The Practical Partner
SWP Delivers the Solutions

by Konnie LeMay

Twenty-one years ago when Carl Lindquist came to work in his small office as the sole employee of the new Superior Watershed Partnership, it’s hard to believe he could have foreseen the future of that nonprofit organization. When he comes to work today at the Superior Watershed Partnership & Land Conservancy offices in Marquette’s Presque Isle Park, Carl, still executive director, oversees a full-time staff of 18 people in two locations, 20 seasonal employees and a boatload of volunteers. SWP coordinates or cooperates in projects on all four Lake Superior shores and on Lakes Michigan and Huron. It has worked with five Indigenous nations, universities, religious organizations, plus local, state, federal and Canadian partners. The partnership has projects for Great Lakes habitat protection and restoration, community pollution prevention, climate change adaptation planning and implementation, invasive species removal and prevention, water quality and stormwater management, native plant restoration, land protection, youth programs and public education, and Upper Peninsula community assistance, including assisting low-income families with energy bills, solar energy options and energy conservation.

When Carl first came on board, he was told he was funded for a year and needed to get a grant to continue. The group has received many grants since then, most recently, a competitive $2.5 million National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant for coastal resiliency.

And did I mention that SWP owns a lighthouse?

Results Driven

“We don’t do a lot of promotion, a lot of PR or a lot of publicity, but we focus on the real work, what needs to be done,” Carl says. That has always been the focus for SWP, which proudly touts the phrase: “We are results driven.”

One story cannot possibly begin to cover the dozens of initiatives and operations that have been undertaken – and accomplished – by this organization in its 21 years. Last year, at its 20th anniversary celebration, the group invited award-winning geneticist and renown Canadian science educator and author (and one of Carl’s heroes) David Suzuki to speak at the ceremonies.

“What kind of world are we living in now if we don’t first start with a foundation of agreement?” David said at that ceremony. “If we don’t do that, then we’re all over the map, and we’re not really talking with each other. … The world needs more local organizations like SWP, doing the real work.”

Working within the current reality has been a major strength of SWP. The organization’s staff and board bring a practical approach to the environmental and community needs it identifies.

Keeping it real has been the underlying directive for the group since its inception, and a key source of its multiple successes has been partnerships, sometimes unexpected ones for an environmentally focused organization and based on “a foundation of agreement.” “The practicality,” says Carl, “that’s it, that’s what it’s all about.”

True Partnerships & Truly the Watershed

“We’re a local organization focused primarily on Lake Superior, plus Lake Huron and Lake Michigan,” says Carl. “Local is really important to us. In a funny way with Lake Superior, it’s all local, right? We still are primarily Upper Peninsula – the 15 counties here – but also northern Wisconsin, Minnesota and even Ontario to benefit Lake Superior. It all comes back to the Lake. … We share this Lake; we’re neighbors across the pond.”

Early on, the mission of SWP was to cover entire watersheds. “There are big watersheds in the U.P. that cover many counties. We just saw the potential to grow the program from a natural watershed perspective.”
That watershed-focused focus has allowed the group to expand its influence across state lines and international borders.

A fun example of that came when the group acquired Stannard Rock Lighthouse under a federal government disposal program about six years ago. “We didn’t want to see it go into the uncertainty of what could happen if it went into private hands,” says Carl. “It’s prized fishing grounds. We got it mainly to complement our climate work.” Now the lighthouse hosts monitoring equipment from researchers in the United States and Canada. “The climatologists like it because it’s so remote. That’s better for a lot of monitoring equipment; it’s not affected by other impacts. Canadian researchers credit the monitoring with more accurate weather forecasts for that part of Ontario.”

The organization has been practical about its finances as well as its projects. SWP quotes the National Center for Charitable Statistics report showing the most effective, efficient nonprofit organizations spend at least 75% of their budgets on projects. SWP averages about 85% of its budget for that. One of the more unique roles the SWP took on was as a water quality monitor at the Eagle Mine just after the opening of the highly controversial copper-nickel mine beside the Yellow Dog River, a trout spawning habitat.

“We did a lot of work in the Yellow Dog watershed and the Salmon Trout River watershed. They are both in the footprint of the mine,” Carl says. “The SWP had developed a watershed management plan for the area, which included the recommendation to prohibit surface 24 hours, but the mine was permitted to move forward regardless.”

Mine owner Rio Tinto invited SWP to do monitoring. “Our board and a lot of our partners discussed it at length and decided, ‘Yes, who better than a local organization?’” says Carl. The Keeweenaw Bay Indian Community has joined in the monitoring, which continues although the mine has been sold.

