

Meeting Summary for Community Conversation #3
Wednesday, August 5th, 2026 - 6:00-7:30pm – Hessel School House

On Wednesday, August 6th, 2026, The Nature Conservancy held its third of four planned “Community Conversations” in 2026. The third Community Conversation was held at the Hessel School House – Avery Arts & Nature Learning Center from 6:00-7:30pm. Seven people, not including Conservancy-related individuals, attended the meeting.

Emily Clegg, Director of Land and Water Management for The Nature Conservancy in Michigan, started off the meeting by conducting a round of introductions and asking the participants for their reason for attending. She noted that everyone was there for the same reason: all loved & cared for the Bush Bay Trail (also known as “Narnia”), all were concerned with the changes over the last few years, and all wanted to work together to seek the best path forward in a complex situation. Emily then reviewed the timeline of The Nature Conservancy (TNC)’s involvement with the properties crossed by the Trail as well as the timeline of actions taken to address the issue since the trail went viral on social media in 2023. This information is explained on the launched Bush Bay Trail & Wetland Restoration Project webpage at www.nature.org/bushbaytrail.

Emily then gave progress updates on the projects introduced at the first and second Community Conversations (May 6 & June 30, 2026). She informed attendees of anticipated projects and timelines for the remainder of the summer and into the fall. Highlights of the project updates since late June included:

- 1) Parking lot improvements to date included the addition of a sign at each portable toilet that asks visitors to take all non-bathroom-related trash out with them. TNC reported that on Monday, August 4th, no trash was seen in the portable toilets, and no toilet paper was found within ¼ mile of the trailhead. The sign and the addition of portable toilets seem to have solved two significant issues of biohazard litter and general litter left in the parking lot!
- 2) The kiosk sign and parking lot delineations seem to be easing the issue of a chaotic parking lot and lack of pre-trip information for hikers. The parking gravel and delineation guides visitors to park in orderly rows without blocking travel. TNC, Carmeuse, and MDOT will be having further conversations about additional updates to the area in the near future.
- 3) TNC staff and volunteers have continued working to delineate the trail with log-lining, brush piling, and additional wayfinding signage. They also put out sizeable “trail prompts” prior to the July 4th weekend. Participants at the Community Conversation agreed with TNC that, while more are needed, the prompts that are there seem to be working well. Regrowth of plant life is apparent in several areas.

TNC will also install temporary maps at trail intersections later this summer. Replacement or additional signage and/or barriers will continue to be installed as necessary throughout the summer.

- 4) For the wetland boardwalks, engineer drawings of proposed wetland boardwalks have been acquired, and TNC staff have submitted permit requests to EGLE. A Request For Proposals (RFP) will be released soon, as TNC seeks to find a company to install priority boardwalks as soon as possible. If all goes smoothly with permitting and the RFP process, boardwalk install could start this fall, however, this process may be delayed. TNC hopes to have at least some of the boardwalks completed before winter and emphasized that getting boardwalks in as soon as possible is a top priority.

After the project introduction and progress update, Emily then introduced the focal point of the evening: How the proposed projects support both ecological and social restoration for the Bush Bay Trail. Emily and Andrea Daar, a consultant with Grayjay Strategies, LLC, who has been contracted by TNC to support this project, gave a joint presentation, with Emily focusing on the ecological values of the trail, and Daar focusing on the social values of the trail. Each discussed in detail why the proposed projects were tools for restoration from these two standpoints.

Highlights from the presentation included:

- Wetland boardwalks are tools for restoration because they concentrate use onto a structure that is built to withstand that use. Walking through wet areas damages plants, compacts soil, changes water and nutrient flow, and is a potential vector for the spread of non-native invasive species (NNIS). Elevating the trail tread above the soil and water allows the soil to rebound, plants can regrow around and under the boardwalk, and it becomes easier to respond to NNIS occurrences.
- Prompting signs and clarified trails are tools for restoration because they concentrate use into a narrowed corridor, reducing the overall acres of impact.
 - o Based on the 2025 and 2026 assessments, there are three main reasons for visitors going off trail: unclear trail tread/signage, accessing scenic views, and avoiding trail obstacles. Prompting signs are installed to clarify the trail, allow access to specific views while asking visitors to return to the main trail, and providing preferred routes around obstacles.
 - o Based on current trail conditions and maps produced from AllTrails, an app used about 1% of visitors, the current corridor of use is between 30-300 feet wide along the total 3.5 miles of trails – this is an impact area of about 65 acres.

- If the signage and trail delineation project is successful, it should reduce the corridor to an average of 8-25 feet; this will be an impact area of 4-10 acres.
- Parking lot amenities such as the portable toilets, kiosk, and delineation are tools for restoration because they concentrate specific uses in an appropriate area, provide needed information, and guide people to behave appropriately.
- The Bush Bay Trail, the “Cove,” and “Narnia” have been woven into the narrative and cultural fabric of the Les Cheneaux Island communities as far back as we have been able to find documentation, and likely well before documentation. This place-based, the memories and stories and ability to take people there and be proud of it, also deserves restoration as part of the ecological restoration.
 - Keeping the trail open to all, without restriction, allows both those whose memories are older and those whose memories are newer to continue connecting with this special place. It ensures equity of access and ethical alignment with the values shared between TNC and the community.
 - Research tells us that closing the trail will create much bigger problems, as some people will still go...but, those people will be there intentionally breaking rules, and the social pressure for appropriate behavior, consequence, etc. Will be gone. They will do more damage.
 - Research also tells us that if we can help visitors connect to a natural place in a way that encourages reciprocity (mutual respect between & benefit for person, place, and community), they are more likely to transfer that lesson to the next time they visit as well as to other places. The trick is to “get through to them.” TNC and the local community have an opportunity here.

Daar then invited the participants to gather around one table for an open discussion of the prompt, *“Can recreation and restoration be complementary at the Bush Bay Trail?”* She took notes and facilitated the discussion. The participants discussed the importance of a trail that is wide enough for people to pass one another, clear enough while maintaining the natural character, and with enough signage to help visitors of all abilities feel confident in knowing where they are. They discussed how different trails in the area show off the unique aspects of the area, in different ways, and that perhaps some visitors should be directed to visit other trails that may better meet their needs and goals. They discussed the importance of hikers (locals in particular) to take personal responsibility for their behavior and to set examples for others. They also discussed the importance of recreation, restoration, and education for long-term success of behavior change. The discussion then naturally flowed into education: what education is available, and what could – or should – be available. Of particular interest for the discussion was the attendees stated need for educational signage at the Trail, and a need for community members to talk about the

reasoning behind the need for certain behaviors with one another, their clients/customers, and their friends and families.

At around 7:20, Daar asked if there were any lingering questions, and after answering them, Emily thanked the audience for coming, reminded them of future events, and provided contact information for follow up. Information and interactive feedback opportunities were on posters and easels throughout the room for attendees to provide feedback anonymously. Most attendees remained after the Q&A until well after the planned meeting end of 7:30 to keep the conversation going between one another and TNC staff while helping clean up (thank you!!!).