

River Rally 2017

FINAL REPORT



Summary

River Rally 2017 attracted 441 water advocates and enthusiasts from 44 U.S. states and Canada to learn, celebrate, and gain inspiration toward a future of clean and ample water for people and nature. Participants gathered at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel in Grand Rapids, Michigan from May 8-11 to share practical solutions for keeping our rivers wet, clean, and healthy, as well as approaches for strengthening coalitions and organizations for greater impact. The event was framed by the challenges surrounding the politics of water

across the country. **Thank you for your part in making River Rally 2017 a great success!**



River Rally 2017 participants in Grand Rapids, Michigan. All photos are ©John Wathen unless otherwise noted.

River Rally participants included staff and board members of local, regional, and national NGOs, representatives of tribal nations, municipal, state and federal employees, engaged corporate leaders, lawyers and engineers, academic experts, community representatives, and college students. Thanks to more than \$120,000 in scholarship funding, 199 participants received financial support to attend who might not otherwise have been able to benefit from this experience.

Highlights of River Rally 2017

WELCOMING RECEPTION

A Monday evening networking reception was held onsite to officially kick-off River Rally and welcome everyone to Grand Rapids. Attendees heard from River Network President, Nicole Silk, Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss and Levi Rickert, Editor of *Native News Online*. A rousing game of Rally Bingo helped get everyone networking and meeting new friends.



River Rally 2017 participants play Rally BINGO at the welcoming reception.

WORKSHOPS

River Rally 2017 included more than 60 workshops and plenary presentations with content drawn from a six-month recruitment and workshop submission process involving community members, content experts, and recommendations. All workshop submissions were reviewed by staff before inclusion in our final program. Six themes helped river advocates and enthusiasts navigate the content:

- Growing Organizational Momentum and Impact
- Reducing Pollution and Safeguarding Clean Water
- Connecting Communities to Rivers and Recreation
- Protecting and Restoring Flows
- Restoring Urban Rivers and Achieving Resiliency
- Tackling the Drinking Water Crisis and Water Affordability



River Rally 2017 workshop sessions.

PLENARIES AND KEYNOTES

How Did We Get Here? The Rise of the American Conservation Movement and Water: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection

The opening plenary keynote on Tuesday morning focused on illuminating the ways in which the conservation movement in the U.S., including efforts to protect and restore our rivers, is deeply defined by race, class, and gender. **Dr. Dorceta Taylor**, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan, offered a vivid and engaging explanation of the competing motivations, conflicts, problematic practices, and achievements that bring us to where we stand today.

Affordability, Equity, and Drinking Water

During the last few years, we have learned—and re-learned—that the gifts of healthy rivers and the costs of water-related harm are not experienced equally. The Tuesday lunch plenary panel—**Simone Lightfoot**, Director of National Urban Initiatives at the National Wildlife Federation; **Monica Lewis-Patrick**, President & CEO for We the People of Detroit; **Michael Harris**, Flint Development Group; and **Angie Rosser**, Executive Director of West Virginia River Alliance—addressed the realities often facing low-income communities and neighborhoods of color. Many of these places disproportionately experience water-related harm, including the lack of affordable clean water to drink. The issues here are complex, often the result of a mix of challenges like failing infrastructure, contaminated rivers, and insufficient oversight.

"River Rally renews my motivation for river advocacy every year. Just when I begin to feel overwhelmed or defeated, the River Rally community gets me fired up again! Being able to gather with other river advocates who are struggling with the same challenges is a great opportunity to brainstorm new approaches. Looking forward to Tahoe! Rally Ho!" - Chelsea Blount, New River Conservancy

Rethinking Our Relationship to Urban Rivers

This plenary explored the story of the restoration of the Grand River, one of 19 Urban Waters Federal Partnership locations across the country. Panelists, including **Mark Van Putten**, President and CEO of the Wege Foundation; **Chris Muller**, Co-founder and President of Grand Rapids Whitewater; **John Green**, President of Founders Brewing; Grand Rapids Mayor **Rosalynn Bliss**; **Joe Jones**, President and CEO of Grand Rapids Urban League; and **Wendy Ogilvie**, Director of Environmental Programs at Grand Valley Metro Council provided a variety of perspectives with an emphasis on igniting community-wide excitement and other lessons transferable to cities across the U.S.



Panel speakers for “Rethinking Our Relationship to Urban Waters” (left) and Moderator Gary Collins introduces “Lessons from Standing Rock and Beyond” (right).

