project implementation) must be held: Internally-focused portions of these will allow for adaptive management and improve function in the following year, and externally-focused portions will give a platform to thank partners, celebrate hard work, and tell a compelling story regarding what regional conservation partnerships can achieve.

⁴ While terrestrial invasive plant control will undoubtedly continue as a primary focus in all Network restoration activities, this document's scope does not exclude strategies and activities to address other invasive issues such as aquatic plants and forest pests. The Network also understands that there are complementary but separate strategies to be employed to ensure the ultimate organizational goal is achieved.

III. Outcomes & Indicators

The West Michigan Network’s efforts will be considered successful when the following outcomes result from sustainably implemented strategies:

1. Habitat Restoration and Management

- a. At a prioritized, targeted set of sites within the West Michigan Network service area, ecosystem quality, function, and resilience is maintained and improved.
- b. Throughout the region, ecosystem services and recreation opportunities are maintained and/or enhanced for the benefit of citizens within the region.
- c. Complementary strategies are employed to strengthen the long-term success and effectiveness of restoration projects and programs.

Intermediate Outcomes	Completion By
<u>RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT</u>	
1. Sites with a restoration need or opportunity are identified	2016 and Yearly
2. Targets for restoration outcomes at those sites are determined	2016 and Yearly
3. Management techniques necessary to reduce or eliminate threats to targets are implemented, including but not limited to invasive species control	2017 and Yearly
4. Monitoring to measure progress toward targeted outcomes is completed	2017 and Ongoing
5. Sites, targets, techniques, and monitoring methods are evaluated and refined as necessary	2017 and Ongoing
6. A system to respond to new or emerging invasive or other ecological threats is developed and implemented	2017
7. Public education and green industry outreach on the importance of healthy ecosystems, threats to those systems, and ways to assist restoration efforts are carried out	2016 and Ongoing

2. Public and Partner Learning and Engagement

- a. The regional public has equal access to cohesive, aligned, and unbiased educational opportunities and materials on topics of greatest conservation concern.
- b. All Network partners have the opportunity to increase their organizational capacity and expertise through Network-coordinated trainings and tools.
- c. Additional conservation-themed presentations and events are held as necessary, mutually-benefitting the Network and partners.

Intermediate Outcomes	Completion By
<u>LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT</u>	
1. Priority topics relevant to the Network’s mission are identified	2016 and Yearly
2. Messaging on these topics is aligned and widely-shared throughout the region	2017 and Ongoing
3. Capacity or expertise gaps across the majority of partner are identified	2017 and Yearly
4. Trainings and workshops are developed and held to aid partners in their support of the Network and their individual organizational missions	2017 and Ongoing
5. As necessary or as capacity dictates, partners provide presentations or other activities to benefit Network audiences. Simultaneously, the Network provides similar activities to enhance partner visibility	Ongoing

3. Organizational Structure and Function

- a. All members of the Network clearly understand their responsibilities as a partner, their role in the organization, and the opportunities for participation in Network projects.
- b. The format for Network communication, interaction, and function is maximally-inclusive and implemented with the lowest possible logistical impediments.
- c. The Network’s data, finances, and progress toward desired outcomes is clear and made easily available to partners, stakeholders, and the public

Intermediate Outcomes	Completion By
<u>STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION</u>	
1. An organizational chart is developed	2016
2. Subcommittee and/or project leads have a list of responsibilities relevant to effective Network function	2016
3. A survey of current partner’s expertise, interests, and needs is completed, as well as an evaluation of external strategic partnership opportunities	2017 and Yearly
4. Formats and protocols for steering committee, subcommittee, and project-specific meetings are developed to garner maximum participation with minimal partner burden	2017
5. A finance subcommittee is formed	2016
6. An annual report for the public and stakeholders is prepared and disseminated	2017 and Yearly
7. An annual meeting to evaluate multiple, non-project based aspects of Network performance (including Strategic Plan implementation/revisions and review of annual report) is held	2017 and Yearly
8. At the same annual meeting, the Network will recognize successes, outstanding efforts, and new partners	2017 and Yearly

IV. Strategies

The following are one-time or ongoing efforts to best implement activities in order to reach intermediate outcomes listed above:

