For our health

SPRING ISSUE 2020
From the Executive Director

M y initial letter for this page, written six weeks ago, is now in digital heaven—conceived long before COVID-19 changed the face of our current reality. Ironically, if not prophetically, the theme for this spring’s newsletter—health—was chosen last year, well before most of us had even heard of a large Chinese city called Wuhan. Indeed, the landscape of life can turn on a dime.

Through all of this, the undeniable healing power of nature remains a constant, and thus its protection more vital than ever before. In this newsletter, we look at the face of nature and its ability to bring health, and healing, to our daily existence. We look at exercise, medical advice, volunteerism, and the peace found in planned philanthropy through our “Circle of Oaks.” Our cover photo of Maas Preserve subtly invites people to heed Robert Frost’s poetic advice and take that “road less traveled by,” a timely prescription in this new age of social distancing.

While pandemics, stock market swings and personal challenges may roll our everyday lives, the West Michigan trails, lake shores, winding rivers and towering dunes all continue to offer solace for our souls, and a healthy escape for winter-weary residents. The staff at the Land Conservancy of West Michigan invites you to support West Michigan nature as you are able and that oasis has a critical voice to be heard, particularly in this challenging time.

Thanks, as always, for all you do.

Joe Engel, Executive Director

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No trails, no problem.
Exploring the Harters’ peaceful creekside getaway—protected by a conservation easement.

Susie Harter prefers to walk off the beaten path.

“It’s a very refreshing kind of feeling to go out in the woods and just wander around and not have a plan,” she said.

That is why she decided not to put trails on the Baldwin property she and her husband Andy purchased in early 2019. “I don’t want to have a plan when I go into the woods,” she said. “I just want to wander, and wherever there’s a sunbeam I’ll go, and wherever there’s a little opening, a clearing, I’ll just walk through there.”

Susie said the practice is calming and gives her an opportunity to separate herself from the complications of modern life. “I leave the world behind me when I step between the trees,” she said. “It gives me peace of mind to know when we’re gone someday and not around anymore, that this piece of land will always be as it is,” Susi said.

With your kind help, we have invested in nature and its power to heal. As the promise of a new spring approaches, there is no better time than now to put that to work for you.

We do recognize there are many voices in today’s landscape, all with messages of legitimate and heartfelt need. But the existential need that connects all of us, today and into an unknown future, is the continued ability to protect this shared planet and the abundant, healing nature and shelter it provides. To quote one of our board members, it is “our oasis”—and that oasis has a critical voice to be heard, as well. We hope you agree and continue to support West Michigan nature as you are able—particularly in this challenging time.

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“In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.”

—John Muir

Cover Image: Lupine in bloom at Maas Family Nature Preserve

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Dr. West will tell you that exercise is one of the most important preventive measures he can recommend to his patients, but he says it’s one of the hardest things to get them to do. “We all understand that we need to exercise. The problem is, most exercise we do indoors gets boring after a while,” Dr. West said.

Running on a treadmill or pedalling a stationary bike while staring at unchanging scenery or a TV can be monotonous. For some, this can make exercise feel like drudgery.

Personal histories also play a role. “When I’m dealing with a population that’s largely in their fifties and up and they’ve got a lifestyle of inactivity, to try to get them to change their lifestyle to reduce their chances of cardiac events is really hard—particularly when it’s something that’s not fun,” Dr. West said.

So, what’s his answer? Well, it’s on the other side of the door. “Getting someone to do exercise consistently is easier when combined with something that does get their interest—something like getting outdoors,” he said.

Beautiful scenery, fresh air, sunshine and distraction from the hard work of exercise can all contribute to a more enjoyable workout. And the bonus, regardless of age, is better heart health, increased respiratory capacity and stamina, endurance, balance, strength and that all-important sense of well-being.

“Being able to be outdoors and do things is just much more rewarding,” Dr. West said.

Dr. West can personally testify to the power of outdoor exercise. He completed his undergraduate degree at Michigan Technological University in the Upper Peninsula, where he developed an appreciation for open spaces. On hikes up Brockway Mountain, he found that nature benefited more than just his physical health.

“Being able to be outdoors and do things is just much more rewarding.”

–Dr. Daniel West

“At the very top of the mountain, you can see all the way to Isle Royale on a clear day. That is where I would go when I just needed time, when I just needed an opportunity to clear my thoughts,” Dr. West said. “For me, from a mental health standpoint, that or hiking in the woods is what worked.”

Feeling in awe of the natural world has proven to have a positive impact as well.

“Being on top of a mountain is a spiritual experience for me,” Dr. West said. “I feel the vastness of the universe and life when I can be out in open spaces, and looking out at Lake Michigan, walking through a stand of birch or standing on a hill are all really moving to me.”

These experiences all contribute to his well-being.