Lessons From Standing Rock & Beyond

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) sparked a remarkable and unprecedented uprising in defense of tribal sovereignty, sacred lands, and the waters of our country. Outrage unified the tribal community as well as veterans, activists, entertainers, water protectors, and the general public from across the country and beyond. In our closing plenary panel, we heard from **Lee Sprague**, Little River Band of Ottawa Indians; **John Wathen**, Hurricane Creekkeeper; **Roger Pulwarty**, Senior Science Advisor for Climate Research at the NOAA Climate Program; and **Levi Rickert**, Editor of *Native News Online* about the complex issues that have been raised by tribal communities in response to the resistance to DAPL. The session was moderated by River Network’s Board Member and Northern Arapaho Tribal Member **Gary Collins**.

“I commend River Network for creating a space to engage in difficult discussions about equality, race, inclusion, and environmental justice. These are not easy conversations but so important to be able to engage with other professionals in a way I believe was very engaging. The conversations were raw, emotional, and inspiring. I hope we continue these conversations every year.” - Scott Kaiser, Geospatial Planning Advisors

TEEN RIVER RALLY – 2017 marked the launch of Teen River Rally, a new program designed to expose local public high school students to career pathways in conservation. We welcomed 30 students and 5 teachers from C.A. Frost Environmental Science Academy and TRIO to River Rally for a day of service learning programs, workshops, and field trips. Several students presented their own work in a collaborative workshop, and all students participated in an interactive game interviewing conference exhibitors and other River Rally attendees about how they landed in their environmental careers. Afterwards, students ate lunch with Rally attendees and some visited Calvin College for a tour of campus with college students.



Teen River Rally students presenting in a workshop (left) and meeting exhibitors (right).

Celebration and Inspiration at the Annual River Heroes Banquet

River Rally 2017 culminated with the traditional River Heroes Banquet and celebration on Thursday evening. In 2001, River Network created The River Heroes Award to celebrate rivers and those who protect them. River Heroes are peer nominated and selected. The James "Jim" Compton Award is bestowed by the River Network Board of Directors to recognize an individual's long-term or lifetime achievements in support of healthy rivers. This year's ceremony was followed by live music from the Emmy-winning bluegrass band Trout Steak Revival.

2017 River Heroes and James R. Compton River Achievement Award Recipients:

Angie Rosser, Executive Director, West Virginia Rivers Coalition – Serving also as West Virginia Headwaters Waterkeeper, Angie's work is instrumental in the protection of the six rivers within the Monongahela National Forest which provide drinking water for millions of Americans. With Angie at the helm, WV Rivers broadened its reach and impact at both the state and federal levels, within challenging political climates. As the WV state affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation, Angie serves as Co-Chair of the NWF Water Caucus. She is also the current Co-Chair of the Choose Clean Water Coalition, which works to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

David Sligh, Conservation Director for Wild Virginia – David has worked with perseverance and enthusiasm for more than 35 years to protect streams and water quality and to make government regulators responsive to the public. He is a strong advocate and is always ready to give citizens advice and encouragement in fighting battles for clean water. He is devoted to pushing for ever stronger and more creative use of the Clean Water Act. David has worked as a government regulator and for non-profits on every level: as a volunteer leading local grassroots citizen groups, executive director of a watershed group, a Riverkeeper, and a representative of national and

state advocacy groups. David also has a consulting business, through which he has worked for numerous non-profits as a lawyer, a technical analyst, and an expert witness, and has contributed hundreds of hours of his time each year for the last 6 years. He has worked on water quality issues in 10 states and the District of Columbia.

David Deen, River Steward for the Connecticut River Watershed Council

– David has been responsible for public education and advocacy on issues in the Vermont/New Hampshire reach of the Connecticut River since 1998. The job has

included regulatory affairs, river cleanup, hydro dam relicensing, and presentations to citizen groups about the river. David has served in the Vermont Legislature for 29 years as chair of the Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Committee among other assignments including ranking member of the House Rules Committee. He serves on the board of the Connecticut River Chapter of Trout Unlimited and as a member of the Vermont Community Foundation.



From left to right: Gary Collins (accepting for Dave Archambault), Denny Caneff, Margaret Frisbee, Angie Rosser, David Sligh, and David Deen.

Denny Caneff, Former Executive Director of River Alliance of Wisconsin – Denny served as executive director of the River Alliance of Wisconsin from 2003 until 2016. Matt Krueger, River Alliance of Wisconsin’s River Restoration Director describes the many roles played by Denny during his tenure there as a “motivational speaker, skeptic-in-chief, vigilant watchdog, guerilla paddler, citizen organizer, bridge-builder, pragmatist, rabble rouser, and river steward.” As executive director of the Superior Hiking Trail Association in northern Minnesota, Denny figures his biggest challenge will still relate to water: maintaining scores of bridges over Lake Superior basin rivers.

