



Huron
River
Watershed
Council



REPORT *to the* **COMMUNITY**

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Much of our work this past year was driven by contaminants. Hexavalent chromium was released to Wixom’s wastewater treatment plant in August. The source of the chemical was Tribar Technologies—the same company responsible for the PFAS contamination in the Huron River four years ago. Since 2018, HRWC has been negotiating more stringent cleanup standards for the 1,4-dioxane plume in Huron River groundwater. Our efforts ended abruptly this year when the Michigan Court of

Appeals ruled in favor of Gelman Sciences, leaving us with a woefully inadequate plan for cleanup. These examples serve as a painful reminder that the systems regulating pollution prevention and cleanup are deeply flawed.

Drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and water ecosystems are all part of ONE system. This was the focus of a One Water Summit I attended in September. It was inspiring to spend time with water utility managers, municipal staff, and grassroots activists engaged in robust discussions about how to provide safe drinking water, improve public health, and respond to climate change.

As you’ll see in this year’s project highlights, HRWC takes a holistic, One Water approach. We recognize that algal blooms in Ford Lake can be addressed by reducing nutrient runoff from Mill Creek farms. We advocate for stringent wastewater treatment standards and polluter pay laws knowing that upstream pollutants impact downstream residents. We encourage the protection of forests and wetlands because it reduces urban flooding and protects drinking water.

The fact is: water is a right, not a commodity. You understand that the Huron River is our One Water. Thank you for helping us meet ongoing threats. Thank you for your support!

With gratitude,

Rebecca Esselman

Rebecca Esselman
Executive Director



Front cover (Great Egret) and back cover (Trumpeter Swans) photos by John Lloyd.



2022
Program
Highlights

ADVOCATING FOR POLLUTER ACCOUNTABILITY

This year, HRWC re-ignited its role as a strong advocate for polluter accountability and stricter cleanup requirements to address contaminants that potentially pollute the river and threaten public health.

In August, Tribar Technologies' catastrophic discharge of hexavalent chromium into Wixom's wastewater system closed the river for nearly two weeks. While officials investigated, people were told not to go near or in the water downstream of Norton Creek. As a result, outfitters that rely on the river had no customers at the height of their earning season, and Ann Arbor's drinking water treatment plant went on high alert, increasing its already stringent monitoring efforts at the intake and preparing for the worst outcome. With great relief, we eventually learned that most of the toxic chemical solution had not reached the Huron River.

During the crisis, HRWC worked diligently to protect public health by communicating late-breaking news to watershed residents and partners, providing expertise to news media and others, and collaborating with Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) on the investigation. We also hosted a community forum to call for stronger state-level polluter pay laws. Equally important, we joined with our partners to demand that the auto industry stop using this dangerous chemical in its supply chain.

A SNAPSHOT OF OUR REGIONAL IMPACT

Hosted a unique **2-YEAR FELLOWSHIP** designed to help early career conservation professionals from underrepresented groups **develop into environmental leaders**



Trained **300 volunteers** TO LEAD **3,000 volunteers** in lake and river monitoring through our leadership of **MiCorps**



Photo by Tessa Crowley



Crafted standards for better data comparison of **GREAT LAKES HEALTH** across **16 local water quality monitoring programs** in the Lake Erie Volunteer Science Network



Photo by Ecology Center

ENCOURAGING URGENT ACTION ON EMERGING PFAS INFORMATION

HRWC continued to advocate for urgent action and stricter regulation of PFAS at the state level. This past summer, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a health advisory lowering the recommended human exposure levels for PFOS and PFOA. The agency then proposed that the chemicals be listed as hazardous substances under federal law. Following this development, HRWC continued to communicate emerging news on PFAS throughout the watershed—including updates on the Do Not Eat Fish Advisory issued by the State of Michigan in 2018. We also coordinated a River Walkers outreach program on the Huron River to share the most current information with people who fish. In addition, we contributed to a fish sampling study designed to determine how PFAS moves through river ecosystems.

