

Citizen Involvement in Conservation

Following his tour of America during the 1830s, studying American society and institutions, Count Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his book *Democracy in America*, that this country was uniquely strengthened by the strong influence of fraternal and civic organizations. He observed that participation in these groups by large numbers of average citizens resulted in Americans being more engaged in the affairs of society and government, making America stronger as a result. This model of social involvement served our country well for 150-years.

Of particular interest to many of us today, citizen participation in organizations concerned with the complex issues affecting management of our natural resources has proven especially important and effective. Many of the things outdoor recreationists, especially hunters and fishers, take for granted are the result of citizen organizations such as The Sierra Club, Ducks Unlimited, the Wildlife Conservation Society, National Audubon Society, Trout Unlimited, and others. They brought the voices and interests of outdoor enthusiasts to government agencies, or battled on our behalf in courts across the land, with outcomes that benefit all Americans to this day.

But in the last 50 years, much has changed. Participation in a wide variety of organizations has plummeted. In groups as diverse as the Lions, Masons, bowling leagues, and conservation clubs, membership and involvement have plunged. It's not that Americans aren't interested in such things any longer, rather it seems that we want to pursue our passions ourselves or in small groups of friends, not with large organizations and their associated bureaucratic structure and time commitments. As a result, the voice and clout of conservationists isn't as influential as it once was.

Going it alone is fine when the issue is weekly card games or bowling, but for important issues in America this trend doesn't serve us well. This is especially true in the realm of conservation and environmental protection. People might be just as concerned about these issues today as they were decades ago, but the power once provided with a unified effort has been diminished. Organizational strength peaked in the early 1970s following Earth Day, but has eroded away ever since. We've become a nation of solo participants, pursuing our passions and trying to influence decision-makers alone, rather than adhering to the tried-and-true concept of strength in numbers. In 1980 the Michigan United Conservation Clubs had over 100,000 members. Today membership stands at just over 40,000. That's potentially a lot of clout for the cause of conservation that has been lost. MUCC continues to be a powerful force for management and protection of our resources, but imagine if membership numbers were triple what they now are? Sports men and women would have considerable influence on major resource issues that affect us all.

An organization trying to buck the trend of going it alone on behalf of conservation is the Michigan Resource Stewards. MRS is a conservation and environmental advocacy organization organized in 1997. It was formed by and is comprised primarily of retired DNR and DEQ personnel from a wide range of professional resource protection backgrounds. Many members

also came from other disciplines and experiences. MRS is strengthened by members who didn't spend a career in governmental resource agencies, but were active in hands-on conservation efforts and in leadership positions in non-governmental programs and organizations.

For nearly 25-years, members have contributed time and talent on behalf of Michigan's natural wonders. The motto of the Stewards is *Resource Professionals Continuing a Tradition of Service*. This is no empty phrase. It succinctly describes what members are all about. After decades of public or volunteer service, they still devote many miles and hours toward the same conservation and environmental goals as in preceding years. Their conservation ethic is as strong as ever.

Since its beginning, the Stewards have been widely recognized and respected for their professional, non-political science-based approach to conservation and natural resource management issues. Members have been active in a variety of venues to help ensure that wise long-term management decisions are made by public agencies and conservation organizations. MRS does this by partnering with organizations such as MUCC, the Michigan Environmental Council, Michigan Outdoor Writers Association, and other groups whose efforts we support.

Members serve on a variety of committees and work groups in state agencies and conservation organizations, providing professional background experience, knowledge and input. Individual stewards serve on government task forces and advisory councils. Knowing many of the key decision-makers personally, and having vital knowledge of the structure, laws and procedures that make government function, are attributes that have great value in the process of influencing decisions. But while members are familiar with the function of agencies and politics, we are wholly non-political in practice. We take stands based on knowledge and facts, and long-term protection of the resources, not based on political favor or partisanship. Influence is used on behalf of the resources and the public, not a political agenda.

For a quarter century, members have provided testimony before the Natural Resources Commission and other public decision-making bodies. Resolutions and White Papers adopted and prepared by MRS document our positions on issues as wide-ranging as Chronic Wasting Disease to sulfide ore mining. Groups have requested that the Stewards study and take stands on various issues to support them in their efforts. MRS frequently takes a formal stand on key actions or issues by means of Resolutions or letters to appropriate governmental authorities. These formal declarations are deemed valuable by groups involved in contentious issues with long-lasting consequences.

In recognition of its many contributions to the resources of Michigan, the Michigan Resource Stewards organization was inducted into the Michigan Environmental Hall of Fame in 2019. It is our intention to continue service to Michigan for years to come. In an effort to reverse the trend of a weakened voice for conservation MRS urges outdoor enthusiasts of all varieties to become involved with the groups that represent their interests. Collectively, we are the voice of the land, forests, lakes and rivers, wildlife, fisheries, and every other part of the natural world that we hold precious. Let's stand together to protect it for the future. The Stewards would be happy to have you join us in our efforts toward this end.

Check out our website www.miresourcestewards.org or Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/miresourcestewards> for more information or to review documents or posts. If you have professional, educational, or substantial volunteer credentials in the realm of conservation and environmental protection, and would like to put your expertise to use, join us in this critically important effort. A contact email link is available on the web site.

By MRS member Bill Murphy, on behalf of the Michigan Resource Stewards