

ABCA Program Report

To: Board of Directors
Date: February 19, 2026
From: Nathan Schoelier
Subject: Draft Ausable River Cut Conservation Area Master Plan Update
Report Type: ACTION REQUIRED

Recommendation:

THAT the Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Board of Directors approves the draft Master Plan update for Ausable River Cut Conservation Area to be made available for public and stakeholder feedback.

Background:

The budget included funds for updating the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area (ARCA) Master Plan. The ARCA Master Plan was last updated in 2004; significant improvements have been completed since that time. Appended to this report is the first draft of the Master Plan update for ARCA. One of the primary goals that staff had for the update was to reintroduce institutional knowledge to the master plan. Reintroducing this information allows decisions to be made that consider historic information, alongside new tools and resources.

The update is being completed according to the process approved at the March 20, 2025, Board of Directors meeting. The next step is to make the plan available for public and stakeholder feedback. Staff have identified the following stakeholders:

- County of Lambton
- Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation
- Lakeshore Eco-Network
- Lambton Shores Nature Trails
- Lambton Shores Phragmites Community Group
- Municipality of Lambton Shores
- Residents, groups and organizations in the surrounding area
- Rotary Club of Grand Bend

Staff will utilize various engagement methods and tools to complete meaningful engagement within the organization's capacity and resources. Upon completing engagement, any necessary changes will be reflected in the final draft of the plan, and it will return to the Board of Directors for approval.

Preface

The Ausable River Cut Conservation Area (ARCA) Master Plan is the guiding document for the management of this conservation area which is owned and managed by the Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA). The recommendations in this master plan are intended to help direct property management that considers the needs of the environment, and the needs of the community.

This master plan was developed using the goals, objectives, and considerations described in ABCA's Conservation Lands Strategy (CLS), approved November 21, 2024. This master plan includes the collective input _____ (contributing partners to be listed in the final draft) _____.

This master plan was approved by ABCA's Board of Directors on _____ (approval date to be include in the final approved plan) _____.

Acknowledgements

Placeholder: This section will be incorporated into the final draft of this Master Plan.

Land Acknowledgement

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority acknowledges the original stewards of this land, the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. We recognize the Huron Tract Treaty signed in 1827. We recognize this territory was subject to the Dish with One Spoon wampum, under which multiple nations agreed to care for the land and resources, including plants and animals, in peace. As shared stewards of this land and water, ABCA is grateful to work in this territory.

Executive Summary

The Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) has updated the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area (ARCA) Master Plan, building on the 2004 Master Plan. This update reflects current usage and management challenges, offering a progressive framework that balances conservation goals with sustainable operations. The plan was guided by the Conservation Lands Strategy (2024).

Located at 9984 Northville Crescent, near Port Franks, Municipality of Lambton Shores, ARCA is a 28-hectare (69-acre) conservation area formed through land acquisitions in 1949 and 1957. The initial land acquisitions at ARCA were associated with the Ausable River Conservation Authority's extension of the Canada Company Cut, in attempt to mitigate localized flooding by providing a new outlet for the Ausable River. The property was expanded in 1957, establishing a day-use conservation area.

The Ausable River borders the property to the north, Highway 21 borders the property to the east, and private residential properties border the south, and west boundaries of the property.

It is an ecologically significant site within the biodiverse Carolinian zone. The Carolinian zone supports a high level of biodiversity, including species at risk (SAR) and species that are not found

anywhere else in Canada. The property contains dune forests, present on rolling to steep sand dunes that are most prominent in the western half of the property.

ARCA is primarily used for passive, nature-based recreation such as hiking, birdwatching, and accessing the Ausable River for fishing, canoeing, and kayaking. Although data describing the number of visitors is not available at the time of this update, staff and community partners have observed that the property is frequently used by both residents and tourists.

A strong partnership with Lambton Shores Nature Trails (LSNT) has been fundamental to enhancing the ecological, and recreation aspects of this property. LSNT is a local volunteer group who is dedicated to protecting natural areas, and providing opportunities for the community to experience, and learn about the environment.

