

Greenway Ecological Standing Committee
Grantee Final Report

Final Report Date: 6/16/15	
Project Title: Niagara River Greenway Habitat Conservation Strategy	
Organization: Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper	
Report prepared by: Emily Sadowski	Contact information: esadowski@bnriverkeeper.org
Project Start Date: May, 2011	
Project Completion Date: August, 2015	

1. Describe whether or not you have achieved each of your grant objectives.

Task 1. Complete Development of Conservation Action Plan and Strategy Framework

All objectives were completed under this task. Due to the fact that the intended audience of the Strategy is potential implementors (municipalities, sportsmen groups, land trusts, and other environmental organizations) rather than the general public, grant resources were spent communicating the results of the report directly with the potential implementors in lieu of holding a final general public meeting.

Task 2. Complete Baseline Field Data Gathering

All objectives were completed under this task. Detailed results from this effort can be found in the final report and are summarized in the project presentation.

Task 3. Conduct Site Assessments for Up to 30 Best-Bet Conservation Opportunities

All objectives were completed under this task. Fourteen (14) sites were assessed in the field. Out of the combined field assessed sites and opportunities identified via desktop analysis, thirteen (13) opportunities were identified as priorities, with detailed action plans located within Chapter 4 of the report. The sites available for assessment in the field were limited by property ownership; therefore, most of them are located on publically owned land. Additional resources not used under this task were reallocated to supplement the desktop mapping analysis completed by Ecology & Environment.

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2. How has your project promoted tourism, enhanced the environment, advanced economic revitalization, and/or supported the creation of a Greenway within the Niagara River Basin?

The final report generated through this project will enhance the environment and contribute to the creation of a Greenway by providing a detailed plan for the protection and restoration of important habitat features that define our region. The result is significant in that it takes a whole-system, strategic approach to identifying best-bet opportunities for each municipality using a suite of recommended tools. These tools include strengthening policies, protecting specific types of habitats, providing educational materials to landowners on best management practices, and site specific recommendations for priority sites. The project contributed towards progress on Niagara River RAP delisting by providing wetland maps and analysis and supporting a habitat sub-committee in developing a habitat action plan with site specific recommendations for habitat enhancement the Niagara River. Further, the final report offers details in the form of strategic process and recommendations that advance the habitat, open space, coastal resiliency and tourism goals and objectives from the Niagara River Greenway Plan. These details provide thorough background information which more easily facilitates implementation of priority projects within the Greenway.

The actions laid out in the Strategy final report will lead to a more functional, resilient, and healthy Greenway through protection, connection, and restoration of key areas of habitat. This in turn will promote tourism and advance economic revitalization by attracting both residents and visitors to enjoy a world class waterfront. Further, implementation of the suite of recommendations will improve water quality and habitat conditions along and within the Niagara River, directly benefitting both human and wildlife populations.

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3. How did you measure if results were achieved or were not achieved? What kind of data was collected to determine whether the results were achieved or not achieved? What results were obtained?

Achievement of results was measured based on the completion of specific deliverables under each objective. Many of the objectives were straightforward (i.e. collecting data on fish barriers and prioritizing opportunities for restoration). A Technical Advisory Committee and other stakeholders also provided guidance throughout the project. Their expert opinion often vetted progress and decisions made.

Several objectives that were not as straightforward included tasks such as “leveraging local and municipal resources to remove or mitigate barriers [to fish],” and “conduct outreach to municipal stakeholders where best-bet opportunities are located to cultivate support for implementation.” Riverkeeper partnered with the Erie County Soil and Water District and Grand Island to apply for a Water Quality Improvement Program grant to remove several priority barriers on Grand Island. The grant was not awarded; however, the partnership that was created and background work completed through the application process will be useful in moving forward with this project in the future. Riverkeeper has continued a relationship with the Town of Grand Island and hopes to complete barrier removal in the near future.

Progress has been made in moving forward the implementation of several other priority projects identified in the report that attest to the success of the Strategy. Riverkeeper has secured a \$25,000 Sea Grant to complete outreach and education to landowners along the West River Parkway on Grand Island. This was identified as a need in the report in order to convey best management practices on waterfront land that will in the end assist in completing shoreline restoration at select sites along the Parkway through the Niagara River Riparian Restoration Program, funded by the GESC. The Weber Property in the Town of Niagara was another priority site identified in the Strategy. The site presents opportunity for acquisition and long-term protection of a parcel that contains significant habitat within the context of the town and the Cayuga Creek corridor, along with stream restoration activities to address flooding issues within the town. Riverkeeper has spent time moving this forward by bringing partners together (including municipal officials, the property owners, DEC, WNYLC, Buffalo Audubon Society, and others) to leverage resources for acquisition, site investigation, and remediation work. While there is much more progress to be made in terms of implementing priorities once the final report is finalized, these are examples of how the work completed through the Strategy has already begun to come to fruition.

