



Jones Area Conservation Plan

A vision for the conservation and
restoration of wilderness land in the
Greater Jones Area

Project Purpose

With the natural and undeveloped landscape surrounding it, Jones, Michigan provides an opportune setting for focused conservation efforts. Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC) developed the Jones Area Conservation Plan, which provides a locally-informed vision for present and future conservation in the region based around identified conservation corridors, and conservation values—including water quality, wildlife habitat, and recreational assets. Through the expansion of conserved land, site-specific restoration, and protection of natural resources, SWMLC and its partners seek to facilitate the creation of an exceptional greenspace that will sustain and enrich the region's quality of life for generations.

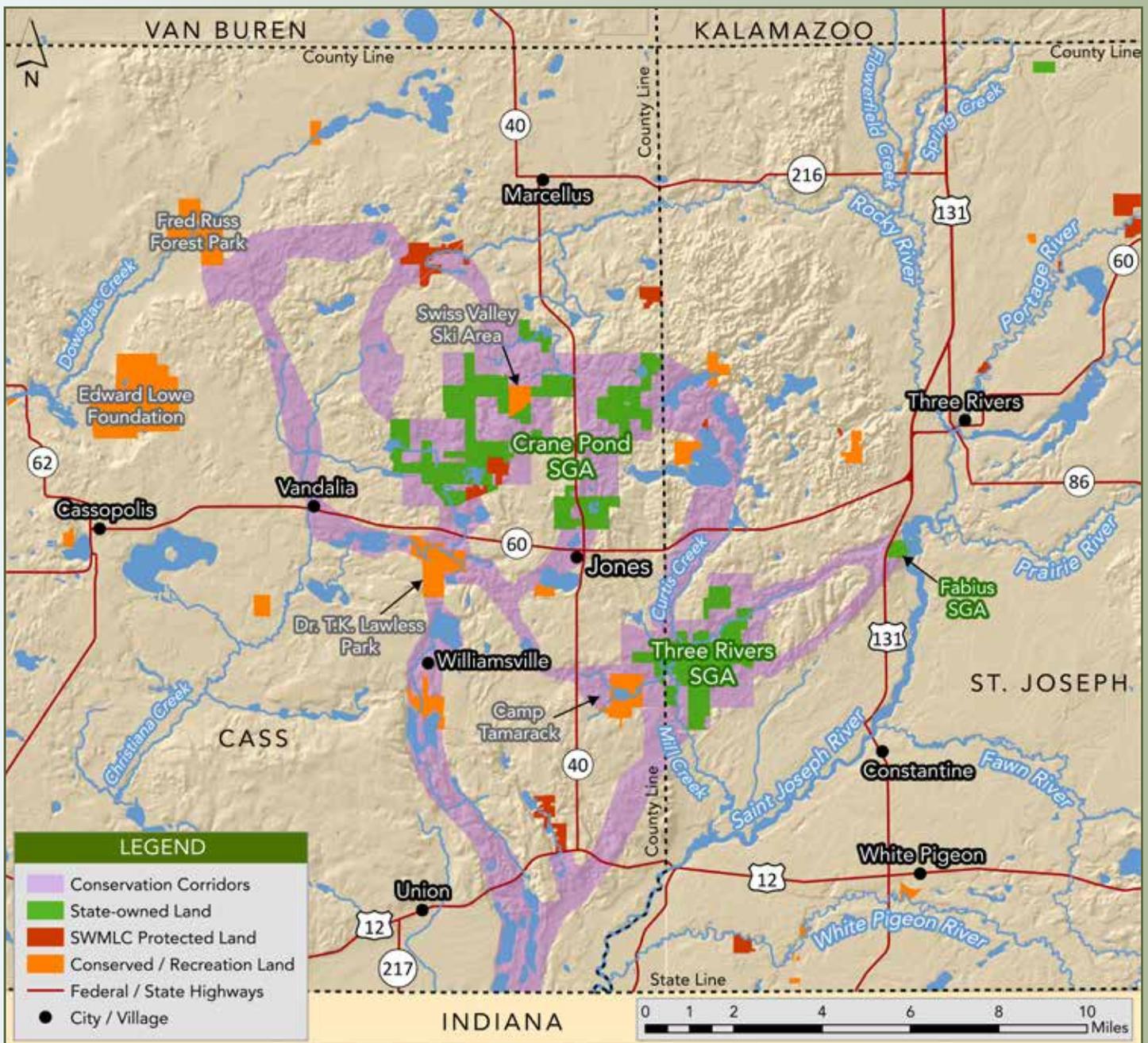
Project Area

The Jones area is blessed with abundant and unique natural resources that characterize the rural quality of the region. Headwaters for numerous streams commence here—the harbingers of water quality found downstream. Traversing the rolling terrain, these waters bring to life the old-growth forests they cut through and the lowlands they inundate, providing critical habitat for migrating and endangered species. Below ground, productive soils and exceptional groundwater recharge sustain widespread agricultural land use. Extensive forests and wetlands filter and improve water quality for drinking, fishing, and swimming. In the Jones area, these large blocks of greenspace and water resources come together to offer limitless

opportunities for some of Michigan's most beloved forms of recreation.

Protecting these conservation values is critical to the long-term sustainability of the region. Fortunately, there already exists a visible, core foundation of natural area—anchored by Three Rivers and Crane Pond State Game Areas—to this end. Out of view are the countless private landowners and farmers who are stewards of their land, and assume a critical role in successful conservation. The identified conservation corridors recognize existing conserved lands and regional natural and cultural resources to create focal areas for land conservation efforts that will build upon this foundation.