The 2004 Master Plan includes several properties; however, due to significant differences in management approaches and the geographical separation caused by the Ausable River, this updated plan focuses solely on the area accessed at 9984 Northville Crescent. In 2004, the property was renamed Ausable River Cut Conservation Area (formerly Thedford Conservation Area).

The plan emphasizes strategies that balance public access with ecological integrity, promoting nature appreciation through experience. ABCA works to adapt to the needs of the environment, and the needs of the community, using the best available information at the time; therefore, the master plan will be updated every ten years.

Master Plan Process

Placeholder: This Master Plan is being updated according to the process approved by the ABCA Board of Directors at its March 20, 2025, meeting. In the final draft of this Master Plan, this section will describe how that process was applied to this specific plan update.

What We Heard – Engagement Summary

Placeholder: This section will be incorporated into the final draft of this Master Plan.

Conservation Lands Strategy

The development of this master plan was directed by the goals, objectives, and management considerations detailed in the CLS (2024) and reinforced by the Watershed-Based Resource Management Strategy (2024). While all CLS goals are connected to ARCA to some degree, the ecological sensitivity and its recreational use highlight the relevance of these particular goals. Although the site currently supports conservation education and community outreach initiatives, this master plan proposes enhancements that further position the property as a setting to “learn from nature, in nature,” in alignment with the CLS goal of fostering environmental appreciation within the watershed community through conservation education.

Management Goal

The Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority and its partners are dedicated to protecting the ecological integrity of Ausable River Cut Conservation Area while offering compatible recreational and education opportunities that promote nature appreciation.

Background

Land Acquisition and Disposition

In 1947, the Ausable River Conservation Authority accepted an engineer's report that proposed a plan for 'improvement of the river mouth in the Port Franks area,' and identified the project as 'Scheme No. 1' of the Ausable River Conservation Authority. The project involved extending the Canada Company Cut to provide a new outlet for the Ausable River in attempt to mitigate localized flooding. In 1949, the conservation authority acquired a strip of land from Highway 21 to Lake Huron; this strip encompassed a portion of the lands that now comprise Ausable River Cut Conservation Area.

In 1957, additional lands were acquired, enlarging the ARCA. This acquisition supported the development of the area as a day-use conservation area.

No property disposition has occurred at ARCA.

Connections with Other Publicly Accessible Lands

The Port Franks area is a unique region of the watershed, with several environmentally focused organizations that own and manage land with aligning and complementary goals. Partnerships with local community groups – such as the Lambton Shores Phragmites Community Group and LSNT – have been fundamental in enhancing communication and collaboration amongst organizations and groups in the area. This improved collaboration has promoted public access to nature, resources and knowledge sharing, and a regional approach to environmental stewardship and managing challenges (e.g., invasive phragmites).

ARCA is part of a trail network, which connects the County of Lambton's Heritage Forest, Lambton Wildlife's Karner Blue Sanctuary and ARCA, for the public to enjoy a series of hiking trails. Although not directly connected, the property is situated near several other properties that provide public access to nature, including ABCA's L-Lake Management Area, Pinery Provincial Park and property owned by Nature Conservancy of Canada.

The property provides canoe and kayak access to the Ausable River, offering a rare opportunity for recreational use, as access to the river is otherwise limited along its entire length.

Although public access may be limited or unavailable, ARCA is also situated near several properties that have aligning conservation goals, including ABCA's Sherwood Fox Plant Preserve, Scouts Canada's Camp Attawandaron, and properties owned by Nature Conservancy of Canada.

It is important to note that the access and permitted activities at the properties listed in this section may change. Individuals planning to visit any of these properties should consult official resources related to the specific property for the most up-to-date information.

Land Use History

While ARCA is in an area with a rich cultural heritage, spanning much longer than described in this master plan, this section focuses on the period documented by ABCA through aerial imagery and past master plans, beginning in 1947.