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4. What factors enabled your success?

The consultants, Buffalo State College and Ecology and Environment, contributed to the success of the project through collection of data that was lacking in the region. Information regarding stream conditions, fish barriers, seeps within the gorge, detailed land cover mapping, and conditions and opportunities at potential sites for habitat restoration and conservation were all generated by the consultants and ultimately played a large role in identification of priorities in the report.

The assistance of interns, primarily from Buffalo State College and University of Buffalo, also helped in providing value-added resources to complete analyses that would otherwise not have been possible based on the limitation of funds.

Stakeholders and the Technical Advisory Committee played a key role in the success of the project by providing input and expertise along the way, and ensuring the information in the report is both accurate and useful. In addition, the time spent during the project in meeting with the municipalities within the Greenway provided valuable insights into municipal priorities, limitations and overall willingness to work as practitioners of habitat restoration. The project team was able to better focus opportunities and recommendations within the report to those which are practicable and feasible for near-term implementation based on the feedback from municipal leaders.

The project team was fundamental in completing the project. Contributions from team members with extensive and diverse backgrounds and vast knowledge on local conditions provided the necessary support to complete the project in a successful manner.

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5. What factor hindered your success? Describe internal or external challenges you faced in achieving your goals? How were these addressed?

The main challenge faced throughout the project was communicating with municipalities. The project team attempted to meet with each municipality both before and after the report was written to ensure that all necessary information was captured, and that the priorities identified in the report aligned with theirs. Although municipalities are not the only target audience of the recommendations in the report, their buy-in is important in order to get work completed on the ground. We met with over half of the municipalities, but were unable to communicate with the others after extensive attempts both at the beginning and end of the process. This challenge was communicated with the Greenway Commission at a presentation in May of 2015. It is hoped that efforts completed by the Greenway Commission to improve outreach about the Greenway and funding source will communicate the findings from the Strategy to audiences that were unable to be reached during the span of the project.

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6. Did the project have any unexpected results?

The municipalities that ended up as willing partners in implementation of the Strategy were the most unexpected result of this effort. Particularly, the Town of Niagara ended up being very interested in working towards addressing flooding issues on the Weber Property through conversations regarding the Strategy. Efforts to protect and restore this parcel have been ongoing for many years but were unsuccessful due to various issues including lack of support from the town; therefore, interest from newly appointed municipal officials was a pleasant surprise. The Town of Wheatfield was another municipality that is very interested in partnering on habitat restoration projects, and is one entity that Riverkeeper had not previously worked with.

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7. What are key lessons you learned from this project? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the project? What did you learn about the strategies you used; the problem or issue you were addressing; and the community within which you work? Has your organization been strengthened as a result of this grant?

One key lesson learned during the project is that many municipal officials are not aware of the ecosystem services that are provided by natural resources within their towns. Often times the focus is on making decisions that will bring monetary benefits to their townships, and habitat is overlooked. It is important that ecosystems services and their monetary/community value are communicated as economic delivery systems that contribute and support the overall vitality of a community so that a proactive approach to protecting habitat resources can be taken before the resources are lost. Chapter 3 of the final report attempts to communicate the benefits associated with habitat and will be an important tool in communicating this problem.

The strengths of the report are that it is strategic and detailed. The project team took time upfront to collect and understand already completed work in the region before developing a strategy to collect additional data, generate specific analyses, and gather stakeholder input. Using this approach, the resulting report is reflective of previous Greenway planning efforts, and is strategic in its recommendations so that each priority action clearly connects back to an identifiable benefit to natural resources within the Greenway. Specific recommendations are organized by municipality so readers can easily identify areas of interest, also providing for ease of use by municipal leaders. Another strength is the sharing of recommendations with stakeholders on a widespread basis to the best of our ability. These strengths are reflected in the on-the-ground progress that has been made for sites such as the West River Parkway and Weber Property. A weakness of the report is that not all municipalities were reached, although many attempts were made.

One problem we encountered with identifying site-specific opportunities for habitat conservation and restoration is that much of the land within the Greenway is privately owned. In the interest of making the most of the project's resources and timeline, we focused on publically owned land for the site assessments. We identified priority areas of land that we were not able to assess in the report, however not as much detail is provided compared to those areas that were able to be assessed. A recurring recommendation from the report suggests that a more in depth analysis of lands for sale within the Greenway be completed to identify areas available for acquisition in order to achieve long-term protection.

Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper has been strengthened from the point of view that we now

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have complete habitat plans for both the watershed and Greenway. The strategic planning process has allowed us to gain an in-depth view of current conditions and needs for habitat conservation as well as establish a restoration trajectory that will assist in implementing meaningful and achievable projects in the near-term. .

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8. How did collaborative/cooperative efforts with individuals/organizations contribute to the project?

The collaboration with our contractors in completing data collection greatly contributed to the information that led to the ultimate recommendations found in the report.

