

# Grand River Expedition 2010

## FINAL REPORT

By Doug Carter, Chair

After two years of public planning, promoting and praying, a large coalition of mid-Michigan citizens conducted the very successful Grand River Expedition 2010. The Expedition was a 13-day public journey of discovery and celebration of Michigan's longest river. The Grand runs 262 miles from northern Hillsdale County to Lake Michigan at Grand Haven,



*"It takes more than water to make the River Grand!"*

flowing through 22 cities and villages, including the Capitol City of Lansing and Michigan's second largest city, Grand Rapids. Michigan's second largest, and most populous, watershed includes 18 counties and 158 townships, with a population over one and a-half million.

One of the major goals of the Expedition was to document and explain to the public the recreational, economic and environmental benefits the Grand River Watershed provides to us. These efforts will contribute to the public's knowledge and appreciation of the Grand River, and how it connects communities across the region. It will generate enhanced stewardship of river and watershed related values.

On July 14, we began with a tour and study of the headwaters history and ecology. The next

day, some 90 boats began the trip down the 225 navigable miles of the Grand across mid-Michigan, ending on July 26 at Lake Michigan in Grand Haven. This trip retraced the route of the two previous expeditions, in 1990 and 2000. Hundreds of other citizens welcomed us to their community, offered us snacks and drinks as we paddled past their homes, visited us at our campsites or just pitched in to help.

Fifty-four very diverse paddlers completed the *entire trip*. This included: a 13-year old boy on his first river trip, and a woman celebrating her 85th birthday; a newlywed couple on their honeymoon; a married couple from California and a father/son pair from Arizona. Erich Ditschman of East Lansing, who had to conduct 8 hours of kidney dialysis every night, raised more than \$ 17,000 for the National Kidney Foundation. Noted long-distance canoeist Mike Smith paddled with a GPS unit attached to his canoe, so that folks could track our progress on the web. The Gabagouache, a 26-foot voyageur canoe from Project Lakewell in Onaway, and its



crew in period costume, joined the Expedition to depict what travel and life was like on the Grand River in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Governor Granholm and Lt. Governor Cherry issued a joint Certificate of Tribute to the Expedition and its participants, as did some twenty local communities. Grand River Expedition 2010 was recognized as a quality physical activity by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports.



In putting the Expedition together this time we had to rely more on local communities, boating, watershed and conservation organizations, historical and educational groups and local businesses than in the past. Reasons for this change were largely organizational and financial. In 2004, after the death of Expedition founder Verlen Kruger, the leadership of the Expedition non-profit chose not to renew their charter. To address this, Timberland RC & D stepped forward to provide a fiscal and organizational "home" for the Expedition. And new watershed groups in the Upper Grand and Lower Grand agreed to take on major roles in planning and coordination of the event.

While the 1990 and 2000 Expeditions were funded largely by General Motors Corporation – not so this time around. Reflecting the country's economy, we received only five cash contributions of \$1,000 or more, with none more than \$ 5,000. The bulk of our support came from more than 165 partners – businesses, communities, user groups and historic and education organizations.

This was the first year we had to charge our paddlers, but for \$147 each received a 13-day guided river trip, complete with camping, meals, liability insurance, leadership, education, transport of their camping and personal gear, fresh water and a top-quality commemorative stainless steel water bottle. Everyone agreed this was the "deal of the century." Of course, lesser fees applied for shorter trips and young people.

How'd we do? What'd we find? Some 300 paddlers joined us on the river and hundreds more on the riverbanks. The extensive and positive press coverage given to the Expedition and the Grand River reached thousands more. We are extremely encouraged by the warm reception extended by local communities, and by property owners, Native Americans, businesses and others along the river as we moved downstream.

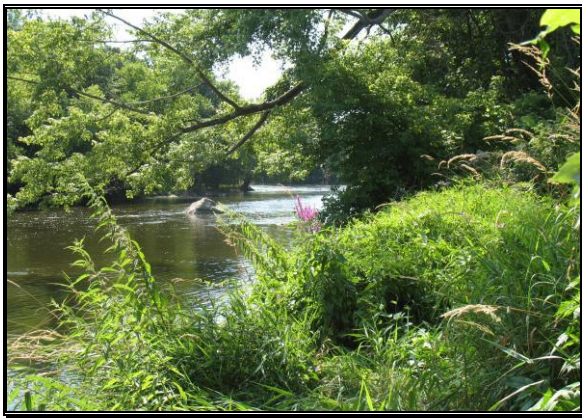
We were welcomed at each stop with music, educational events and ceremonies celebrating the river and their community. The opening ceremony near the headwaters included an exchange of gifts between Liberty (the uppermost community) and Grand Haven (the lowermost). Persons representing Grand River tributaries, Lake Michigan and the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians "blessed" the Headwaters Rock with water from their area (note: we used treated water to minimize movement of invasive species).