The areas surrounding the property have undergone significant landscape-level changes over the past eighty years. In 1947, there was little to no surrounding development, and the highway followed a different route. The 1947 aerial image (Figure 1) depicts a natural landscape dominated by forest canopy that was, on average, sparser than what is observed today. The 1947 aerial image indicates that the property experienced minimal development or disturbance, aside from a small area that may have been mowed. At that time, the unvegetated dune stood out as a prominent feature.



Figure 1 1947 aerial image of the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area and surrounding area

While significant landscape-level changes upstream likely influenced the river and water quality, the transition of the immediate landscape from natural habitat to residential areas had a larger

influence on the property. Between 1947 and 1975, the surrounding areas underwent development, including roads, residences, campgrounds, and additional infrastructure to support a growing community. The highway was also constructed in its present location.

The growth of the surrounding community and improvements to transportation infrastructure introduced new pressures, particularly an increase in the number of people likely to visit the property. The 1975 aerial image (Figure 2) depicts development that occurred at the property to help facilitate public use. This development includes multiple entrances, a loop-style road, and a privy washroom. The aerial image shows a network of unauthorized trails throughout the property, creating a relatively large, disturbed footprint. It also appears that a towpath ran along the river, extending beyond the property and through private lands to connect the site with adjacent neighbourhoods.

During this time frame the property supported additional programs and services of the organization:

- The property formerly hosted the original stream gauge station, supporting the larger network of gauges. The gauge was relocated to the Port Franks Marina in the 1980s; however, the structure used to house monitoring equipment is still present.
- The property hosted an additional monitoring hut, and associated powerline to support monitoring efforts. It is unclear when monitoring efforts ceased at this location.



Figure 2 1975 aerial image of the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area and surrounding area

The 1989 aerial image (Figure 3) suggests that the infrastructure remained visible on the property, although it is unclear whether it was still maintained or in use. The network of unauthorized trails – most evident in the dune habitat – is clearly shown in the image.



Figure 3 1989 aerial image of the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area and surrounding area

By 2000 (Figure 4), most of the infrastructure was no longer visible; only the entrance, in its current location, remained. Conservation authorities underwent significant financial and administrative changes in the 1990s, including staffing reductions; it is likely that the property received minimal investment and management between the 1989 and 2000 aerial images. The network of unauthorized trails, and the towpath along the river are evident in the 2000 aerial image.



Figure 4 2000 aerial image of the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area and surrounding area

Scots pine was historically used in reforestation efforts, with a relatively high abundance of Scots pine planted along the Cut, downstream of the current highway. Due to Scots pine that were likely planted at ARCA, as well as mature trees on adjacent properties seeding into the site, a significant population of Scots pine became established on the property, posing a threat to forest health and biodiversity. These trees may be observed in the 1989 and 2000 aerial images, but are most apparent in the 2020 aerial image (Figure 5). Several iterations of Scots pine management have been completed at the property by ABCA staff. Based on both documented management efforts, as well as those recalled through institutional knowledge, management occurred in 2010, 2019 and 2023.

In 2012, ABCA partnered with LSNT, which began assisting with property management and leading site enhancements. This strong partnership resulted in an exponential increase in management efforts at ARCA within a relatively short timeframe. LSNT shares aligned values, working to facilitate passive outdoor recreation while conserving and enhancing natural spaces in the Municipality of Lambton Shores.

Between 2012 and 2019, ABCA and LSNT collaborated to:

- Create an accessible loop trail, which was later extended in 2020
- Install an accessible lookout platform that overlooks the Ausable River
- Install a canoe and kayak launch to provide access to the Ausable River
- Create a trail that connects ARCA to other publicly accessible trails in Port Franks
- Partnered with the County of Lambton's Library Services to establish a Story Board Trail



Figure 5 2020 aerial image of the Ausable River Cut Conservation Area and surrounding area

The 2023 invasive tree management efforts had a broader focus than just Scots pine – which also included managing other non-native tree species, including Austrian pine, European buckthorn and Norway maple – all of which present a threat to the rich biodiversity present at the property. These efforts were successful in managing most of these populations, with noteworthy exceptions:

- A small population of Scots pine were left adjacent to residences located off Northville Crescent. These trees required more technical removal efforts, which the available budget did not support.
- A small population of Austrian pine were left along Highway 21 as the available budget did not support their removal
- Efforts were made to remove all Norway maple trees. However, considering the number of Norway maple trees present in residential areas, adjacent to the property, regular and ongoing management of Norway maple regeneration is expected.