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The bread-and-butter of SWP remains its environmental projects, but here is just a small sampler of its activities:

• Partnering with local businesses, community groups, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), SWP helped to restore miles of coastal dune habitat around Marquette, improving road conditions and flood control.

• Partnering with coastal communities, SWP provides education about stormwater runoff effects on water quality.

• Partnering with U.P. businesses, SWP has enhanced sustainable economic development through nature-based tourism and through the Great Waters Initiative (a 2009 Lake Superior Magazine Achievement Award winner).

• Partnering with U.S. and Canadian entities, SWP helped to create an inventory of most dams tied to Lake Superior.

• Partnering with municipalities and counties, SWP helps create adaptation and mitigation plans to address issues that will arise with on-going climate change.

• SWP has organized waste collections that, in one day, totaled 45 tons of household hazardous waste, 320 tons of electronic waste and 2,000 pounds of old medications.

• SWP does invasive species removal and native plant restoration.

• The SWP Energy Conservation Corps receives funding through the state energy assistance office to aid low-income families with home weatherization, heating assistance and installation of free solar panels.

One of the biggest projects undertaken by SWP involves the $3.5 million grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. It is a new national coastal resiliency grant program and only two of the 30 grants went to the Great Lakes. Under the project, Lakeshore Boulevard in Marquette, subject to damage from Lake Superior’s high waters, will be shifted 300 feet inland. Then the shoreline will be stabilized and more than 20 acres of green space restored between shore and road. “It’s exciting,” says Carl, “because we’re going to demonstrate a number of coastal resiliency and habitat restoration practices.”

Grooming the Next Generation

SWP has developed or helped to develop multiple educational programs from adult to kindergarten.

Under the Upper Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, for example, it’s aided place-based education to

“inspire connections between classrooms and the local environment to build resilient communities.”

In 2000, SWP created the Great Lakes Conservation Corps, hiring seasonal workers to help municipalities, tribes, nonprofit organizations and other agencies.

The projects range from high-priority conservatism and restoration work to assisting communities during the early months of the COVID pandemic with food distribution events, opening public parks and lending a hand when trained, enthusiastic help was truly needed. After the Father’s Day Flood of 2018, GLCC crews arrived within 24 hours and stayed for over a month to assist residents of Houghton with cleanup and to coordinate the disaster relief donation center.

These initiatives, like the dozens and dozens undertaken by SWP, deliver measurable results.

What’s difficult to measure – especially in one story – is all the group has accomplished in its two decades. Even its director acknowledges that proud dilemma.

“It’s hard to sum it all up,” admits Carl, who then gives an apt summary for the results-oriented organization: “If we can help to solve a problem or get the work done, we will.”

Past Winners

2019 Madeline Island Ferry Line and Apostle Islands Cruises

2018 Fred Stonehouse, maritime historian/author

2017 Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation

2016 Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, St Paul Ste. Marie, Michigan

2015 Paul Pepe, manager of tourism for Thunder Bay

2014 Lee Radzak – historic site manager of Split Rock Lighthouse

2013 Larry Macdonald – Sanibel mayor

2012 Bad River Watershed Association

2011 Mike Lisk & Kate Crowley and Josephine Mandamin – walked around Lake Superior

2010 The Great Lakes Shipwreck Preservation Society

2009 The Great Lakes Initiative

2008 Kurt Soderberg – retired executive director, WLESD

2007 The Earth Keepers Initiative

2006 Ray GlogOWER and creation of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore

2005 Gaylord Nelson

2004 Nature Conservancy

2003 Dave Helberg – retired executive director, Duluth Seaway Port Authority

2002 Elmer Engman – director, founder of “Gales of November”

2001 Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior

2000 Crisp Point Light

1999 C. Patrick Labadie – authors, publishers

1998 John and Ann Mahan, photographers

1997 North of Superior Marina Marketing Association


1995 Lake Superior Brational Forum

1994 Craig Blacklock, photographer

1993 Brian Prindle, photographer

1992 Dow Peninsula Fish and Wildlife Foundation

1991 Johnstone & McFarlane, book publisher

1990 Ralph A. Best

1989 John T. Luijk

1988 Brian Prindle

1987 Mary G. Theis

1986 Bette K. Anderson

1985 Brad St. John

1984 RMS Empress of Ireland

1983 Robert M. Spencer

1982 Robert M. Spencer

1981 James R. Acheson

1980 Samuel Johnson

1979 Paul H. Reiff

1978 Michael D. LeBlanc

1977 James C. Olsen

1976 William C. Paterson

1975 Robert M. Spencer

1974 Peter M. LeBlanc

1973 John G. Johnson

1972 John C. Johnson