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## **We Are Water: Growing a Great Lakes Commons Milwaukee Environmental Consortium**

### **Project Summary**

#### **Part I. Description**

##### Participating organizations

There were several organizations and individuals instrumental to the success of this project. Children of the Wild theatre ensemble, Love Your Greats, and musician Ben Weaver contributed to the Charter Toolkit and co-hosted water events. Milwaukee Water Commons, Council of Canadians, Wellington Water Watchers, and Six Nations of the Grand River, along with the Great Lakes Commons Leadership Council all offered inspiration and guidance through the project. Many more individuals offered their expertise by reviewing, editing, and translating toolkit resources. Artist Lena Wilson designed and formatted the documents.

##### **Background or problem statement**

The Great Lakes region faces myriad environmental issues and complex multi-jurisdictional governance while weakened citizen roles reduce community engagement to steward the waters. Currently local action feels inconsequential in the face of the watershed's size; international boundaries confound and confuse local communities innovation of potential solutions. Creating a water commons can help generate a collective identity ('belonging to the Great Lakes'), promote concepts of shared responsibility and shared benefit, engage communities in addressing common challenges, and create positive change through cooperation to care for these waters now and for future generations.

This project had two interconnecting goals: (1) to empower local capacity to engage in Great Lakes care and decision-making and (2) to strengthen bioregional engagement of community-level water groups by enhancing dialogue and sharing experiences. To empower local communities Great Lakes Commons, along with key partners, developed a suite of tools and resources that leverage and inform community action. To strengthen bioregional engagement of communities, Great Lakes Commons increased the communication and sense of connection using video-conferencing technology between and amongst local water groups and leaders, and build further momentum and 'connectedness' through water events that took place on the shores of the Great Lakes.

##### **General description of the project**

After 12 months of assessing community needs, developing content, and piloting tools, a new set of resources is now ready to enliven the Commons Charter's call for community engagement and action across the basin. The Charter Toolkit is intended to support individuals, communities, and campaigns aimed at protecting and caring for the waters of the Great Lakes. The toolkit currently includes: the Charter Declaration in 5 Great Lakes languages; native and non-native water governance introductions; ways-of-knowing workshop outlines; a series of water-commons conversation starters and concepts; and a set of community organizing practices.

In order to address second goal of this project, Great Lakes Commons hosted "Commons Conversations" with community water leaders from around the Great Lakes. These conversations enhanced 'connectedness' and raised the level of individual and shared commitment on selected topics. The conversations are recorded and hosted (in audio and/or video) on Great Lakes Commons' website. The titles and topics of the conversations included: Bottled Water in the Great Lakes: A Discussion between Ontario and Michigan; Water Pedagogies Confluence in the Great Lakes: Teaching Water in Classrooms; Great Lakes Stands with Standing Rock: Unity in Action; and Take This Toolkit: Resources for the Commons Charter.

## **Description of outcomes and follow-up**

This project resulted in over 450 people attending the 6 water events where community members connected to their home waters and to their communities. Community leaders gained increased knowledge, skills and increased capacity to activate change and water stewardship projects in their communities or field of work. The 4 virtual conversations were held connecting individuals and organizations. These events increased knowledge and awareness on the part of engaged communities and organizations about similar work and interest taking place in the bioregion. These conversations were recorded and can be accessed as part of our Commons Conversation series at <http://www.greatlakescommons.org/commons-conversations/>.

There were 46 new stories/articles produced as part of this project, increasing societal level awareness about local and regional water issues and events. Most of these stories can be accessed on the Great Lakes Commons Blog (<http://www.greatlakescommons.org/our-blog/>) and at <http://www.greatlakescommonsmap.org/>.

Finally, A 10 piece Charter Toolkit was created and is responsive to various community needs across the basin. The toolkit will increase a shared vision and cooperation across the Great Lakes. Access to the toolkit can be gained through <http://www.greatlakescommons.org/chartertoolkit/>.

## **Project Summary**

### **Part II. Analysis**

#### **Successes**

This project increased awareness of, and sparked action from Great Lakes watershed community-level engagement with social and environmental issues. This was done by developing a community focused Charter Toolkit to increase engagement in water issues and coordinating complementary on and off-line events. The benefit of connecting local efforts and interests is that community organizations feel supported by a growing bioregional movement – enabling them to activate an increased audience and furthering positive environmental stewardship efforts in turn contributing to vibrant, aware, and sustainable communities around the Great Lakes.

Our approach to empower local water stewardship through commons ethics while braiding local efforts into a growing grassroots, bioregional water-based movement, connected communities and individual that had not been connected, coordinated, or sharing knowledge.

#### **Challenges**

Originally it was planned that the Toolkit would contain only 4 models/tools for community engagement and action. We quickly found that limiting the toolkit to 4 models/tools would not adequately address the many needs and gaps in Great Lakes focused community engagement and action. Based on many conversations and assessments we shifted our expectations and eventually ended up with a 10 piece toolkit. This project was deeply collaborative that extended our timelines, but strengthened our knowledge-base, community trust, and promotional network.

#### **Lessons Learned**

Obtaining media coverage of events and the toolkit was a challenge for two reasons during this project. We have learned that personal contacts and fostering relationships with those in the media takes time and is the most effective way to gain interest. It's important to prioritize engagement and communications, taking time to develop the proper channels and strategies for a needs of a specific project. We are now much clearer about what value we offer the Great Lakes basin -- to communities and to media outlets.

#### **What Next? What will you do and what should others do?**

Great Lakes Commons is committed to expanding access to and awareness of the Charter Toolkit. The Toolkit will continue to be shared and promoted across all our communications platforms and at the numerous events we attend. We hope to work with targeted community groups to use and test the resources contained in the Toolkit. Great Lakes Commons will be following up on conversations started during the virtual events, hosting on/offline discussions to advance cooperation and shared knowledge. There are already many spring and summer events being planned around the lakes: beach cleanups,

sacred water talks, educational and advocacy conferences, and local and regional campaigns, We know our networks, stories, and resource will be depended upon..

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