

CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS



LAND CONSERVATION PLAN

2023 UPDATE



Chikaming Open Lands

OUR ORGANIZATION

Chikaming Open Lands (COL) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit land conservancy working in Berrien County, Michigan. We are governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, managed by a professional staff, and work with a dedicated group of volunteers. COL is an accredited member of the Land Trust Alliance, the national association of land trusts.

OUR VISION

Working with landowners, conservation partners, local, state and federal agencies, and other nonprofit organizations, we seek to have a positive impact on conservation and protection of land and natural resources in our region. Through the support of our local communities, we protect the natural environment, promote public health, support the local economy, and preserve unique spaces for generations to come.

OUR MISSION

COL is dedicated to preserving the open spaces and natural rural character of southern Berrien County. We protect and restore native plant and animal habitat, improve water quality in our lakes, streams, and rivers, and permanently preserve ecologically significant forests, prairies, and wetlands, as well as prime farmland and other open spaces in our community.

CONSERVATION GOALS

Conservation is at the heart of COL's mission—protecting land and natural resources for the benefit of nature and people, now and for generations to come.

SHORT-TERM GOALS

As COL continues to grow, we endeavor to expand our impact throughout southern Berrien County, from New Buffalo and Bridgman to Niles and Berrien Springs, and beyond, by providing opportunities for outdoor recreation and education for residents and visitors to enjoy and learn about our natural world.

LONG-TERM GOALS

The work we do is "forever." Every parcel of land we protect will remain protected "in perpetuity." With that responsibility in mind, we strive to develop capacity, processes and procedures, and financial stability and sustainability to meet the needs of the organization now and decades into the future.



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LAND CONSERVATION PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

This plan identifies specific criteria to be used by COL and our conservation partners to guide our land conservation activities over the next 10-15 years. We also encourage our communities and public agencies to incorporate aspects of this plan into their own Master Plans or Parks and Recreation Plans to provide a more holistic approach to land conservation in the county.

CONSERVATION FOCUS AREAS

COL principally operates across southern Berrien County. Within our Primary and Expanded Service Areas, we have designated “focus areas” for our work. Each focus area has certain priorities for our land conservation activities. Broadly, focus areas seek to expand COL’s environmental, social, and economic impact in the communities of Berrien County.

CONSERVATION PRIORITIES

COL’s top priorities for land conservation include protecting and preserving wildlife habitat through ownership of nature preserves, providing public access to those nature preserves for recreation and education, and protecting prime farmland for continued agricultural use.





IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

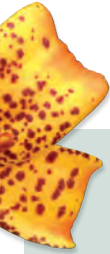
COL will engage landowners and community members through various events and media to share and promote the plan. We will identify and pursue desirable opportunities to acquire or protect land in the designated focus areas. Opportunities presented by landowners will be assessed through the lens of the plan to prioritize activities.

HOW WE WORK

COL works with landowners on a voluntary basis. We acquire desirable property through donation or purchase to create nature preserves which are generally open to the public. Landowners who desire to retain ownership of their land may consider granting a conservation easement to COL to protect their property, typically via donation.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Broadly, COL strives to have a greater impact throughout our Primary and Expanded Service Areas in southern Berrien County. Within the next 10-15 years, we seek to have at least one significant nature preserve and one significant conservation easement property in each township of our service area. We aspire to further expand existing nature preserves to create large blocks of publicly accessible land, as well as buffering protected lands with conservation easements on adjacent private properties.





Lake Michigan

Saint Joseph

Fair Plain

Lakeshore Dr.

94

Naomi Rd

31

Berrien Springs

Bridgman

E Shawnee Rd

31

Niles

Buchanan

Cleveland Ave

New Buffalo

94

12

Three Oaks

12

-  Primary Service Area
-  Expanded Service Area
-  COL Preserves
-  COL Conservation Easements

National Geographic, Esri, Garmin, HERE, UNEP-WCMC, USGS, NASA, ESA, METI, NRCAN, GEBCO, NOAA, increment P Corp.

SERVICE AREA AND PROTECTED PROPERTIES

COL operates throughout Berrien County with a Primary Service Area encompassing 12 townships and 11 incorporated municipalities in the southern half of the county. Our Expanded Service Area includes an additional 4 townships and 1 incorporated municipality in the central part of the county.



HISTORY

Founded in 1999, COL has grown from an all-volunteer organization to employing a full-time staff with hundreds of donors and supporters. As of 2023, we have protected over 2,100 acres of natural areas, farmland, and open space in Berrien County.

SERVICE AREA INFORMATION

As of 2023, COL has protected properties located in 12 of 23 townships/municipalities in our primary service area, with a nature preserve located in 7 of the townships/municipalities.

PROTECTED PROPERTIES

COL's protected lands include 800 acres of nature preserves – properties owned and managed by COL; and more than 1,000 acres of conservation easements – properties under private ownership with restrictions and limitations on use.

21

Nature Preserves open to the public for recreation and education.

33

Conservation Easements on private land.



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Fair Plain

Lakeshore Dr.