Between 2020 and 2025, ABCA and LSNT collaborated to:

- Rehabilitate the stairs leading to the canoe and kayak launch
- Remove a small unused cinder block building (former location: 17N 429600 4785816)
- Install boot brushes to encourage visitors to clean their boots of mud, and debris with the goal of reducing the spread of invasive species
- Install a Wind Phone to provide visitors a place to grieve in nature
 - The Wind Phone was the first to be installed at a conservation area in Ontario, and it quickly gained recognition across the province. Since its installation, several other conservation authorities have implemented Wind Phones.
- Employ a multi-faceted approach to restore two-acres of eroding dune habitat adjacent to the river. Although vehicle access was historically a concern, the ongoing degradation of the dune was due to a random, intersecting maze of unauthorized pedestrian trails.
 - Invasive species were managed within, and adjacent to the dune habitat
 - Marram grass was sourced from the *Friends of Pinery Park* and planted to establish vegetation within the eroded dune area
 - Installed a boardwalk to direct pedestrian traffic through a centralized, and sustainable location within the dune
- Close a small section of trail at the property, which was causing significant erosion as it traversed a steep dune. LSNT supported the closure by installing suitable barriers and enhancing the trail that travelled perpendicular to the top of the former dune trail.
- Managed a population of periwinkle that likely encroached onto the ARCA from adjacent residential areas, or from unauthorized disposal of landscape waste.
 - The project was completed on a trial-basis, attempting solarization by covering the periwinkle with heavy duty tarps, anchored by woody-material, including Scots pine that had been removed. The goal of the solarization was to use a public space to raise awareness for invasive species, management, and employ a technique that landowners could utilize on their own backyards, with limited resources.

In 2024, the ABCA constructed a new privy-style washroom to replace the former privy-washroom (former location: 17N 429591 4785786).

The partnership between ABCA and LSNT resulted in significant enhancements between 2012 and 2025. The property was improved as a place for passive recreation and community connection, while also making substantial progress toward restoring and enhancing its ecological condition.

Staffing

The property is managed in partnership with LSNT, a volunteer group dedicated to promoting, developing, and maintaining public nature trails in Lambton Shores and the surrounding area. ARCA does not have on-site staff; instead, it is overseen by staff based at ABCA’s Administration Centre.

Permitted Activities

Birdwatching	Fishing	Snowshoeing
Bicycling*	Geocaching	Picnicking
Canoeing and Kayaking	Hiking	
Cross-country skiing	Walking dogs on leash	

*Bicycling permitted on enhanced surface (i.e. stone dust) pathway only

Programs and Services

ARCA is a key part of ABCA’s conservation lands, and passive recreation programs. It supports the organizations broader mandate by contributing to several core programs and services, including:

- Conservation Education Program
 - ARCA provides a space for hands-on, nature-based learning that fosters environmental awareness and appreciation. There are recommendations in this master plan that aim to enhance ARCA as an educational space.
- Flood and Erosion Control Structures
 - Along the river shoreline of ARCA, and surrounding areas, ABCA maintains a series of steel and rock armour structures. The structures protect the shoreline from scouring erosion, particularly during spring ice breakup on the river.

Beyond these defined programs, ARCA plays a vital role in integrated watershed management. Natural areas support essential ecological and hydrological functions, which support the core mandate of conservation authorities: protecting people and property from flooding and other natural hazards.