Strategy I: Habitat Restoration and Management

- a. Understanding that invasive species (specifically terrestrial invasive plants) pose one of the most significant threats to natural systems, the Network will carry out invasive species survey, treatment, and monitoring projects to restore habitats.
- b. Complementary to invasive species management, the Network will evaluate additional restoration efforts, such as native species planting, on a case-by-case basis to improve the success of invasive species control and raise overall habitat quality.
- c. Underpinning the focal area of invasive species management, the Network will employ both public education (to generate project support and volunteer assistance) and green industry outreach (to reduce the probability of new invasive species introductions and improve customer options for purchasing native species)

Strategy II: Public and Partner Learning and Engagement

- a. After a yearly review of gaps in partnership expertise or capacity, the Network will employ expert-led presentations, trainings, and workshops for its membership
- b. Based on a yearly review of new, upcoming, or under-represented conservation topics, the Network will develop a suite of presentations and materials which will be deployed across the entire service area via Network partners
- c. Opportunistically, or as determined by current need, partners and the Network will share responsibilities for additional presentations or similar events. These will serve as a way to both allow partners to reach a wider audience, and increase community awareness of the Network.

Strategy III: Organizational Structure and Function

- a. To ensure that all partners are engaged and aligned, the Network will develop an organizational structure that will serve as the backbone of future project implementation.
- b. Utilizing the organizational structure as a template, subcommittee or project-based groups will be formed to both carry out activities relevant to their targeted outcomes, as well as assist in day-to-day function of the Network.
- c. On a yearly basis, the Network will survey its membership to determine their areas of expertise or interest with regards to possible project development. Similarly, outside organizations will be identified and evaluated to assist in completion of projects and movement toward outcomes.
- d. An annual report template will be developed and completed each year to report and analyze project-based outcomes. This will increase visibility of Network successes and improve regional understanding of the Network's mission.
- e. An annual meeting will be held to both review the performance of the Network (strategic plan implementation, overall functionality, etc.) as well as recognize and celebrate partners who have made outstanding efforts or contributions to Network outcomes.

V. Activities [*To be determined pending review of outcomes and strategies*]

In order to implement strategies and ultimately achieve desired outcomes, WMCN will engage in the following activities:

1. Habitat Restoration

- a. Invasive species management
- b. Complementary restoration activities
- c. Public education and green industry outreach

2. Education and Engagement

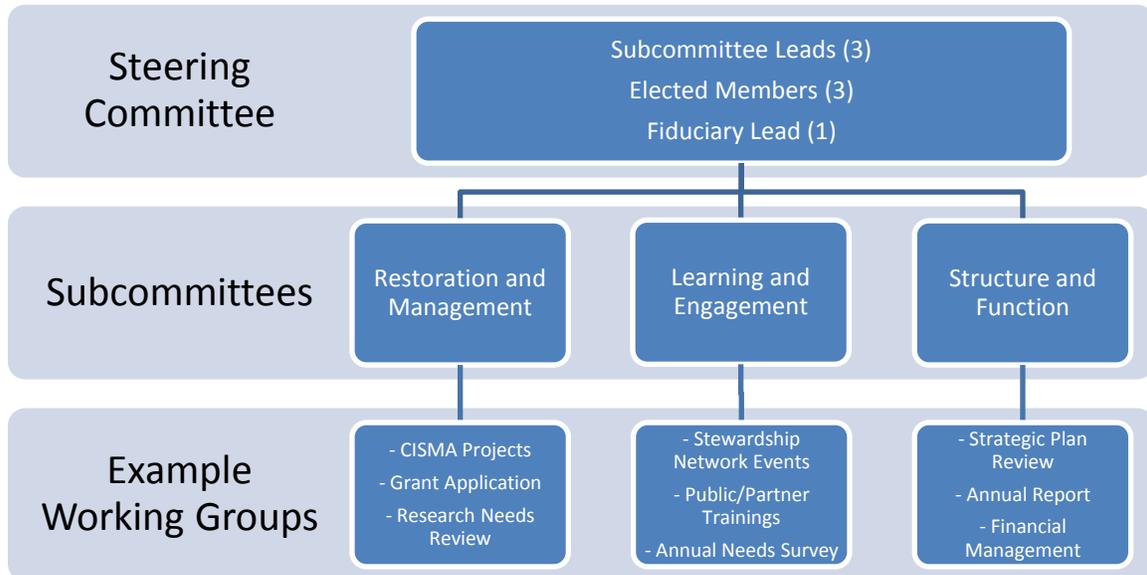
- a. Aligned and widespread public education
- b. Strategic partnership trainings and capacity development
- c. Ad-hoc partner- and Network-led presentations

