

Meeting Summary for Community Conversation #2
Tuesday, June 30, 2026 - 6:00-7:30pm – Clark Township Community Center

On Tuesday, June 30th, The Nature Conservancy held its second of four planned “Community Conversations” in 2026. The second Community Conversation was held at the Clark Township Community Center from 6:00-7:30pm. 25 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 reminding the group that all in attendance were there for the same reason: all loved & cared for the Bush Bay Trail (also known as “Narnia”), all were concerned with the impacts caused by increased use, 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 recently launched Bush Bay Trail & Wetland Restoration Project webpage at www.nature.org/bushbaytrail.

Emily also gave updates on projects introduced at the First Community Conversation (May 6, 2026) and informed attendees of anticipated projects and timelines for the remainder of the summer and fall. Highlights of the project updates included:

- 1) TNC staff attended and presented several sessions at Aldo Leopold Festival, including a lunchtime panel discussion titled “Recreation and the Economy.” TNC staff were joined by staff from Little Traverse Land Conservancy, board members from Drummond Island Silent Sports, and Sue Bakkila, owner of Woods & Waters Kayak guiding company.
- 2) Parking lot improvements to date included gravel, which had been spread in the days prior to the first Community Conversation, railroad ties to control and delineate a smaller parking area were completed by Carmeuse with TNC guidance. And a temporary kiosk with temporary signage in it. While TNC has been informed of people parking in the MDOT ROW, controlling or blocking that section of the parking area will require MDOT planning and approvals.
- 3) TNC staff and volunteers have also worked to delineate the designated trail with log-lining, brush piling, and additional signage. This was done to prevent damage to the natural resources and promote visitor safety by aiding people in navigation on designated trails. On multiple occasions, these trail designation arrows have been removed. TNC staff are planning to put out more sizeable “trail prompts” prior to

the July 4th weekend; they will also install temporary maps at trail intersections later this summer. Replacement or additional signage and/or barriers will be installed as necessary throughout the summer.

- 4) The wetland delineation and threatened and endangered species surveys have been completed, and engineer drawings of proposed wetland boardwalks are due shortly. Once those have been acquired, TNC staff will submit permit requests and release a Request-For-Proposals to find a company to install priority boardwalks as soon as possible. If all goes smoothly, boardwalk install could start as early as August, but it may be delayed. TNC hopes to have at least some of the boardwalks completed before winter.
- 5) Visitors should be aware that throughout the trail are pink flags, blue and pink spray paint markings, and other indicators of the projects that are being rolled out this summer. Visitors are asked to refrain from removing, moving, or otherwise disturbing any markings along the trail or elsewhere in the properties.

After the project introduction and update, Emily then introduced Alexandria Graham, TNC Michigan's Marketing Specialist, who has been assigned to support this project with digital media analysis and digital media strategy and outreach. Alexandria took about 20 minutes to provide an overview report of the digital media analysis she had completed over the last few months, which showed both challenges and opportunities for addressing the issue at hand. Three highlights of the report include:

- 1) The Google Search analysis showed that, year over year, most people finding information about the Bush Bay Trail are looking for things to do in the Les Cheneaux Area in general, and encountering Bush Bay Trail information secondarily. This could be used to the community's advantage as it shows that there is significant interest in outdoor recreation visitation to the area; with the right preparation and messaging strategy, this audience can likely be engaged in ways that are more economically and socially acceptable.
- 2) When analyzing the "viral" social media trend, visitation trends to the trail mirrored social media trends and that there is a slight downward trend in both mentions and visitation in both 2025 and 2026 (As of June 29). We also see that discussion and responses to "Narnia Trail" posts evolved over time, from positive and welcoming responses to those expressing dismay over the increased use – very few responses describe what to do instead or why recreating respectfully is important. It also showed that there is no single individual or page responsible for the increased attention to the trail. Together, this gives TNC a picture of where to start solving the issues: TNC now has a manageable list of "influencers" to reach

out to; it will ask them to encourage *respectful recreation* and to educate their audiences about the fragile nature of the ecosystem there; and it will respond to public posts (and encourage people to respond to public posts) with education and requests for respectful interaction with the trail.

3) With increasing frequency people are relying on AI summaries, created by search engines from popular pages, when they seek information online. As of June 29, these summaries do not include the type of information about respectful recreation, ecosystem protection, etc. which TNC wants to see – therefore, TNC must enter the online media conversation with that information & engage other pages in posting the same message in order to get that message to be part of these search engine summaries.

To summarize Alexandria's concluding points, without TNC's active input to multiple information channels, incorrect, incomplete, or inadequate information will accelerate and gain momentum; and accurate, educational information will become harder to find. TNC plans to get involved in the conversation, starting with its "owned channels" (i.e., TNC project webpage), then reaching out to partner channels (i.e., local media or CVBs), and then individual social media accounts - otherwise the pattern of information will continue as it has.

Alexandria then introduced Andrea Daar, a consultant with Grayjay Strategies, LLC, who has been contracted by TNC to support this project. Daar stated that the next step was to get community input about what words, phrases, information, and emphasis TNC should be using as it joins the conversation. She introduced a group-based activity where participants were asked to work with their tables to design mock social media posts. Daar explained that the results of this activity would be compiled to give TNC staff a place to start as they work on developing a messaging strategy for outreach as they work towards "influencing the influencers." She emphasized that TNC wants locals' input on and support for these messages. After this exercise, the participants shared their "posts" and discussed briefly before moving into 20 minutes of moderated questions and answers.

At around 7:10, TNC staff thanked the audience for coming, reminded them of future events, and invited them to stay around to keep the conversations going as they were able. Interactive questions and feedback opportunities, as well as drafts of signage planned for the trail, were on posters and easels throughout the room for attendees to provide feedback anonymously. Many attendees remained after the Q&A until after the planned meeting end of 7:30 to keep the conversation going between one another and TNC staff.

Andrea Daar of Grayjay Strategies also hosted a booth at the July 5th Farmers and Artisans Market at the Hessel School House on behalf of The Nature Conservancy of Michigan. Multiple attendees from the Tuesday night Community Conversation visited the booth to ask further questions. Several people stopped by the booth who stated that they were unable to attend the Community Conversation and so had intentionally come to the Market to talk about the situation at the TNC booth. About 50 visitors stopped by the booth in total.