TACKLING AGRICULTURAL IMPACTS TO WATER QUALITY

This past year, our Whole Farms for Clean Water project prevented nearly a ton (1,738 pounds) of phosphorus from finding its way into local waterways. With guidance from HRWC, a proactive farmer with 521 acres of corn fields used incentive payments and whole farm sustainability planning to adopt a handful of techniques that prevented erosion and reduced the amount of fertilizer typically used. Targeted strip till fertilizing resulted in a significant 84% reduction of phosphorus runoff while also reducing fertilizer costs. In addition, the use of cover crops and crop rotations prevented erosion. All of these sustainable practices improved the farm's bottom line and will result in healthier soil that can be productively farmed longer-term while protecting water quality downstream.



2022
Program
Highlights

HRWC'S
COMMITMENT TO
OUR WATERSHED
COMMUNITIES

Co-hosted **YPSI FALL RIVER DAY**
with the **Ypsilanti Parks & Recreation
Commission**, including a cleanup
by a student **Sierra Club** group
from **Eastern Michigan University**



Provided 6 weeks of
OUTDOOR LEARNING
experiences for
15 elementary-age
Parkridge Community
Center summer campers



Photo by Kari Paine

INCREASING THE REACH OF GREEN STORMWATER INFRASTRUCTURE

Stormwater pollution continues to be a significant concern. This past year, HRWC expanded a highly successful rain garden program across the entire watershed, recruiting and educating residents in techniques for creating landscapes that soak up stormwater runoff—which is expected to increase with climate change. In collaboration with Friends of the Rouge, the Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioner's Office and others, HRWC led 82 people from across the region through a six-week rain garden certification class. We also researched and prepared a business plan, promoted rain gardens to homeowners at several local events and talks, and co-sponsored the largest ever regional native plant sale. As a result of these and other efforts, HRWC was awarded a state grant to expand the rain garden program specifically to residents of Brighton and Belleville.

PROTECTING HEALTHY FORESTS FOR CLEAN DRINKING WATER

Our healthy forests and wetlands filter air and water pollutants. They also sequester carbon from the atmosphere and reduce flood risks and erosion. This year, HRWC joined the Forest to Mi Faucet program led by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to educate woodland owners and the public about the connection between forests and drinking water. The program is focused on identifying high-priority forested properties and supporting landowners interested in protecting them. As part of this initiative, HRWC created a spatial data set of natural lands and urban tree canopy cover showing the value of the ecosystem services these features provide in terms of protecting water quality and creating climate resilience. We also partnered with community groups and volunteers to plant 25 trees at a park in Ypsilanti Township.



*Increased HRWC's capacity for **collaboration** with stakeholders, scientific river monitoring, and employee recruiting and retention by relocating to a **NEW HEADQUARTERS** building with **dedicated lab space***



Photo by Kari Paine

FINANCIAL REPORT

Although this past year saw many challenges to the health of the river, HRWC remains financially strong. We were surprised and humbled to receive two unexpected estate gifts, creating a legacy of clean water for many years to come. More and more, eligible donors with IRAs are setting up Qualified Charitable Disbursements, which allow the required minimum distributions to support clean water work at the local level. And we are grateful to many of you who supported our move into our new home—The Headquarters for the Huron.

HRWC completed another clean annual audit, and we maintain a four out of 4-star rating, awarded by Charity Navigator—demonstrating strong financial health and a commitment to accountability and transparency.



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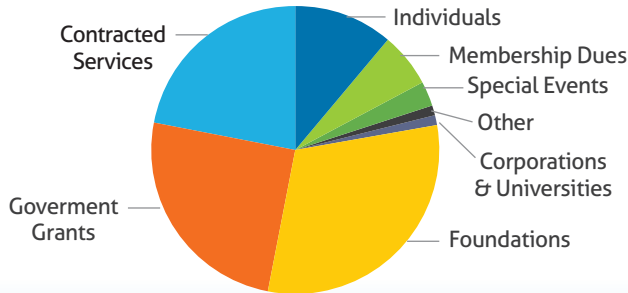
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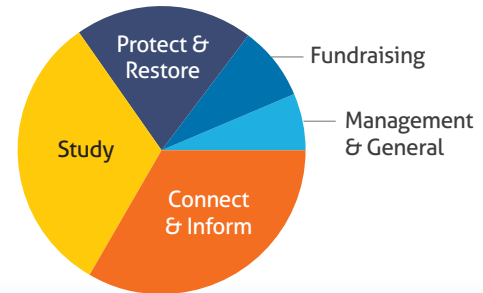
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STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES • Fiscal Year April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022

TOTAL REVENUE • \$2,275,907



EXPENSES • \$2,168,882



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The Huron River Watershed Council, thanks every contributor who gave their time, efforts and financial resources to make protecting the Huron River and clean water a priority.