Infrastructure

ARCA contains infrastructure that supports outdoor recreation activities, this includes a parking area, washroom, trails, accessible lookout platform, and a boardwalk. The infrastructure at ARCA is an asset to its operations, helping balance recreation opportunities with the ecological integrity of the property.

The boardwalk installed by LSNT through the sand dune is an example of how infrastructure can support a responsible balance between public access and ecological protection. Before the

boardwalk was in place, several unauthorized and meandering trails crossed the dune. These unauthorized trails led to trampling of vegetation and accelerated erosion, comprising the integrity of the sensitive dune habitat. The boardwalk provided a clear and navigable route for visitors, significantly reducing the formation of unauthorized trails in the dune. As a result, vegetation began to re-establish in previously disturbed areas, improving the overall health of the dune ecosystem.

Unless specifically addressed in the recommendations of this Master Plan, existing infrastructure is considered an asset to both the conservation area and the organization. Its maintenance, rehabilitation or replacement will be guided by ABCA's Capital Asset Management Plan (2024) and will be integrated into financial forecasts and annual budget preparations to ensure existing infrastructure remains safe and continues to support a high level of visitor satisfaction.

Visitor and Community Use

Visitor Numbers

The ABCA does not have visitor number data for the ARCA. However, anecdotal information suggests that the ARCA is relatively busy and experiencing increased use.

Visitor numbers increased – both from residents and tourists – after the LSNT installed the Wind Phone. The Wind Phone was the first to be installed at a conservation area in Ontario, and it quickly gained recognition across the province. Since its installation, several other conservation authorities have implemented Wind Phones.

Events

The property is used to facilitate group hikes by local community groups and organizations. Overall, the ARCA sees minimal event activity.

Cultural and Heritage Resources

While ARCA is situated in an area with a rich cultural heritage that extends beyond what is described in this plan, this section includes only the information documented in previous plans. ARCA's unique location provides visitors with a first-hand view of the significant landscape alterations made by settlers that have influenced the area both at the property and upstream.

Between 1872 and 1875 a large canal was excavated from the Ausable River northeast of Thedford directly through the sand dunes to Port Franks – the canal was created to drain the former Lake George, Lake Burwell and surrounding wetlands to promote drainage for agricultural production. This extensive project significantly altered the landscape and is known as 'The Cut;' the ARCA is located beside the cut.

ARCA provides an opportunity to partner with the County of Lambton's Cultural Services department to formalize ARCA as a location to view these historical landscape alterations.

Natural Areas

Watershed Context

ARCA is located within the Ausable River watershed, in an area of the watershed referred to as the 'Lower Ausable' sub-watershed. The property is adjacent to the cut, approximately three kilometres upstream of Lake Huron, and approximately one kilometre upstream of the mouth of the Old Ausable Channel (OAC). Given its proximity to the lake, wind direction over the lake may influence water levels at the property. Seasonal flows and weather-related factors, such as ice jams, may also affect water levels.

The upstream land use is dominated by agricultural production, including both row crop production (e.g., corn, beans and wheat) as well as vegetable (e.g., onion, cabbage, turnip) and fruit orchard production.

The nearby community of Port Franks is largely a cottage-community but does include both seasonal and permanent residents.

While the broader watershed is dominated by agricultural land use, ARCA is part of a relatively contiguous forest system that stretches from Kettle Point, to just south of Grand Bend. This an ecologically diverse area of the watershed that contributes to overall watershed, with notable contributions towards forest cover and streamside cover.

Site Characteristics

ARCA is a diverse property which includes several ecosystem types, ranging from restored areas hosting young forest, to oak woodland and dune habitat. The soils, topography and Ausable River contribute to the exceptional diversity on this property.

The young forest, and restored areas exist primarily where past management resulted in disturbances to the property. Some of these disturbances creating openings large enough that reforestation efforts were undertaken. Although some reforestation was completed with undesirable species – Scots and Austrian pine – it created conditions that supported native species regeneration. The recent removal of Scots and Austrian pine will help release desirable native species and promote succession toward a diverse forest habitat suited to the local landscape.