Margaret Frisbee, Executive Director, Friends of the Chicago River – Appointed to her position in 2005, Margaret has been working to improve water quality for the Chicago River system; develop guidance for responsible river corridor development; create habitat for wildlife; connect people to the river; and establish relationships with the civic, corporate, and government leaders throughout the Chicago River watershed needed to advance these goals. Passionate about protecting and restoring the health and vitality of urban communities both for people and wildlife, at present Margaret serves as secretary for the board of Friends of the Forest Preserves and on the Great Rivers Chicago Leadership and Implementation Committee. In 2010, the Harvard Business School Club of Chicago named her as a Roman Nomitch Fellow.

Dave Archambault II, Chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Compton Achievement Award Winner)

Chairman Archambault has emerged as a global leader for Indigenous Peoples’ rights as he has led the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and continues to be a voice for tribal sovereignty in championing protection of tribal treaty lands and natural resources. Archambault has testified before the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, led the Washington, DC “Native Nations Rise” march, and published two editorials in The New York Times. He was recently named a “Leader Global Thinker of 2016” by Foreign Policy Magazine and given the Native American Leadership Award by the National Congress of American Indians.

Other Conference Activities

FIELD TRIPS – Ten field trip options provided participants with more opportunities for informal networking, exploration of the region, and “off-site” education. Participants chose from multiple paddling trips on local waterways, native plant restoration and green infrastructure tours, beach cleanup at Lake Michigan, fly-fishing, and brewery tours that showcased how local breweries are implementing innovative techniques to enhance their sustainability efforts.



Paddling field trip. Photo: Victoria Yu

PROTECT CLEAN WATER ACTION –

While we are still compiling final numbers from the “Protect Clean Water” calls to action at River Rally 2017, we know that at least 25 groups in 19 states mailed letters and 230 individuals mailed postcards to the EPA, urging the agency to protect clean water regulations. Several groups told us that they did their own action alerts, including Gulf Restoration Network's alert that generated 1,300+ emails! Additionally, we conducted 13 video interviews with river advocates from around the country telling their story of the value of clean water and the potential impacts if clean water protections are lost. These are being used by the national Clean Water for All communications team in their efforts to fight rollbacks.

INSPIRATION THROUGH FILM – Wednesday evening attendees were treated to a screening of the Wild & Scenic Film Festival, a series of environmental and adventure films featuring the work of communities around the world to protect our rivers.

FUN RUN AND YOGA – Early risers gathered for a pre-dawn 5k through downtown Grand Rapids on Tuesday, May 9, and early morning yoga classes in the Amway Grand Plaza on Wednesday, May 10 and Thursday, May 11.

OPEN MIC & TALENT SHOW – On the evening of Tuesday, May 9, attendees shared their many talents – including songs, dances, and stories – with their peers.

"This was my first River Rally and it exceeded all of my expectations! All of the sessions I attended were informative, and everyone was genuine, warm, welcoming and passionate about their work. River Rally is a great opportunity to see what all these awesome folks are up to and stay in touch with important, current and upcoming changes in our industry. LOVED IT!" - Tara Neff, Lower DuPage River Watershed Coalition

River Rally 2017 Results

To evaluate the effectiveness of the event, River Network collects information from attendees each year and uses what we learn to improve delivery the following year. Survey results (n=165) indicated that:

- **96%** of participants took home new knowledge and/or inspiration to help them in their work to protect and restore healthy rivers
- **95%** made new connections, people they expect to become part of their peer network moving forward
- **93%** rated the relevance of conference content as good or excellent
- **95%** ranked speakers as good or excellent



Networking at River Rally

New subject matter will be included in next year's program based on feedback from 2017 participants. Participants expressed a continued interest in sessions about diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as interests in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, recreation, civic engagement, the effects of climate change, and leadership in rural communities for consideration in the 2018 program. We will continue to bring a high energy and fun event, rich in content, and brimming with opportunities to connect to others.

"This was by far the best conference I've ever attended. The quality of the speakers, and the topics presented, were very useful and were above and beyond what I expected. My first time attending River Rally was a great experience, and I left with new friendships, a plethora of ideas, and hope that there are good people working hard to protect our water sources." - Aleta Daniels, Jackson County Conservation District

Thank You to Our Incredible Sponsors, Scholarship Funders, and Volunteers!

River Rally 2017 would not have been possible without the generous financial and in-kind support of the following companies, foundations, nonprofits, government agencies, and individuals.

