

Bad River Watershed Association receives Environmental Stewardship Award



(Submitted Photo) GROUP EFFORT - U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employee Frank Stone, left, Michele Wheeler of the Bad River Watershed Association and Northland College student Adrian Roth monitor fish populations in the 18 Mile tributary of the Bad River.

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Its network of volunteers compiled a volume of data for an important part of the Lake Superior watershed and gave aquatic life a better chance at survival, and the Bad River Watershed Association was recently rewarded for its efforts.

The group was given an Environmental Stewardship Award from the Lake Superior Binational Program for a couple of reasons: establishing a baseline of water quality for the Bad River watershed, along with its program of culvert inventories and replacements.

The first part took about four years and involved checking water chemistry for oxygen, nitrogen and other factors that offer a snapshot of a stream within the watershed at a given point in time.

Aside from water chemistry, BRWA's volunteers also looked for macro-invertebrates like bugs and larvae that provide insight into the longer-term health of the water. Since many of the pollution-intolerant critters can live in the water for a year or more, their presence is a good sign of the overall health of the water, BRWA Director Michele Wheeler said in an interview Wednesday.

That data on aquatic life and water chemistry within the Bad River watershed didn't exist before, but the state Department of Natural Resources was happy to have it — it's the main reason why streams in the watershed were designated as Outstanding or Exceptional Resource Waters, which helps prioritize the state's streams and rivers for funding and management.

Now that the baseline assessment has pretty much been established, the association is at somewhat of a turning point, Wheeler said.

One possibility is adding to the 18 sites the volunteers currently monitor. Another is a more specific focus in monitoring efforts, rather than a "let's see what's out there" approach, she said.

The other half of the association's work is far from over, however. Of the 1,100 sites where streams and rivers cross with roads, the BRWA has about 700 of them inventoried.

Getting them all on paper is one part. Potentially replacing the culverts at those crossings is another, but equally important, task. An adequate culvert is one where the stream, its sediment and aquatic life pass freely from one side of the crossing to another.

But that's not always the case within the Bad River watershed, as the organization has found. Occasionally there can be a drop of 6 inches or more, which holds sediment back and traps fish on one side or another.

Replacing smaller culverts with larger ones can be expensive, so the group and partners like the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's Natural Resources Department and the Fish and Wildlife Foundation seek grant funding to purchase them. A match often comes in the form of labor to install them, which creates its own opportunities for education and awareness, Wheeler said.

The process of working with a crew from the Town of Gingles on how to install fish-friendly pipes has opened their eyes a bit, Wheeler said.

"I asked whether it was different from the way they normally do stuff, and they said, 'Well, yeah, we don't normally think about the stream, we were thinking about traffic across the road,'" she said.

To finish the inventory task, the BRWA is reaching out for more volunteers who could check out their own backyards, Wheeler said.

"What's neat about that is local people are conducting these inventories in their neighborhoods that we're going to be using for the next year, so then there's that direct feedback," she said.

The group is also working with teenagers through the Pathfinders program at the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, which Wheeler said helps the young ones see the world in a different light as well.

"To know what's going on at that one site and how it's going to change through time, you really have to understand a lot about what's going on in the watershed," she said. "It's a neat experience for the volunteers, too, because they see the landscape in a different way."

Helping local residents, as well as state and tribal agencies, to see the Bad River watershed in a different way is the main reason why the group was awarded the Environmental Stewardship Award, said Lissa Radke, the U.S. coordinator of the Lake Superior Binational Forum.

"The fact mainly that they did such ongoing, expensive, highly technical work with a volunteer base on a really important body of water in the Lake Superior watershed is something the judges said was undeniably the kind of work the Binational Program's awards program is looking for," she said.