“You can’t separate the mind from the body,” he said. “One of the benefits of getting exercise outdoors is that I touch on all three components—the physical, the emotional and the spiritual aspects of who I am—much more so than standing on a treadmill watching CNN on the TV.”

It’s critically important to have publicly accessible outdoor spaces for people to enjoy these benefits, Dr. West said. That is why he is a supporter of the Land Conservancy of West Michigan.

“Having accessible outdoor space is really important to me,” Dr. West said. “I really believe people need to understand the value of making this land available to the public, through the work of the Land Conservancy.”

One of Dr. West’s favorite spots is Flower Creek Dunes Nature Preserve in Montague. He used to live in the area and was inspired by how the project gave the community access to a natural landscape he valued.

“To have a place where the public can get access to that, and you don’t have to be a wealthy landowner to have a place like that to recreate, I think is incredible, and that’s one of the reasons I keep donating to the Land Conservancy every year.”

Outdoor exercise supports heart health and more

Dr. West's favorite areas protected by the Land Conservancy of West Michigan.

Scenes from Flower Creek Dunes Nature Preserve, one of Dr. West’s favorite areas protected by the Land Conservancy of West Michigan.
Circle of Oaks members will leave an enduring legacy

David and Diana Morgenstern are members of the Land Conservancy of West Michigan’s “Circle of Oaks” society. They enjoy this distinction because they have generously included the Land Conservancy in their estate plans. The commitment Circle of Oaks members make ensures nature will always be nearby for future generations to enjoy.

The Morgensterns understand the value of nature nearby. They live on a beautiful wooded 20-acre parcel in Kent County with a creek running through it. For some friends, the Morgensterns’ choice to live in “the middle of nowhere” is perplexing, David said.

“People ask me, ‘Why do you live out in the woods like that?’” he said. In rebuttal, he pulls up an idyllic photograph of a creek running through a snow-covered woodland on his cell phone. “I say, ‘Because of this.’”

Both David and Diana enjoy witnessing nature change with the seasons. “I appreciate the four seasons. I enjoy seeing what’s happening—what happens not only to the plants and trees, but what happens to the animals,” David said.

“The people I volunteered with all have the same goal: preserve nature. They all take that to heart. That’s what I enjoy, is sharing that same excitement.”

–David Morgenstern

For Diana, who has struggled with her health for many years, proximity to nature is helpful, David said.

“For her to be at home, with her cats, sitting in her chair, looking out at the woods—it’s a time for her to meditate, think, be clear. It helps her,” he said.

David first engaged with the Land Conservancy as a co-chair for the Phase One campaign for The Highlands. A former member of the Grand Rapids Jaycees, he remembers the group hosting a PGA tournament when the property was a golf course. The storied tournament was attended by golf legends like Arnold Palmer and Billy Casper. If The Highlands were developed into a crowded condo community, memories of that landscape’s historic past would have been erased.

David also saw the importance of providing young people with access to nature in the city of Grand Rapids, the place he has called home for 45 years.

“People ask me, ‘Why do you live out in the woods like that?’” he said. In rebuttal, he pulls up an idyllic photograph of a creek running through a snow-covered woodland on his cell phone. “I say, ‘Because of this.’”

“Get out to The Highlands—you might get dirty, you might get burrs, but that’s part of it,” he said.

In the Land Conservancy of West Michigan, David found a community of like-minded people with whom he could collaborate to make a difference.

“The people I volunteered with all have the same goal: preserve nature. They all take that to heart,” David said. “That’s what I enjoy, is sharing that same excitement.”

The Land Conservancy is deeply grateful to have David and Diana’s support, not only as dedicated advocates for The Highlands, but as Circle of Oaks members committed to ensuring future generations will reap the benefits of their passion for keeping nature nearby in West Michigan.

David and Diana Morgenstern decided to include the Land Conservancy of West Michigan in their estate after David served as a co-chair for The Highlands Phase One campaign.

A stream runs through the Morgensterns’ scenic Kent County property. Image courtesy David Morgenstern.

Join our Circle of Oaks and leave a legacy of conservation.

Common throughout West Michigan, the oak tree is one of the enduring symbols of strength, stability and timelessness. As such, it is the perfect symbol of the Land Conservancy of West Michigan’s legacy society.

By including the Land Conservancy in your estate plans, you will join a group of dedicated people—our Circle of Oaks—who are committed to sustaining the work of the Land Conservancy for future generations. Learn more on our website at naturenearby.org/planned-giving.

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Finding health and fulfillment in volunteering

After retiring from a career in social work, Caroline Clark found she had time to explore new opportunities. One avenue that sparked her interest was becoming a master naturalist through Michigan State University Extension. The program requires prospective naturalists to complete a certain amount of volunteer hours. Caroline found the Land Conservancy’s regular Second Saturday workdays to be a perfect way to fill the requirement.