Naomi Rd



Berrien Springs

Bridgman

E Shawnee Rd

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-  Expanded Service Area
-  Conservation & Recreation Areas

Red Arrow Hwy



Niles

Buchanan

Cleveland Ave

New Buffalo



Three Oaks



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BERRIEN COUNTY CONSERVATION AND RECREATION LANDS

Berrien County hosts a variety of private and public conservation and recreation lands from golf courses and youth camps to parks and nature preserves. Despite being home to a few high-profile state parks, Berrien County has comparatively less publicly accessible land than many other counties in MI.

1,952

In acres, size of Warren Dunes State Park—the largest park or preserve in Berrien County.

2

Number of State Game/State Wildlife Areas in Berrien County.

PUBLIC PARKS AND CONSERVATION LAND

The majority of the publicly owned land in the county is located at 4 sites: Boyle Lake State Wildlife Area, Grand Mere State Park, Warren Dunes State Park and Warren Woods State Park. Other significant public land sites include Chikaming Township Park & Preserve, Galien River County Park, Hagar Township Riverside Park, Love Creek Nature Center & County Park, Madeline Bertrand County Park, and St. Joseph Riverview Park.

PRIVATE CONSERVATION LAND

In addition to Chikaming Open Lands, several private organizations own land and hold conservation easements that are protected for conservation purposes. Properties owned by land conservancies such as Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy and Michigan Nature Association are generally open to the public and free to visit. Sarett Nature Center and Fernwood Botanical Garden are open to members or the general public for a daily fee. The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi also owns significant tribal land for conservation purposes.

PRIVATE RECREATION LAND

Various other groups also own significant properties, primarily for recreational use, including golf courses, hunt clubs, youth camps, and private resorts. While these organizations may not be dedicated to protecting land, many groups manage their properties for conservation purposes along with recreational activities.



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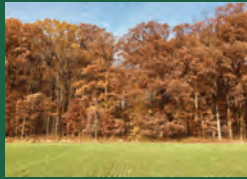
CENTRAL AGRICULTURAL CORRIDOR

Berrien County is home to a wide variety of agricultural production—from corn and soybeans to grapes and fruit trees. Protecting productive farmland benefits the environment, the economy, and the residents of Berrien County.



PRIORITY

Protect prime farmland to preserve agricultural use and production. Protect associated wetlands, forests, or fallow land for wildlife habitat and buffer zones.



METHOD

Place conservation easements via donation or purchase to protect and preserve agricultural use while maintaining private ownership by landowners and producers.



STRATEGY

Seek to protect large agricultural parcels under single ownership or blocks of contiguous parcels with single or multiple owners to provide the greatest environmental & economic benefits.

Several state and federal programs offer financial assistance to landowners and producers to enact conservation practices and to protect farmland in perpetuity.

41

Percent of Berrien County land in agricultural use.

#1

State rank of Berrien County in direct-to-consumer sales of agricultural products.



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LOWER GALIEN RIVER CORRIDOR

The lower stem of the Galien River contains large areas of relatively undeveloped forest and wetlands. The forested corridor provides vital habitat for wildlife, but the scenic nature is also highly desirable for further residential development.

82

In thousands, the number of acres of the Galien River watershed in Michigan.

52

Percent of wetlands lost in the Galien River watershed.



PRIORITY

Protect wetlands and floodplain forests for wildlife habitat. Protect adjacent forests and fields to buffer riparian zones. Provide access and recreational opportunities on the river and adjacent lands. Create links with existing protected lands.



METHOD

Acquire significant parcels by donation or purchase to expand and connect existing nature preserves and protected lands. Place conservation easements via donation on private land to preserve habitat and balance residential development.



STRATEGY

Seek small-sized to medium-sized parcels linking and expanding existing protected lands to increase habitat resilience and connectedness and balance recreational uses.

The lower Galien River provides valuable habitat for resident and migratory songbirds and is designated as one of Michigan's "Important Bird Areas" by Audubon.



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Focus Area



COL Preserves



COL Conservation Easements



Conservation & Recreation Areas

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KETTLE LAKES REGION

Kettle lakes or kettle wetlands are aquatic systems which formed from glacial activity thousands of years ago. As the depressions filled with water, soil, and plant life, ecosystems developed which may host very unique plant and animal species.



PRIORITY

Protect kettle lakes and wetlands for wildlife habitat. Protect adjacent uplands for wildlife habitat and as buffer zones. Provide public access for recreation and education.



METHOD

Land acquisition of significant parcels via donation or purchase is desirable to create or connect nature preserves. Place conservation easements via donation on private lands to preserve key habitat and balance residential development.



STRATEGY

Seek medium-sized to large-sized tracts with significant conservation value to create or connect nature preserves. Engage landowners for potential to place conservation easements on private lands to buffer preserves.

A bog is a type of kettle wetland which is strongly acidic and receives most water and nutrient inputs from precipitation only.

10

In meters, the maximum depth of most kettles.

4

Types of carnivorous plants native to Michigan.