Focusing on Conservation Corridors



Map by Bruce Howe

Crane Pond State Game Area

Crane Pond SGA is located just north of Jones at the intersection of M-40 and M-60. In contrast to Three Rivers SGA, Crane Pond's 4,237 acres of land is largely fragmented. Stretching east to west, the SGA starts around the St. Joseph-Cass county line and continues in pieces east nearly to Vandalia. Management of the SGA focuses mainly on sustaining huntable game populations, in accordance with its funding decree. 75-acre Forked Lake is the most prominent water feature within the SGA, located in the southwestern portion of its extent.



Expansion, Restoration, and Protection In and Around Corridors

Habitat fragmentation is recognized as one of the greatest threats to the integrity of natural areas and conservation values because of its cascading effects on species population, biodiversity, and vital ecological services. Truly understanding its impacts on natural resources requires evaluation from a “big-picture” perspective—fragmentation is a landscape-level phenomenon.

The natural areas in the Jones Conservation Area, while abundant, are at times discontinuous, and connected only by narrow corridors of unprotected forest and streams, or nothing at all. Corridors of protected natural area provide critical habitat for migratory songbirds and the means of mobility for land animals. Corridors also enhance forest and water quality by facilitating the building of resilient ecosystems and by buffering water bodies from other land uses. Focusing land conservation and restoration efforts in and around these corridors in the present creates a framework for successful conservation endeavors in the future.

Building upon Public and Private Open Space Resources

Numerous existing public and private natural areas already protect significant conservation values and provide unique recreational opportunities, and create a foundation for further conservation, including:

- Crane Pond SGA – Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division
- Three Rivers SGA – Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division
- Tamarack Swamp Preserve & Spirit Springs Sanctuary – Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy
- Dr. T.K. Lawless Park & Fred Russ Forest Park – Cass County Parks
- Swiss Valley Ski & Snowboard Area
- Camp Tamarack – Boys Scouts of America, LaSalle Council
- Edward Lowe Foundation

The Jones Area Conservation Plan endeavors to build upon this foundation through the identification of conservation corridors. The corridors provide a framework for focused conservation efforts, such as land protection and habitat restoration, that benefit regional conservation values.



Conservation Strategies for the Jones Area

The following strategies will enable expansion, restoration, and protection of the core natural areas, and conservation corridors linking them, that are critical to water quality, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and agricultural land use. These strategies seek to recognize the diversity of land uses and land users that have an interest in, and can benefit from, high-quality natural areas and resources.

• Land Conservation

Conserve land through acquisition and conservation easements using both private and public funding sources. Focus conservation efforts in and around identified conservation corridors to link existing conserved parcels, such as Crane Pond and Three Rivers State Game Areas.

• Public Engagement / Education

Provide landowners with information and access to governmental organizations and cost-sharing programs that promote conservation of agricultural land and restoration of natural areas. Host public outreach events that inform and educate.

• Habitat Restoration

Promote the creation and/or protection of large blocks of grassland-oak savanna habitat areas similar to Savage Prairie (Crane Pond State Game Area) throughout the region.

• Ecological Health

Promote awareness and implementation of invasive species management on public and adjacent private lands to enhance the quality of forest, grassland, wetland, and riparian habitat in the region.

• Recreational Opportunities

Support active and passive recreational opportunities in the region, such as road and mountain biking, hunting and fishing, downhill and cross-country skiing, and hiking and birding. Promote the shared values of recreation and protection of natural areas.

• Agricultural Conservation

Recognize the importance of agriculture to the region when implementing conservation strategies by protecting groundwater recharge areas and high-quality farmland.

Three Rivers State Game Area

Three Rivers SGA is located about 2 miles south of M-60 along the county line between Cass and St. Joseph counties. The SGA covers 2,103 acres of land that is fairly compact and contiguous. that was originally managed for sustainable huntable populations of game species, though recently more focus has been placed on managing the unique landscapes it contains. Curtis Creek, one of the highest quality designated trout streams in Michigan, flows south through the SGA.

Project Approach

The Jones Area Conservation Plan intends to provide a baseline for understanding the landscape-level issues in the region, and proposes conservation strategies to address those issues. Most importantly it intends to crystallize a locally-informed vision of conservation for the region.

Creation of the Plan brought together a diverse alliance of local and state governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and non-profits which formed the Jones Area Conservation Planning Committee. The Committee met several times over the course of 2014-2015, including with the public, to examine conservation values within the project area. The Committee then organized these values into five categories significant to the Jones area: water quality, wildlife habitat, recreational assets, and surrounding land use. The categories provided the framework for a geographic mapping analysis that translated those values into conservation corridors, upon which conservation efforts can be focused.



Kathy Fenton-Miller

SWMLC is continuing to work with project partners to implement the solutions outlined in this document. The Jones Area Conservation Plan acknowledges and prioritizes regional conservation values to create pathways toward success. Furthermore, leveraging the involvement of all relevant stakeholders allows the Plan to remain flexible, and therefore viable, for years to come.

To fulfill the vision presented here, SWMLC is actively seeking landowners within the Jones project area who are interested in conserving or restoring their land.

Please reach out to us at (269) 324-1600, or conserveland@swmlc.org.

Project Partners

- Michigan Department of National Resources, Wildlife Division
- Michigan Department of National Resources, Fisheries Division
- Friends of the St. Joseph River Watershed
- Ducks Unlimited
- St. Joseph County Drain Commissioner
- Cass County Parks & Recreation
- Cass County Conservation District
- USDA Farm Services Agency
- Edward Lowe Foundation
- Swiss Valley Ski Area & Heart Smart Events
- Michigan Nature Association



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