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YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO US!

If your name is misspelled, incorrectly listed, or omitted, please accept our sincere apologies and bring the error to our attention so that we may correct our records. Contact Allie Schneider at aschneider@hrwc.org or (734) 519-0331.



Photo by Keith Matz



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Zaynab Al-Heleal
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298
volunteers

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John Lofy
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Kate Lopez
Molly Maciejewski
Christina Maier
Kianna Marquez
Evan Marsee
Todd Marsee
Hannah Martin
John Martin
Dennis McGowan
Norman Meluch
Matthew Mercure
Trinity Metcalf
John Metzler
Lily Mitchell

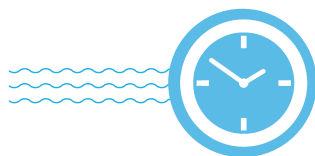
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Dharma Montagnolo
Dwight Moody
Katie Nailos
Matt Naud
Simona Navarikova
Aziza Nelson
Bridget Nelson
Eric Nelson
Otto Nelson
Ali Newton
Tiffany Ng
Ruthann Nichols
Richard Norton
Isabel Nowak
Coreen O'Rourke
William Orr
Kevin Osborne
Matthew Ostrowski
Rosalia Otaduy-Ramirez
Therese Panian
Rachel Pastori
Russell Perigo
Stacy Piette
Patrick Pinkowski
Agnes Pinter
Courtney Piotrowski
Tony Pitts
Evan Pratt
Jennifer Price
Nicholas Psenicka
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Isabel Reyes
Elijah Richards
Tom Roach
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Laura Rubin
Olivia Ruiz
Michal Russo
Kazimir Ryzewski
Krysta Ryzewski
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Drew YoungeDyke
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Yongwen Zheng
Austin Zoppi



4390 VOLUNTEER HOURS

2022 HRWC STAFF

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psteen@hrwc.org



*The Huron River Watershed Council protects and restores
the river for healthy and vibrant communities.*

HRWC.org



Photo by John Lloyd



REPORT *to the* COMMUNITY

2022 2023



Huron
River
Watershed
Council



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

On the heels of another summer of extreme weather around the world and here in Southeast Michigan, it often feels hopeless to talk about climate change. But it doesn't have to. Humans drive climate change, but we can also drive climate solutions.

HRWC has always worked to reduce threats to the Huron River—stormwater runoff, habitat loss, sediment and nutrient pollution, bacteria, and chemical contaminants. Climate change is a “threat multiplier.” As patterns in precipitation change and air temperatures increase, the threats to river health are amplified. In this report, we share some of our work over the past year that shows how with your support we are working to reduce the impacts of climate change.

Protection of natural lands especially forests and wetlands in the watershed and the land along our creeks and streams serves to keep the water cool and captures polluted runoff from storms before it reaches the river. In urban areas, similar outcomes are achieved with green stormwater infrastructure like rain gardens that catch and soak in runoff. Removing dams removes the risk of dam failures and restores habitat allowing aquatic biodiversity to recover in ways that make the ecosystem resilient to the shocks of extreme events like floods and drought.

