THE WHITE RIVER NEWS

FALL 2005

Progress Made on White River Management Plan

In the early part of 2004, with support of a Wisconsin DNR River Planning Grant, the Wild Rivers Chapter of Trout Unlimited set out to gather citizen input and come up with a plan that would outline how best to protect, preserve, and restore the extraordinary natural resources of the White River.

In particular, the plan focused on the "middle segment" of the White, a portion of river roughly bordered by Highway 63 to the west and Highway 13 to the east.

A river's eye view of the middle section of the White River. Those who have paddled or fished this section of the river will recognize areas of eroding clay banks, pictured above, which likely degrade the fishery and water quality of the river.

Almost all the river corridor in this segment is in private ownership. By contrast, both above and below this middle segment, the White River and its watershed enjoys the protection of a patchwork ownership including federal, state and tribal land.

The White River Watershed Management plan, completed in spring 2004, was intended to serve as a guide and resource for White River private landowners who were interested in river preservation in general, and in conservation options for their land in particular.

The plan identified four objectives considered most important to protecting and preserving the stretch of the White River between Hwy. 63 and Hwy. 13 as a natural corridor for future generations to enjoy:

1. **Research and maintain or improve water quality.**
2. **Research and maintain or improve the fishery.**
3. **Provide limited public access to the river.**
4. **Encourage ecological preservation and restoration in order to protect the scenic beauty and ecological health of the river corridor.**

In the 18 months since the plan's publication, a great deal has happened in the White River watershed in support of these goals.

In fall 2004, the state Natural Resources Board unanimously approved the proposed expansion of the White River Fishery Expansion project This decision allows the state to acquire property or easements along the White River between the Bibon Swamp Natural Area in Bayfield County and the White River Wildlife Area in Ashland County—that is, the stretch of river targeted by the management plan.

The DNR board's decision now allows the Department of Natural Resources to purchase land or conservation easements from willing landowners along a 15-mile stretch of the White River and many of its tributaries. Land or easements acquired in this way by the state would be managed for maximum natural resource values.

The White River Watershed Management Plan is being monitored by a volunteer group formed in 2005 called the **White River Citizen Involvement Committee**. This committee serves as an information resource for White River landowners and river users, as an advocate for the protection and preservation of the White River, and as an advisory group to the Wisconsin DNR regarding the management of any state-acquired land in the newly expanded White River Fisheries Area segment of the watershed.

The state's decision to provide conservation options to White River landowners is just one of the past year's successes that the White River Citizen Involvement Committee is pleased to report in this newsletter. This publication features additional land conservation stories, news about fisheries research, and an update on water quality testing.

Also included here is a post card that White River landowners can return to the White River Citizen Involvement Committee to request more information about conservation options on their land. ●

Water-Quality Testing Continues on the White River

In the winter of 2003, a small group of volunteers met in the chemistry lab at the Mellen School to take on an ambitious project-to collect information on water chemistry throughout the entire Bad River watershed. The project, called the Bad River Watershed Monitoring Plan, started with four water-chemistry testing sites on the Marengo River, and in less than three years has grown to include 17 testing sites, five of which are located on the White River or White River tributaries.

Bad River Watershed Association volunteers conducting macroinvertebrate sampling (above) and water-chemistry testing (at right).

The plan is coordinated by the Bad River Watershed Association, a nonprofit group of citizen volunteers who work to protect and promote the health of the Bad River watershed. In addition to regularly testing water chemistry, BRWA volunteers collect macroinvertebrates twice a year at 18 sites around the greater watershed, including five sites on the White River. The presence or absence of different types of these tiny aquatic organisms serves as a biological indicator of water quality and ecosystem health.

Testing water quality in one spot on one occasion gives only a small and incomplete snapshot of aquatic health. That's why this BRWA project aims to establish a database of at least four years' worth of sample collections and results. From this baseline data, a clearer picture will emerge of the overall health of the watershed-current trouble spots can be identified with some certainty, and the possible water-quality effects of future land-use decisions in the watershed will be easier to detect.

WATER CHEMISTRY SAMPLING

The White River watershed is part of the larger Bad River watershed, as the White flows into the Bad River at Odanah. Water-chemistry testing sites on the White (and its tributaries) have been established at White River crossings at Pike River Road, North Sweden Road and Bibon Road; on Twentymile Creek at Camp 8 Road; and on Schramm Creek at Vranes Road.

The chemistry testing kids volunteers use allow measurements of water temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen, phosphate, nitrate and turbidity. Volunteers also make notes of other physical characteristics at their testing sites, such as presence of vegetation, signs of erosion, and so on. To date, data has been gathered monthly for a year or two at these White River watershed sites.