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Thanks to the 2017 River Rally committee members:

American Rivers, Great Lakes office

Calvin College

City of Grand Rapids

Clinton River Watershed Council

EPA Urban Waters

Erb Family Foundation

Grand Rapids District Office, Water Resources Division

Grand Rapids White Water

Grand Valley Metro Council

Healing Our Waters

Huron River Watershed Council

Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District

Plaster Creek Stewards

Thornapple River Watershed Council

Trout Unlimited

Western Michigan Environmental Action Council

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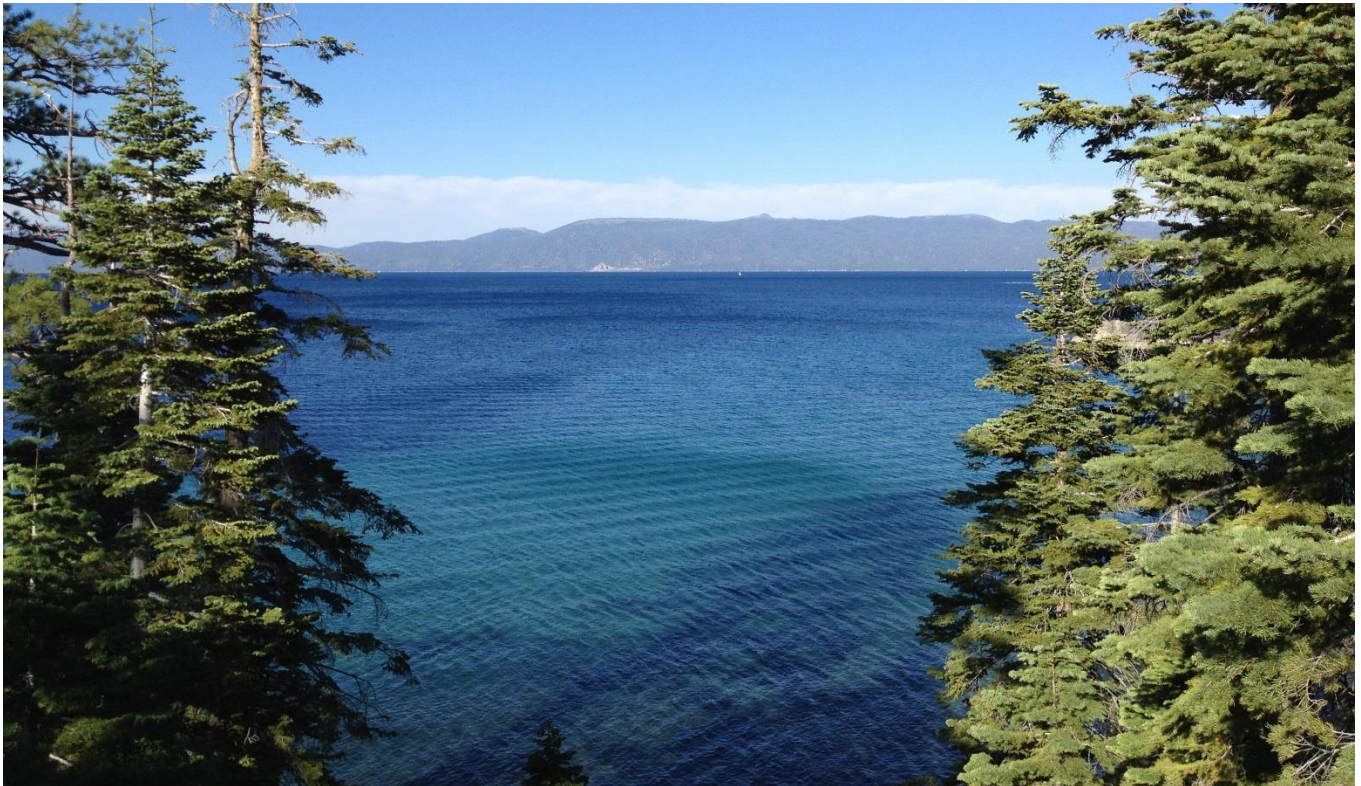
Mary Nagy

Thanks also to River Network's dedicated, hardworking staff and board members.

River Rally 2018

April 29- May 2, 2018 in Lake Tahoe, California

River Network's staff and board are already laying the groundwork for River Rally 2018 in Lake Tahoe, CA where we will explore best practices, new ideas, innovations and collaborations from and for our community. In addition to maintaining our focus on themes directly related to clean water, ample water, and strong champions, we anticipate concentration around the themes of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, civic engagement, and recreation. We welcome your feedback and suggestions as we further develop the themes for next year's River Rally programming.



Workshop proposals for River Rally 2018 in Lake Tahoe will be invited beginning in July 2017.

**Sponsorship and exhibitor opportunities are available.
Please contact riverrally@rivernetwork for information.**