The oak forests exist primarily on the sandy-dune soils of the property, as this forest type is well suited to these conditions.

Dune habitat persists in an area of the property where ongoing disturbance prevented the dune from succeeding to early successional habitat. Recent management efforts have ceased much of the unauthorized disturbance that was not sustainable for long-term management. However, this Master Plan considers sustainable management approaches that offset succession to encourage habitat diversity.

Environmental Designations and Protections

Environmental designations and protections are an important component of conserving the ecological integrity of ARCA. This master plan may not present a comprehensive inventory of environmental designations and protections.

Conservation Authorities Act

Areas of ARCA are subject to *Ontario Regulation 41/24: Prohibited Activities, Exemptions and Permits* under the *Conservation Authorities Act*. Ontario Regulation 41/24 directs development away from natural hazards, supporting the core mandate of conservation authorities of managing watershed resources and protecting life and property.

Municipal Zoning By-Law

The Municipality of Lambton Shores Municipal Zoning By-Law establishes and regulates land use by implementing the general policies from the Municipality of Lambton Shores Official Plan. The zoning regulations applicable to ARCA is Open Space – 1 (OS1).

Woodlands Conservation By-Law

The forested areas of ARCA are subject to regulation under the County of Lambton's Woodlands Conservation By-Law. The Woodlands Conservation By-Law aims to promote good forestry practices, and conserve forest habitat, and forest resources for future generations.

Natural Heritage Augmentation

The ecosystem benefits provided by the natural areas at ARCA extend beyond property boundaries by contributing to overall ecosystem health.

The natural areas at ARCA build upon the forests and other ecosystems that create one of the largest contiguous forest habitats in southern Ontario, west of Toronto. Although some fragmentation is present, it is minimal when compared the larger landscape of south-western Ontario. The ARCA is a component of a forest that spans approximately twenty-five kilometres of Lake Huron's south-east shoreline, from the north end of Pinery Provincial Park to Kettle Point. Through sound management, and collaboration, much of this habitat may remain intact.

The watershed model recognizes the direct link between land management and aquatic health. The natural areas at ARCA, along adjacent natural areas, play a positive role in supporting healthy aquatic ecosystems. This contribution is both in the aquatic ecosystems adjacent to the terrestrial ecosystems, as well as throughout the larger, downstream areas of the Ausable River and Lake Huron.

Species at Risk

Ontario's Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) provides species-at-risk (SAR) data using one-kilometre grids, two of which apply to ARCA. Several SAR have been documented within this area.

It is essential that staff are aware of these species, or their potential presence, and manage the site accordingly. Staff maintain detailed records and monitor for new occurrences. Responsible management not only supports terrestrial species but also protects and enhances conditions for nearby and downstream aquatic species.

To help safeguard SAR from potential threats, detailed information is not published in this plan.

Summary of Prior Management Plan Implementation

Status	Action Item
Manage aquatic and terrestrial resources to provide habitat for species, including Species at Risk.	Implemented/ Ongoing.
Update the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems inventory and assessment.	Implemented/ Ongoing. Aquatic and terrestrial inventories have been completed since the last plan. It is important to inventory and update this information periodically; therefore, it is considered an ongoing action item.
Control unauthorized vehicle use that is eroding the dunes.	Implemented. Although unauthorized access remains a potential threat to the property, it has been substantially deterred.
Encourage research and scientific use of the property.	Ongoing. ABCA permits research and scientific study through a Special Use Permit system. Researchers provide their findings to ABCA, augmenting institutional knowledge of the site.
Cut down invasive exotic trees.	Implemented/ Ongoing. Significant progress was made in reducing the presence of invasive exotic trees, primarily Scots pine and Norway maple. Ongoing efforts are required due to the presence of nearby mature trees that contribute seed to the property.
Establish a tall grass prairie demonstration site.	Implemented. A small, tall grass prairie was established in partnership with the Ministry of Transportation.
Improve the trail system by creating a guide and directional signs. Link the trails with Lambton County and Lambton Wildlife Inc. properties in Port Franks.	Implemented. A defined trail system, including connections to other trails, was established in partnership with LSNT.