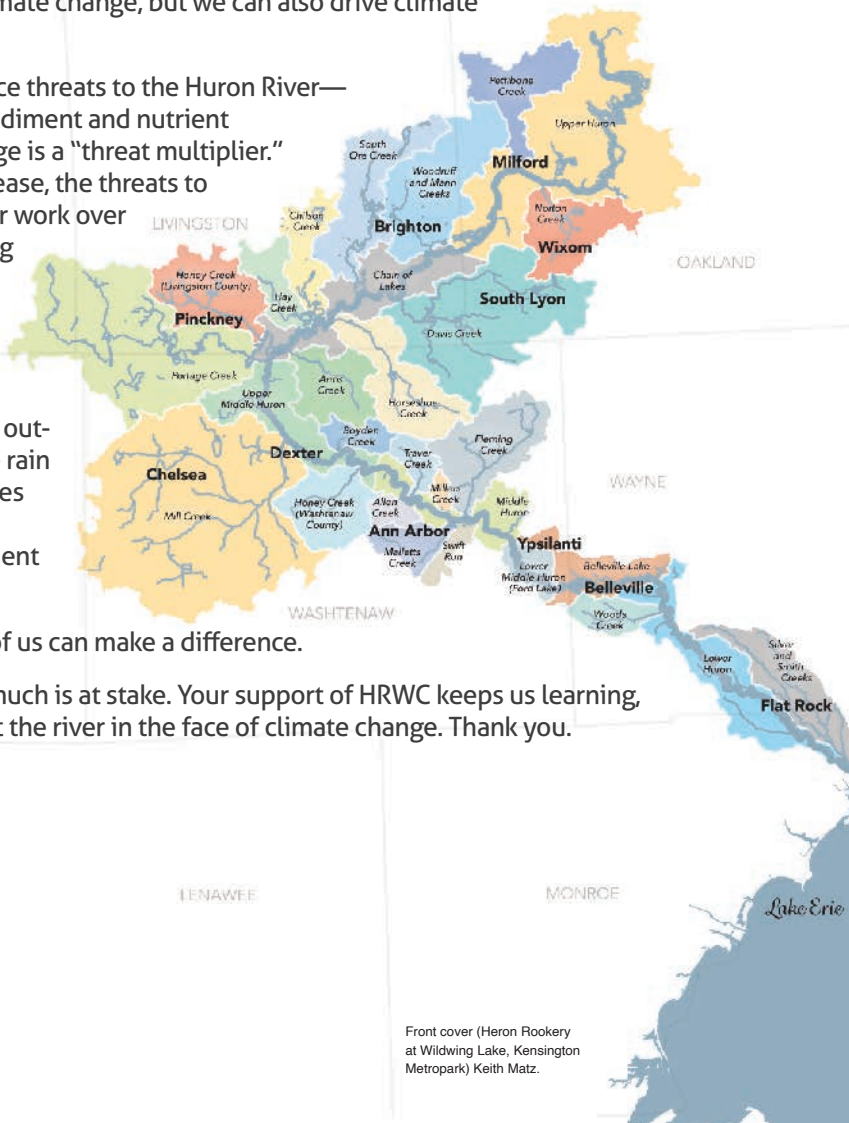
Climate change multiplies the threats that affect us all. Each of us can make a difference.

We are proud that you are helping us drive the solutions. So much is at stake. Your support of HRWC keeps us learning, evolving, innovating, and implementing solutions that protect the river in the face of climate change. Thank you.

My highest regards,

Rebecca Esselman

Rebecca Esselman
Executive Director



Front cover (Heron Rookery at Wildwing Lake, Kensington Metropark) Keith Matz.

A major river restoration project like removing a dam is a 'once in a generation opportunity' to make our communities safer, healthier, and more resilient. Dam removal eliminates the risk of dam failure and restores habitat, allowing aquatic biodiversity to recover in ways that make the ecosystem resilient to the shocks of extreme events like floods and drought.

In 2023 the City of Ypsilanti, with support from HRWC, received a \$3.78 million grant from the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) Dam Risk Reduction program to remove Peninsular Paper Dam. Pen Dam is a high-hazard dam that was recently downgraded to "poor" condition. The high-hazard rating indicates that severe damage and loss of life are likely if the dam were to fail. The EGLE grant is a major milestone in the project. It demonstrates a significant commitment from the state to address a hazardous piece of obsolete infrastructure.

As this project approaches the next phase, our engineers and ecologists are getting ready to safely deconstruct the dam, restore the river, and protect areas downriver during dam removal. In 2024 partners will pursue additional funding to restore the river above Ford Lake and below Superior Dam.

Healthy mussel populations found in 3 SPOTS IN THE RIVER: Proud Lake State Recreation Area, Portage Creek in Hell, and Commerce Township



Photo by 7 Cylinders Studio

A key element of dam removal is understanding the impact on aquatic life around the dam. This summer HRWC conducted volunteer-based monitoring of threatened and endangered mussels. With newly developed identification tools, HRWC staff, volunteers, and interns practiced mussel monitoring techniques around Pen Dam and throughout the watershed. Protecting this sensitive species is becoming even more critical in the face of climate change's impacts on the river.