We and our local visitors learned about the human and natural history of the area, as well as more current subjects like: individual actions we can take to reduce non-point pollution; recent efforts to link terrestrial and water trails; status and integrity of vegetation, aquatic systems and fish and wildlife populations, including invasive and endangered species; and how to recognize that crystal meth activity is occurring in remote river areas (a growing problem in this area). As we approached Lake

Michigan, we were escorted by the United States Coast Guard.

We were unable to conduct a formal science-based environmental assessment during the Expedition due to budget limitations. However, our participants' observations of a wide variety of fish species, mammals, invertebrates, birds (eagles, osprey, herons, Sandhill cranes, and many songbirds and shorebirds) all indicate a fairly healthy and improving stream corridor.

Many river sections are quite undisturbed, with fairly intact wetlands, floodplains and aquatic and riparian vegetation. The beauty of the river and its banks surprised and pleased even the most ardent critics. Our limited water quality



testing showed signs of an urban stream that is returning to life. We found no real major "hot spots" or critical areas. We still have a ways to go – non-point sources of pollution, runoff, erosion and resultant sedimentation still exist.

A public education program is needed, as some people continue to act without respect and concern for the river and its banks. But as more and more positive attention is focused on the Grand as an important recreational and economic resource, in time these activities will decrease. Likely to help in this regard is the "coffee table book" produced by the Grand Rapids Press, Michigan's second largest newspaper. The Press was on the Expedition every day, and had daily internet blogs and

feature articles (including many front page spreads) for 17 straight days. Their resulting book focuses on the Expedition and the watershed – its communities, its values and its people. The Grand Haven Tribune also had a correspondent on the trip, filing daily blogs and articles for publication on the web and in the paper. Other media also covered the trip.



Expedition Chair Doug Carter presented each host with a Certificate of Appreciation and a book on the history of the Grand River. He then "Passed the Paddle," asking local officials if they would be willing to sign the "official Expedition paddle" as a commitment of their community or organization to work with their neighbors for greater protection and stewardship for the river, and enhanced education of its citizens – all enthusiastically agreed!

The Expedition was an organizational and logistical nightmare. There are no public campgrounds along the river, and few well designed access points. Toilets for 75-100? Forget about it! We rented porta-potties along the way, and mounted one on a snowmobile trailer. Our "traveling blue loo" was hauled downriver by our ground support crew, and proved to be one of the most popular services we provided. The 10 dams lacked signage, good portage or safety measures. And providing three meals a day for a large number of paddlers was a BIG challenge. Even though this Expedition has been done twice before, we



found very few notes and no budgets, procedures or hints on how, when, where, why or who! A few of us were somewhat involved in the past, but no one had “the big picture.” But with local support, knowledge and energy, we pulled it off. We are dedicating ourselves to creating a “time capsule” - archiving our step-by-step procedures, contact lists, budget, fundraising, etc.



What now? Clearly, we need to take advantage of the momentum, excitement and positive feelings generated by the Expedition. There is very strong support from participants and communities to “do it again, right away.” This won’t happen – extremely challenging to organize and conduct, and another Expedition within the next few years will have lost its magic, and be largely ineffective. The ten-year schedule appears to be valid. However, there is strong support for conducting smaller trips down Grand River tributaries. The Thornapple, Rogue, Flat, Maple, Red Cedar and Looking Glass rivers are all good candidates.

Our goals included a statement of the following desired long-term outcomes:

1. Archive and document efforts – develop “time capsule”, including step-by-step procedures to guide future expeditions.
2. Establish a sustainable citizen organization dedicated to protection and enhancement of watershed values

located within the Middle Grand (Eaton Rapids to Portland);

3. Establish, develop and maintain new website – watershed-wide information network to connect existing groups for the Upper Grand, Lower Grand and tributaries and the new conservation group for the Middle Grand.
4. Develop and deliver an on-going educational program - fact sheets, study guides, annotated bibliography.
5. Work with government agencies, local communities and the private sector to improve recreation, i.e.: facilities (public access, camping and support services; safety –particularly with better signage and improved portages at dams; and public information – maps, heritage water trails, websites, etc.

These five initiatives are now underway. With involvement, support and leadership of our many partners, we’ll keep the momentum going, and achieve our long-term goals for the Grand River Watershed.

## THANK YOU!

We wish to acknowledge the support of

- our 27 local host communities
- our 165 partner organizations, groups and businesses
- our hundreds of volunteers, who helped move canoes and kayaks, serve meals, set up and take down staging sites, clean parks and access sites and help us in so many other ways.



[www.grandriverexpedition.org](http://www.grandriverexpedition.org)