Volunteers undergo training with the chemistry kits and guidance for correct sampling at their sampling locations. Quality control check workshops are held annually to ensure that volunteers are using correct techniques and getting valid data. A technical advisor collects data regularly and enters it into the database.

MACROINVERTEBRATE SAMPLING

Biological monitoring using macroinvertebrates indicates water quality based on what organisms (insect larvae, aquatic worms, snails, leeches, crayfish) are living in the stream. As most of these animals spend a large part of their life cycle in the water, macroinvertebrates can give a longer-term feel for water quality. For example, some macroinvertebrates cannot tolerate any pollution while others are more adaptable to it.

Of the 18 testing sites throughout the Bad River watershed, eight are located on the White River or on White River tributaries. With the equipment and facilities support of the Inland Sea Society and Northland College, volunteers gather and identify macroinvertebrates taken at each site. The frequency of certain groups of organisms yields a water-quality "score" at the site. The last three samplings at the White River watershed sites revealed encouraging results (see chart). ●

White River Watershed Macroinvertebrate Sampling Results

SITE	SPRING 2005	FALL 2004	SPRING 2004
Long Branch White	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
18 Mile @ Grandview	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
20 Mile @ Grandview	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
20 Mile @ Camp 8	Excellent	No data	No data
White @Pike R	Excellent	Excellent	Very good
White @ Maple Ridge	Good	Very Good	No data
White @Schramm	Very Good	Excellent	Excellent
White @ Hwy 13	Very Good	No data	No data

First Population Study Begun on Middle White River Fishery

For the past several years, DNR Fisheries Biologist Scott Toshner has studied the White River fishery from the Bibon Swamp upstream, adding his data to many prior decades of fisheries research on the White. But as with state fisheries biologists before him, Toshner's jurisdiction ended at the Bibon Road bridge; most of the 15-mile-long stretch of the White River between this spot and the river crossing at Highway 13 in Ashland County had never been studied by the DNR.

A new page in White River fishery research was turned in late September of this year, however. The state of Wisconsin's decision in 2004 to expand the White River Fishery area to include the middle portion of the White River brought Toshner and other DNR fisheries managers the unique opportunity to begin work in the only section of the river they had not yet studied.

On Sept. 29, a DNR crew spent the day on this middle section of the river electroshocking fish. From a specially designed boat, the researchers applied a controlled amount of electric current to the water, momentarily stunning nearby fish and allowing researchers to scoop them up in a net, count them, and record other data before releasing the fish back to the river.

The electroshocking technique does not physically reveal every single fish in the river. However, researchers estimate how efficient they are at catching fish in the study segments, and from that estimation can then make an educated guess as to the overall population of various fish species in the river.

The DNR researchers shocked fish in three two-mile-long stations that had earlier been marked along the river. Each station was divided into two one-mile segments—in the first segment, researchers caught and counted every fish they could net; in the second segment, only game fish were caught and counted.

The only game fish found was brown trout, and in declining numbers as the crew worked its way down to the White River flowage at Highway 112 (see map and chart). Toshner noted a correlation between rising water temperatures and fewer brown trout as they progressed downstream.

Electroshocking on the White River.

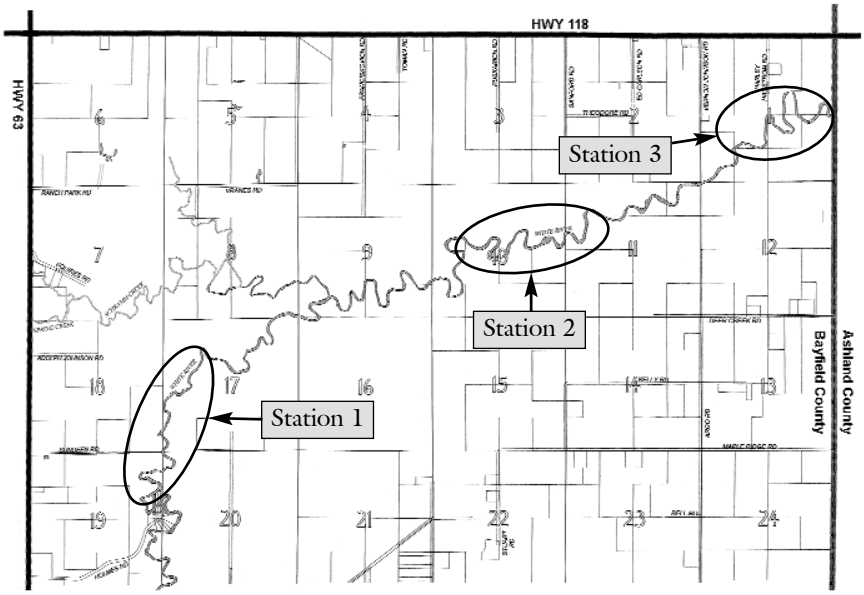
Nongame species included shorthead redhorse, white suckers, common shiners, longnose dace, mottled sculpin and trout perch.