Cooperative efforts with student interns from both Buffalo State College and University of Buffalo also contributed valuable in-kind services to mapping analyses used in development of the report.

Meetings and conversations with sportsmen groups, municipalities, the Technical Advisory Committee and other local organizations helped to inform the planning process and review the recommendations in the final report.

The project team also worked closely with the DEC and other members of the Remedial Action Committee Habitat Sub-Group to support the delisting of BUI #14 Loss of Fish and Wildlife Habitat, one of the goals of the project. Together the group worked to identify a suite of priority sites and actions that when implemented will achieve delisting of this BUI.

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9. Were you able to leverage additional funding through this grant? If yes, indicate how much and if it was direct or indirect.

Yes, Riverkeeper was able to leverage approximately \$25,000 of direct funding through the New York Sea Grant to make progress towards implementing one of the priority opportunities identified through the Strategy that focuses on restoring riparian habitat along the West River Parkway on Grand Island. This land (approximately 11 miles of shoreline) is owned by New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation. Although the land is publically-owned, private landowners along the opposite side of the Parkway have consistently maintained the land to preserve views of the water and access to docks, therefore causing erosion problems and coastal habitat degradation. This project will improve coastal resilience and community stewardship along Grand Island's shoreline by engaging shoreline property owners and municipal officials through a combination of technical assistance, and public outreach and education. Program activities will target stretches of shoreline experiencing significant erosion and habitat degradation problems. Activities completed through this project also include the assessment and prioritization of opportunities for living shoreline implementation to be completed through the Niagara River Riparian Restoration Program.

The data and analyses that were used to provide guidance to the RAP Habitat Sub-group in developing the Habitat Action Plan will leverage future Federal funds aimed at restoring Niagara River habitat and delisting the river as an Area of Concern.

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10. Tell us about one success or a challenge that you think is important to your organization or the community.

One challenge that is important to the community is the cost of land within the Greenway. This makes it difficult to secure sufficient funding to acquire lands containing important natural resources for long-term protection and often times deters land trusts or organizations from taking action due to the fact that it is more cost effective to work in other, less expensive areas of the region. The fact that remediation is also required in many areas throughout the Greenway contributes to added costs and effort needed to create a safe environment for both humans and wildlife. Funds for long-term stewardship along with the time needed to coordinate all of the pieces and partners throughout the process add in additional costs as well. It is suggested that this be addressed through a dedicated line of funding specifically for the acquisition (including coordination, remediation, and stewardship costs) of lands that would contribute to the protection of habitat and creation of an emerald necklace of green spaces within the Greenway. Also, assisting municipalities in adopting the regulatory tools necessary to protect important areas of habitat may help address this problem.

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11. What recommendations would you make to the GESC or to other project directors working in this area?

It is important that results are communicated with stakeholders in the community as well as with the Greenway Commissioners. Many organizations are working towards a shared goal of regional revitalization-better coordination and communication can help prevent duplicative work and can better align partners and leverage resources to complete work in a more efficient manner. It is also important to consider life after each project. This could be long-term monitoring, maintenance, or in this case continued communication of the results. If reports are filed away and left to sit on a shelf then the effort is lost. Similarly, if sites are not monitored or maintained they could become overrun with invasives or degraded over time. Long-term maintenance or stewardship is something that should be built into each project funded by the GESC in order to ensure long-term success for the region.

A second recommendation to the GESC and Greenway Commission is that all projects receiving funding through a standing committee be screened through a more coordinated and rigorous process to ensure that the collective funds are being used to build a long-term, sustainable Greenway.

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12. Please give us your comments about any aspect of the grant making process, such as the proposal requirements, proposal review process, and/or reporting requirements.

We recommend that a document clarifying the types of projects that are desired within the Greenway be made available to potential applicants. This will help ensure that projects are consistent with the Greenway Plan and the desires of the GESC or individual standing committees as well as ensure that each committees' priorities are clearly developed and transparent to the public. It is hoped that the Strategy final report will help contribute to this effort by providing an overview of priority projects related to habitat within the Greenway.

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13. Please attach 3 to 5 photographs with dates and short descriptions taken throughout the project.



Photo 1: This photo, taken during an investigation of seeps within the gorge completed by E&E, shows discharge from fractured sandstone near the gorge rim.



Photo 2: One of the impassible barriers to fish identified through an assessment completed by E&E. This barrier, located on Cayuga Creek, inhibits fish passage on a seasonal basis due to dense vegetation that has created braided, shallow channels with minimal flow. Suggested mitigation efforts include removal of vegetation and grading the stream to create a distinct low flow channel.

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Photo 3: This photo was taken during the stream assessments completed by Buffalo State College. This specific reach is located along Woods Creek between Autumnwood and Baseline Roads.



Photo 4: One of the top priority sites identified in the Strategy, Cherry Farm located in the Town of Tonawanda presents opportunity for restoration of grassland habitat along with aquatic and wetland habitat enhancement.