3. Structure and Function Support

- a. Organizational structure, roles and responsibilities, and partner interest documents
- b. Internal meeting and communication protocols
- c. External material development and partnership engagement
- d. Adaptive management

VI. Appendices

Appendix A – West Michigan Conservation Network Organizational Structure



Appendix B – West Michigan Conservation Network Partner List

Current as of 10-5-2016

Ada Township - Parks and Recreation	Michigan Department of Natural Resources
Allegan Conservation District	Michigan Garden Clubs
Aquinas College - Biology Department	Michigan Nature Association
Black River Habitats	Montcalm Conservation District
Blandford Nature Center	Muskegon Community College - Institute of Agricultural Technology
Calvin College - Ecosystem Preserve	Muskegon Conservation District
Calvin College - Plaster Creek Stewards	Muskegon River Watershed Assembly
Cascade Township	The Nature Conservancy
Cardno	Newaygo Invasive Plant Project
City of Ferrysburg	North Country Trail Association
Enchanted Gardener	Oceana Conservation District
Fen View Design, LLC	Outdoor Discovery Center Macatawa Greenway
Friends of Grand Rapids Parks	Ottawa Conservation District
Gaines Township	Ottawa County - Parks and Recreation Commission
Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation	Rogue River Watershed Council
GEI Consultants of Michigan, PC	The Stewardship Network
Grand Valley Metro Council	Trout Unlimited
Grand Valley State University	US Forest Service – Baldwin Ranger Station
Groundswell	Wild Ones – River City/Grand Rapids Chapter
Gun Lake Tribe	West Michigan Environmental Action Council
Howard Christensen Nature Center	West Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative
Izaak Walton League - Dwight Lydell Chapter	West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission
Kent Conservation District	Wittenbach/Wege Agriscience & Environmental Education Center
Kent County Parks	
Kitchel-Lindquist-Hartger Dunes Preserve	
Land Conservancy of West Michigan	
Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds	

Appendix C – West Michigan Conservation Network Steering Committee Overview and By-Laws

I. PURPOSE

The WMCN Steering Committee exists to provide high-level decision-making for the Network. Through panel review, the Committee will (when requested or as necessary) provide a determination on these high-level issues based on a majority vote. In general terms, the Committee will provide decision-making with regard to the following three broad categories:

1. Decisions that impact multiple aspects of the Network
2. Decisions which carry with them a high level of risk for the Network
3. Decisions involving outcomes that require shared responsibility by all in the Network

Decisions impacting multiple aspects of the Network (1) can be labeled as “cross-cutting” – the outcomes of those types of decisions are likely to have an effect on multiple individuals, partners, or working groups throughout the Network, including those decisions that require balanced input from multiple Subcommittees. Decisions that carry a high level of risk (2) are those where even well-reasoned decisions may potentially impact the image, sustainability, and/or long-term function of the Network. Decisions that require shared responsibility (3) are more difficult to define; they may encompass categories (1) and (2) above, but even more generally are decisions that would be uncomfortable, improper, or unprofessional to make individually. All members of the Network must be willing to share the consequences resulting from those types of decisions.

As a point of clarification, **not all Network decision-making needs to be or should be done through the Steering Committee process.** The Steering Committee exists to make decisions that traditionally have been difficult for a single individual, working group, or Subcommittee to make. Moving forward, Subcommittee and project leads should view the Steering Committee as a way to ease the burden of making determinations on complicated issues as they arise. To use the most recently completed Network project (Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program application) as an example, the project lead (in this case the CISMA Coordinator) should feel full confidence to make interim decisions regarding programmatic work, financial allocation, and partner recruitment for the project, however the Steering Committee would be the logical “final review” of the application draft and provide their sign-off and approval. In essence, the Committee would answer the question, “Is this application ready to be submitted to the State of Michigan?” and perhaps even more broadly, “Does this project application move the Network closer to reaching desired outcomes?”