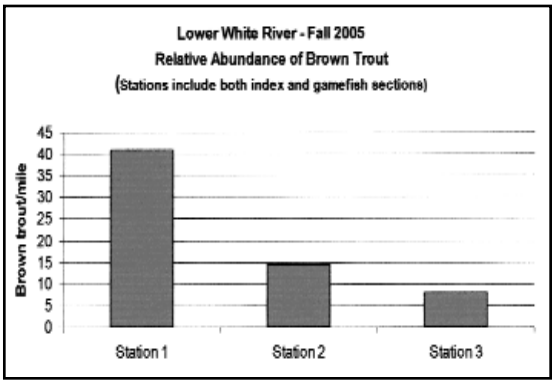
"Frankly, I was expecting more species diversity, but we didn't see that," said Toshner. "However, I do feel we got a good representative sample."

Toshner did note that the absence of northern pike in the survey was a bit of a surprise. Pike prey on brown trout, and anglers who feel that brown trout populations are declining on the White River often point to pike as one reason.

"With what we found, I don't see pike as a significant factor in controlling browns," said Toshner, though he noted that it's difficult to draw overall conclusions from just one set of data.

"I would like to do this again in the spring and see what we would turn up then," he said. "But based on this and other data from elsewhere in the river, if you asked me if the brown trout fishery on the White River was in peril, I'd say no." ●





Ashland County Couple Donates First White River Easement

Thinking beyond their own lifetimes, Ashland County residents Kathy Logan and Warren Kehn this summer became the first private landowners along the White River to establish a permanent conservation easement on their riverfront land.

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization or government agency that permanently limits a property's uses in order to protect its conservation values.

Logan and Kehn have lived in the Chequamegon Bay area for 35 years; in 1988 they bought and moved to a parcel of land in the Town of Gingles on the White River. They acquired adjoining land, ultimately ending up with 58 wooded acres through which the White River flows. There, they designed and built their own house, a stable for Kathy's four ponies, a woodworking shop for Warren, and a log sauna.

Kathy Logan and Warren Kehn on the White River land that they love.

But not long after they were settled, the couple began to wonder about the future of the land when they were gone. Both had grown up on farms and had owned horses, Kathy in Minnesota and Warren in South Dakota. Both loved the outdoors and worried that the land they were preserving as wilderness might someday be spoiled by development.

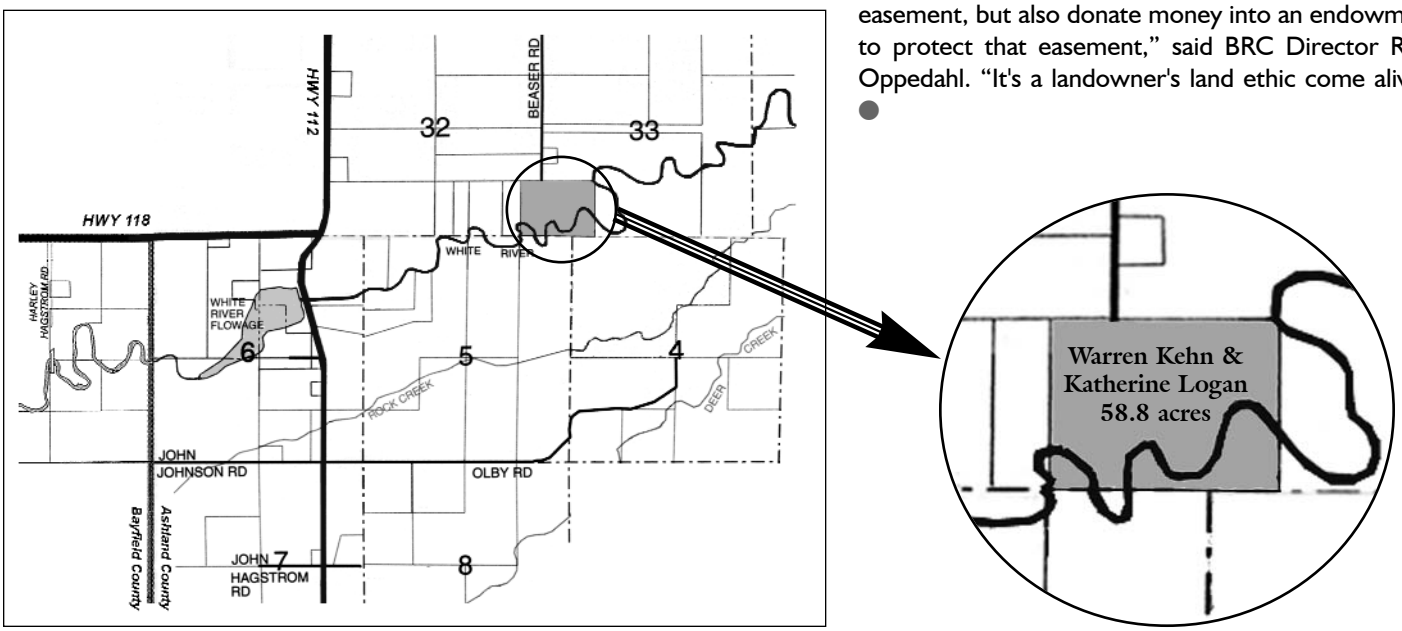
In early 2004 they ended up in contact with the Bayfield Regional Conservancy, a private, nonprofit land trust headquartered in Bayfield that works with landowners around northwest Wisconsin who are interested in protecting the natural resource value of their land for future generations. They met with BRC Director Ruth Oppedahl, and subsequently arranged a field trip on their land for the BRC Land Projects Committee.