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5

Number of designated water trails in Berrien County, including the Dowagiac River, Galien River, Paw Paw River, St. Joseph River, and Lake Michigan Water Trails.

58

Length in miles, when fully built, of the Marquette Greenway, a non-motorized trail system connecting Chicago to Berrien County.

LINEAR PARKS/NON-MOTORIZED TRAIL CORRIDORS

Linear Parks and Non-motorized Trail Corridors provide an opportunity for people to bike, walk, or run for recreation or transportation by linking communities together and to destination points in between. These corridors create an opportunity for COL to develop nature preserves as destination points for recreational users and additionally as rest stops for transportation users.



PRIORITY

Create destinations and/or rest areas for users of linear parks and trail corridors. Provide public access for recreation and education. Develop amenities for visitors to enhance experiences.



METHOD

Pursue land acquisition of new preserves via donation or purchase for destinations and rest areas for trail users.



STRATEGY

Seek parcels with significant conservation value for new preserves within ½ mile or less of proposed and planned trail corridors.

The Friends of Berrien County Trails and its partners completed the "Berrien County Trails Master Plan" in December 2022 creating a vision for development of non-motorized trails linking communities and destinations throughout the county.



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EASTERN TOWNSHIPS REGION

While eastern Berrien County has significant population centers, residents of the townships have fewer locations and opportunities to access parks and preserves for outdoor recreation and education, comparatively. COL seeks to expand our efforts and impact within these communities.



PRIORITY

Protect natural areas and wildlife habitat. Provide public access for recreation and education. Preserve prime farmland.



METHOD

Pursue land acquisition through donation or purchase to develop new nature preserves. Place conservation easements on prime farmland and other open space by donation or purchase to preserve agricultural use and balance residential development.



STRATEGY

Seek medium-large tracts with conservation value for new nature preserves. Seek to protect large parcels of farmland under single ownership or blocks of contiguous parcels with single or multiple owners.

Townships in southeast Berrien County have significantly fewer public lands and publicly-accessible preserves and parks compared to townships in central and southwest Berrien County.

4

Significant publicly accessible natural areas (park, preserve, etc. greater than 40 acres) in 4 townships east of the St. Joseph River in southeast Berrien County.

20+

Significant publicly accessible natural areas (park or preserve greater than 40 acres) in 12 townships west of the St. Joseph River in south-central and southwest Berrien County.



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100

Size, in acres, of Burnham Wildlife Corridor, a ribbon of urban wilderness along the Chicago lakefront

200+

Species of migratory birds which travel through Berrien County along the "Lake Michigan/ Mississippi Flyway."

WILDLIFE CORRIDORS AND GREENBELTS

Wildlife corridors and greenbelts are defined as narrow strips of land that differ, usually in terms of dominant vegetation, from the surrounding area. They provide safe passage and refuge for wildlife species to travel between fragmented habitat areas and provide important sources of food and cover for many species.



PRIORITY

Protect wildlife habitat along streams and rivers to create greenbelts and increase connectivity. Identify locations and opportunities to develop wildlife crossings in transportation corridors.



METHOD

Pursue land acquisition of parcels by donation or purchase to create and connect nature preserves. Engage land owners with potential to grant conservation easements to connect protected lands.



STRATEGY

Seek parcels with significant conservation value for new preserves. Place conservation easements on private lands to buffer and connect other conservation parcels.

Wildlife crossings are structures that allow animals to safely cross man-made barriers, such as highways, significantly improving connections between fragmented habitats for wildlife and reducing animal-vehicle collisions thus preventing injury, death, and property damage.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

LANDOWNERS

If you own property in Berrien County (natural area, farmland, or other open space), consider whether protecting your land as a nature preserve or conservation easement fulfills your goals as a landowner.

Preserving land for future generations creates a legacy that lasts forever.

SUPPORTERS

If you are a current member/donor of COL – thank you! Everything that COL has accomplished in our community is a direct result of your support for our operations, projects, and programs. If you are not yet a member, please consider making a gift and become our partner in preserving open spaces and the diverse natural character of this special corner of Southwest Michigan.

VOLUNTEERS

If you volunteer for COL – thank you! Our volunteers, particularly committee members, Preserve Stewards, and education/outreach volunteers, are the lifeblood of the organization. We offer a wide variety of volunteer opportunities, where you too can make a difference.





COMMUNITY MEMBERS

If you are just learning about COL, we invite you to attend our outreach programs, participate in stewardship volunteer days, and consider supporting COL financially at any level. Join your friends and neighbors as one of nearly 1,000 households who support, volunteer, and participate in COL activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chikaming Open Lands

12291 Red Arrow Highway
Sawyer, MI 49125
(269) 405-1006

col@chikamingopenlands.org
www.chikamingopenlands.org



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We protect and restore native plant and animal habitat, improve water quality in our lakes, streams, and rivers, and permanently preserve ecologically significant forests, prairies, and wetlands, as well as prime farmland and other open spaces in our community.

**If you are considering protecting your land within Berrien County,
or to discuss conservation options that will fit with your land
management goals, please contact:**



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