43 species of mussels in Michigan, 31 species listed as threatened, endangered, or species of concern

Amani Tolin, HRWC summer intern, created 25 3D models of mussel shells to help identify mussels in the field.

Photo by Kari Paine





An HRWC staff member conducting a natural areas assessment.



Forests, wetlands, and prairies filter pollution from stormwater runoff, keep streams running cool and constant, soak up flood waters, sequester carbon pollution, and provide endless hours of recreation and wildlife viewing. The water quality protection provided by natural areas has become even more vital as Michigan experiences changes in precipitation patterns, higher air temperatures, and increasing water temperatures due to climate change.

HRWC works with local governments and their residents to enact land preservation programs and innovative land use policies. Our goal is to protect an additional 23,000 acres of woodlands, wetlands, and other natural and working landscapes.

Last fall residents in three watershed communities took bold steps to boost climate resiliency and protect clean water. Voters in Dexter, Northfield, and Scio townships approved property tax millages to fund land protection. HRWC endorsed and supported the millage campaigns.

Land protection programs, in concert with local government policies, help watershed communities accommodate new population growth while allowing natural areas to keep water clean and cool. HRWC offers policy and technical support directly to local governments, and our Change Makers program empowers residents to engage in the process by teaching them about river-friendly policies and how to get involved in local government decision-making.

Over the last five years, we have grown a corps of residents who have run for and been elected to office, become members of boards and planning commissions, participated in master plan updates, and reviewed and provided comments on local policies. Some of our Change Makers were instrumental in advocating and campaigning for the local land protection millages that passed.

HRWC'S
COMMITMENT TO
OUR WATERSHED
COMMUNITIES



60 YMCA Youth Volunteer Corps campers SEINED, DIP NETTED, and SNORKELED the Huron in Ypsilanti, learning river ecology with HRWC's summer STEM education program.

Stormwater runoff is a threat to the Huron River that has been multiplied by changing precipitation patterns. HRWC's Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI) program includes many projects that use plants and trees to improve the flow of the river and its creeks and reduce streambank erosion and pollutant and phosphorus runoff. GSI catches stormwater runoff, allowing it to slowly soak into the ground. Types of GSI installations include rain gardens, bioretention (medium-scale rain gardens), bioswales (rain gardens that move water), green roofs, porous pavement, rain barrels, and streambank restoration.

HRWC's approach is to develop many small projects to collectively do the same job as larger ones, which can be expensive and harder to find space for in the watershed's urban areas. We have completed many GSI projects in partnership with local governments, community groups, other nonprofits, schools, residents, and businesses.

This summer HRWC focused its efforts on two GSI projects in the Norton Creek watershed in the cities of Wixom and Walled Lake. Norton Creek's stream flow is highly altered resulting in extremely low dissolved oxygen levels that prohibit fish and other wildlife in most of the creek.

HRWC redesigned a drainage area in Gunnar Metalla Park into a bioswale which was seeded with native plants. At the Walled Lake Fire House, we transformed a lawn area into a rain garden. Combined, the two projects are expected to catch and soak in over 400,000 gallons of runoff a year (infiltrating it into the groundwater) and reduce phosphorus runoff by over a pound a year.



HRWC volunteers plant trees in Wixom.



We introduced **150** kids and adults to the **CREATURES OF THE HURON RIVER** at the 2023 Parkridge Summerfest Joe Dulin Community Day celebration.

FINANCIAL REPORT

HRWC's upward trend in the growth of our fund balance continues, which helps fuel the expansion of programming and serves as a safety net for our organization. A portion of our fund balance is professionally managed with a minimum of 30% of the portfolio invested in environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) funds. Designated ESG funds strive to follow sustainable practices and have evolved to include the principles of health, safety, and corporate responsibility.

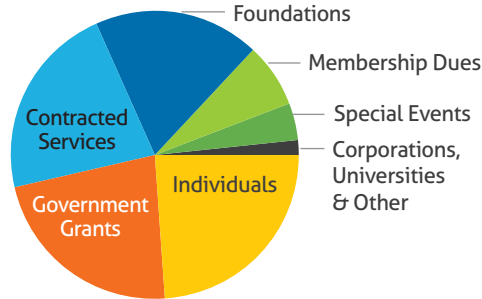
HRWC completed another clean annual audit, and we maintain a four out of 4-star rating, awarded by Charity Navigator—demonstrating strong financial health and a commitment to accountability and transparency.