Part of the Committee's written report describes the land: "From the ridge at the NE corner of the property you can look south over the White River and see no signs of humans. This is a wild and scenic stretch of the river. Wildflowers in bloom on our site visit May 26, [2004] included Spring Beauty, Toothwart, Bishop's Cap, Large-flowered trillium, Bellwort." Feeling that the property was a prime candidate for a conservation easement, the BRC committee gave the go-ahead to the project.

Bill Bussey, Chairman of the Land Projects Committee and attorney for the BRC, drew up the necessary legal documents in consultation with Kathy and Warren, and on June 15, 2005, the conservation easement went into effect. The land now is protected by a permanent easement that restricts logging and development in order to minimize erosion, protects habitat for wildlife, and maintains other conservation values. According to BRC Director Ruth Oppedahl, this is the first such easement on the White River.

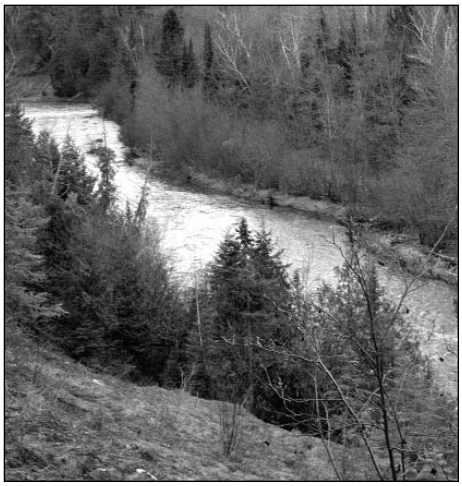
Simply establishing the easement is not the end of the story, however. The Bayfield Regional Conservancy will monitor compliance with the easement, sending volunteer monitors to the property at least once a year. Should future owners of the property fail to honor the terms of the agreement, BRC maintains a fund that can be used to support legal action to enforce the easement. In addition to donating the easement, Warren and Kathy also donated $3,000 to this fund as another way of ensuring that their love for the unspoiled beauty of the White River will outlive them.

"It amazes me that someone feels so strongly about the future of their land that they will not only donate an easement, but also donate money into an endowment to protect that easement," said BRC Director Ruth Oppedahl. "It's a landowner's land ethic come alive."



Third-Generation Landowner Sells River Parcel for Conservation

On a regular basis for the past several years, Bayfield County dairy farmer Harvey Carlson has gotten the same letter in the mail: *"Dear Harvey,"* it begins. *"I am writing to you in regards to your Bayfield County property. I am an acquisitions agent responsible for purchasing property in northern Wisconsin for future development. My company is possibly interested in purchasing some or all of your White River property...."*



A view of the White River from the Carlson parcel.

Carlson and his sister-in-law own about 1100 acres of land in the White River watershed, including several stretches of riverfront, in the towns of Kelly (Bayfield County) and White River (Ashland County). The family holdings began with a 60-acre homestead parcel that Harvey's grandparents, Swedish immigrants Charles and Augusta Carlson, secured in 1898.