“I kind of attached myself to the Land Conservancy,” Caroline said.

Caroline eventually achieved her master naturalist certification, but she never stopped coming to Second Saturday Workdays. She’s been volunteering with the Land Conservancy regularly since 2015. She said that volunteering is not unlike social work: making a difference for the environment, just like making a difference in someone’s life, is personally fulfilling for her.

“You find out that it’s so rewarding to be out there doing this type of work,” Caroline said. “You get so much benefit from being outdoors, and it’s a great way to do something productive and feel good about leaving a little bit of a mark.”

Caroline grew up in Santiago, Chile. A self-described “city girl,” she developed a taste for nature on camping trips with her family. When she moved to West Michigan, she found it was much easier to connect with the outdoors, and opportunities to hike and explore were always within reach. As she learned about climate change and other threats to nature, it became important to her to be a part of protecting it. Volunteering provided her with a chance to do just that.

“I thought, ‘OK, this is a place where I can give a little bit,’” Caroline said.

Caroline has struggled with cancer, and her health has limited the physical exercise she can get. Volunteer stewardship work has proven to provide just the right level of intensity and fresh air to make her feel good.

“It’s not heavy duty work, but you’re active, you’re moving around, you’re doing things. It’s really fun, and you feel like you’ve really accomplished something that morning,” Caroline said.

The social component of the workdays is a plus, Caroline said.

“You also meet other people, and you find some commonalities. It’s really nice to be able to do that—it doesn’t feel like you’re just there with a bunch of people doing something. There’s some camaraderie.”

It’s these benefits that have kept Caroline returning to Second Saturday workdays.

“This is another way for me to feel like I’m taking care of myself,” Caroline said. “I love the work. I look forward to it. As long as I can do it, I want to do it.”

Volunteer with the Land Conservancy

Interested in volunteering with us? Join us for a Second Saturday workday! You can find our schedule and register to volunteer on our website at naturenearby.org/events.

“Finding health and fulfillment in volunteering”

“You find out that it’s so rewarding to be out there doing this type of work. You get so much benefit from being outdoors.”

–Caroline Clark
Fitness trainer Cari Draft’s gym of choice is the great outdoors

Those who are not so inclined to work up a sweat in a humid, fluorescent-lit gym might be happy to know there is an alternative option—and it smells a whole lot better.

Land Conservancy supporter Cari Draft is a fitness trainer and the owner of EcoTrek Fitness, an exercise program that takes place entirely in nature.

Cari takes her clients—“EcoTrekkers,” as she calls them—to parks throughout West Michigan and leads them in 75-minute strength training, cardio and flexibility workouts. She hosts sessions year round in places like Ottawa Sands, P.J. Hoffmaster State Park and Lake Harbor Park.

The idea for EcoTrek Fitness came to her at a continuing education session on outdoor fitness she attended in Oregon. When she came home, she plotted out courses at various parks and posed the idea to the community.

“I just tossed it out there to see who would follow me, and we’re still doing it. We’re going to celebrate 14 years in May of this year,” Cari said. While some of her clients only attend EcoTrek workouts in the warmer months, many attend even in the winter and surprise themselves with just how much they come to admire all of the seasons as a result.

“I feel like everyone is [an outdoors person], you just have to awaken the whole experience of being out there and not being afraid of getting lost or being alone,” Cari said. “It’s neat to watch that happen.”

In addition to the benefits of fresh air, Cari said working out in nature can boost the immune system and hiking on uneven terrain strengthens the ankles.

“You don’t get that on a treadmill,” she said.

The beautiful views nature provides are an added bonus.

“I love when we’re anywhere where it’s particularly pretty—if we’re overlooking Lake Michigan or a pond or a bog—to do yoga stretches. I have people close their eyes, stretch, maybe do some pilates, and then you can open your eyes and just soak it all in quietly,” Cari said.

Cari appreciates the larger partnerships the Land Conservancy has helped protect—her favorite place to go right now is Ottawa Sands, she said. But the importance of protecting the smaller preserves is not lost on her.

“One of my favorite things is how the Land Conservancy is protecting little niches—maybe an ecosystem, or where there’s a certain kind of bird, and it doesn’t even have to have a trail. It’s just a piece of land that someone donated, and it’s protected, so it stays natural, and it doesn’t become a condo complex,” Cari said.

You can learn more about Cari and EcoTrek Fitness at ecotrekfitness.com.
OUR MISSION

Helping people protect, enjoy and care for natural land in West Michigan

$55,000 Matching Gift Challenge

For a limited time, until the challenge is met, the Land Conservancy board of directors has pledged to match donations to the Land Conservancy dollar for dollar up to $55,000. Double your impact—make a gift today!