In general, members of the Network should feel free to ask the Committee to provide a decision (or even guidance) on any type of topic, however they should also be aware that the Committee’s determination may be for that individual, working group, or subcommittee to reach a verdict themselves.

II. MEMBERSHIP

A diverse and experienced Steering Committee membership is essential to understand the nuances of all aspects of WMCN work and how they may be impacted or impact the decision-making process. Members will fall into two categories, the appointed and the elected, totaling a Steering Committee of seven individuals.

Appointed members are the three Subcommittee leads and the organizational fiduciary. In the WMCN, these are currently leads of the Restoration and Management, Learning and Engagement, and Structure and Function Subcommittees, as well as a representative of Ottawa Conservation District. Elected members are three individuals determined by the Network to effectively represent all partners in the advisory and decision making processes with which the Committee is tasked.

III. ELECTION PROCESS

The election process for elected members is to be democratic and informal. Elected members may be nominated by any partner, and partners may nominate themselves. The following scenarios will outline the nomination and election process:

1. Three eligible individuals are nominated: If during the nomination process exactly three eligible individuals are nominated (e.g. within term limits for any current members), then there will be a blind, online approval process to follow with a simple yes/no voting system. If a “yes” vote reaches majority (51%⁵) those individuals nominated will be placed on the Steering Committee at the end of prior members’ terms. If the majority vote is “no”, the Network will return to the initial nomination process for further discussion.
2. More than three individuals are nominated: If more than three individuals are nominated, then a vote will be held. All partners will be given three votes to cast, and the three individuals with the highest vote tally will be elected. If there are ties, those ties will be broken by another, stand-alone vote with one vote per partner.
3. Less than three individuals are nominated: If an insufficient number of nominees are available, the first action will be to ask existing elected members if they are willing to continue to serve, including beyond standard term limits. If an existing member agrees and is term-limited, the Network will hold a vote requiring a majority (51%) “yes” outcome to pass a temporary resolution allowing an extended term limit for that member. If existing members are unable to continue to serve, and no individual from the Network is willing to nominate themselves, the possibility of a temporarily reduced-size Committee will be discussed and/or special processes will be implemented.

IV. TERM DURATION AND LIMITS

All elected members will be expected to serve a one-year term. No elected member may exceed two consecutive terms.

V. RESIGNATION AND RETRACTION

Any elected member may resign at any time. If at the prior election there were more than three nominees, then the fourth place nominee will be placed into the resigning member’s position, effective immediately, and will serve the remainder of their term. This replacement process does not count toward the resigning or incoming member’s term limit if the time served is less than six months, and does count toward either’s term limit if the time served is greater than six months. If a prior nominee is not available or interested, a one-off nomination process will be held to elect a new member. Six month rules from above apply to this process as well.

Any partner may request a retraction of an elected member at any time. The partner requesting the retraction must inform all partners of their request, in writing, and provide their reasoning for the request. A blind vote will be held and if a majority (51%) is reached to retract an elected member it will take place effective immediately. Replacement protocol will be as described above.

VI. DECISION MAKING RECUSAL

⁵ 51% majority refers to 51% of all participating partner organizations in the Network. Votes will be held electronically to allow for maximal participation. If the timeframe provided for voting does not allow for a partner or partners to vote, it is the responsibility of that/those partners to reach out to the individual(s) responsible for coordinating the vote and requesting additional time. Partners who do not request additional time and do not vote will be removed from the voting body for that particular vote, and there will be a corresponding decrease in the number of votes required to reach majority.

Any member of the Steering Committee may recuse themselves from any decision based on conflict of interest⁶, lack of expertise, or other factors they may note. This may result in a tie decision by the Steering Committee, which will then be put to a vote by the full Network. Majority (51%) is required to make a decision by full Network vote.

⁶ Utilizing a strict, standard definition of Conflict of Interest, it is likely that many issues discussed by the Committee could present a COI for multiple members of the Committee at any given time. A more relaxed standard of COI may need to be utilized by this Committee for practical reasons. This will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and may require moving to a full partner vote to mitigate.