Over the years and through the generations, the family added to that total through purchases at county land sales, from neighbors and from the power company. Carlson keeps about 500 acres in agricultural production; much of the remaining acreage is heavily forested with mature stands of hemlock, cedar, maple and pine.

Last year Carlson did decide to sell some of his land—but not to a land speculator or developer. Instead, he sold a 27-acre riverfront parcel to the Bayfield Regional Conservancy, a private land trust that works throughout northwest Wisconsin.

The property will be maintained in its current undeveloped condition to protect the water quality of the river, to provide wildlife and plant habitat and to provide protection of the White River as a natural, wild and scenic area.

"I guess it had occurred to me even when I was a little kid to keep the riverfront land wild and undeveloped," Carlson said. Several years ago, he was among a small informal group of White River landowners and river users who started talking about what would happen to the White River in the future, and what might be done to preserve the area's exceptional natural resource values.

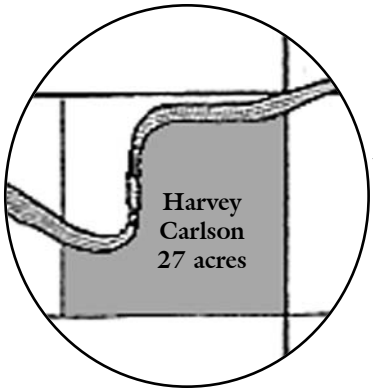
Another member of the group was Bill Heart, president of the regional chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU). Heart submitted a grant request to the Wisconsin DNR that enabled the TU chapter to hold public meetings and put together a management plan for a part of the White River. Part of the plan encourages landowners to consider applying conservation restrictions to their land.

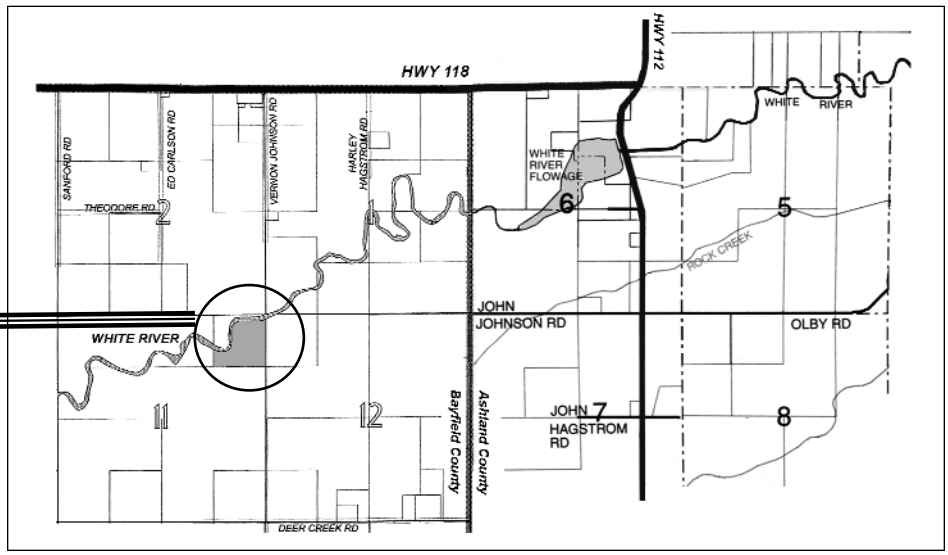
Knowing that Carlson was considering selling some White River land, TU's Bill Heart contacted the Bayfield Regional Conservancy (BRC), a private land trust experienced in working with landowners wanting to donate or sell property or easements to preserve conservation values. Together, TU and BRC wrote a grant to the Wisconsin DNR's River Protection Program, which provided money for land acquisition and land protection activities along the White River.

To further support the transaction, Harvey Carlson accepted a purchase price of $27,000 for the land, well below the $34,000 appraised value. The $7,000 difference was used as an in-kind donation to the project, which greatly helped secure the grant.

The land, which includes about one-half mile of river frontage, will now be held in trust for the public benefit by the Bayfield Regional Conservancy. The property will be maintained by the Wild Rivers Chapter of Trout Unlimited, whose members are familiar with this stretch of river and have volunteered to monitor the use of the property and implement the goals of the management plan. The land will be managed in a natural state. Boundaries will be marked, signage installed, a primitive campsite/rest area may be designated for anglers and paddlers. No structures, roads or land-altering activities are planned.

The outcome suits Carlson's vision for the land. "I certainly didn't want to see the land get developed, and this option seemed like a good opportunity to sell it to somebody who would keep it that way," he said. ●





White River Citizen Involvement Committee
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A stretch of the White River in the newly expanded White River FIsheries Area.

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