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

Fiscal Year April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023

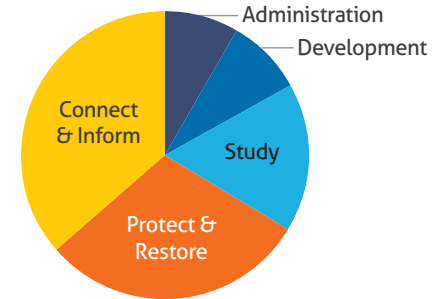
TOTAL REVENUE

\$1,934,338



EXPENSES

\$2,225,078



*Because accounting guidelines require recognition of multi-year grants in the year awarded, there was a large uptick in total revenue in 2022 and a downtick in 2023, but the overall trend is positive.

2023 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Belinda Friis, *Treasurer*
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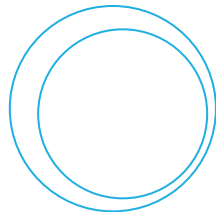
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Washtenaw County

THANK YOU TO OUR 2023 HONOREES

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR



Belinda Friis for steady guidance of HRWC operations

TRAILBLAZER



Kyle Martin for helping HRWC forge a new relationship with the Parkridge Community Center and pilot outdoor education for summer campers

HALL OF FAME



Cheryl Saam for getting many thousands of people outdoors to enjoy nature and the Huron River

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Sabrina Gross
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Bob Hyde
Scio Township

Craig Kivi
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Curt Wolf
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Lisa Wozniak
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Thank you to **EVERYONE** who gave their time, efforts and financial resources to make protecting the Huron River and clean water a priority. Head to [HRWC.org/AnnualReport](https://www.hrwc.org/AnnualReport) for our list of contributors.

The Huron River Watershed Council thanks every contributor who gave their time, efforts and financial resources to make protecting the Huron River and clean water a priority.

April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023



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Sylvia Bethea
BGreen Today
Allison Billi
in honor of Forest's birthday





Photo by Friday1970 (Flickr handle)

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 Susan Bishop
in memory of Brian Vlazny
 Amber Bismack
 Bivouac
 Donald Black
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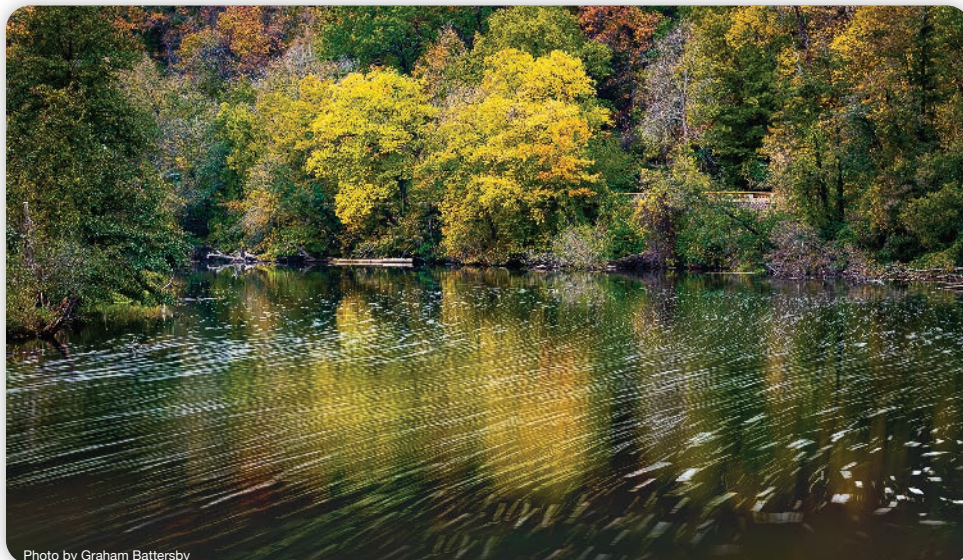


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365
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Photo by Kari Paine

*The Huron River Watershed Council protects and restores
the river for healthy and vibrant communities.*

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**SAVE THE DATE! Our River Givers Gathering
is Wednesday, March 6, 2024.**