Install signs to encourage boaters to leave a minimal wake in order to reduce riverbank erosion.	Not proceeding. Although this is a recommended practice for watercraft users, the ABCA does not have the capacity, resources or authority to enforce it.
Provide technical advice to the Sarnia District Scouts to help them address the environmental issues at their camp.	Implemented/ Ongoing. The ABCA maintains a strong partnership with the Camp Attawandaron committee to support them with environmental initiatives.

Management Statements

To support the Management Goal for ARCA, the ABCA provides the following management statements:

- To conserve and enhance the unique ecosystems that support biodiversity for the benefit of present and future generations
- To encourage public appreciation and awareness of unique natural and cultural features.
- To foster appreciation through experience by providing opportunities for low-impact, passive recreational activities and educational programs.
- To provide access to the Ausable River for nature appreciation and passive recreational activities.
- To foster and support partnerships that align with the management goal.

Implementation

The following recommendations support implementation of the Master Plan in line with management goals and the CLS (2024). The recommendations propose enhancements and operational changes at ARCA, with existing operations assumed to continue unless specifically addressed.

Partnerships

Recommendation 1.1: Work with the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation to better incorporate traditional knowledge, as well as indigenous history, and modern uses of the land.

Description: ABCA acknowledges the original stewards of this land and is grateful to have the opportunity to meet and work in this territory. Through collaboration with the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, traditional knowledge can be integrated into management decisions. To further acknowledge the long-standing connection Indigenous people have to the land, Indigenous history, traditional ceremonies and modern land uses can be better reflected in cultural heritage resources and educational programming.

Recommendation 1.2: Work with the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) and local partners to safely and effectively connect the Rotary Nature Trail with the ARCA.

Description: The Rotary Club of Grand Bend established the Rotary Nature Trail, which connects the community of Grand Bend, to the Pinery Provincial Park. The trail is located alongside Highway 21 and currently ends approximately 4.5 kilometres north of ARCA. In partnership with the MTO, and local partners, the trail could be extended to ARCA – connecting the trail to the conservation area, and providing a safe, effective, active transportation route that connects the communities of Port Franks and Grand Bend. The bridge over the Bayfield River, along Highway 21, demonstrates where MTO led by example, and integrated active transportation routes into bridge infrastructure.

Visitor Numbers, Activities, and Programming

Recommendation 2.1: Explore partnerships, and technology to passively collect visitor use information to better guide management decisions.

Description: The ABCA does not currently have visitor use information for ARCA. Employing tools to collect this information would support data-driven management decisions.

Recommendation 2.2: Establish the ARCA as a designated site for ABCA’s Conservation Education programs that support environmental awareness, stewardship and community learning.

Description: The property provides excellent opportunities for conservation education, offering a wide diversity of habitats and species within a relatively small area. Its location adjacent to Bluewater Highway, along with existing infrastructure – including a parking area, accessible trail, privy washroom and accessible lookout platforms – supports high-quality, meaningful learning experiences. However, the property lacks shelter, such as a pavilion, which is a limiting factor in offering education programs. The organization should consider a cohesive approach that provides shelter and establishes a Collaborative Learning Space (Recommendation #4.1) to support high-quality, inclusive learning experiences.

Environmental

Recommendation 3.1: Remove all Norway maple and Scots pine from ARCA; continue to monitor and manage regeneration.

Description: Norway maple and Scots pine are invasive species that impact biodiversity in forested areas. Norway maple is often planted as a shade tree in residential areas. Scots pine was historically used in reforestation efforts and were planted at ARCA. Removing these invasive trees from ARCA will reduce the immediate seed source; however, ongoing monitoring and management will be required due to nearby seed sources – especially with Norway maple.

Recommendation 3.2: Complete annual invasive species monitoring by trained staff to ensure the ‘Early Detection and Rapid Response’ (EDRR) framework for detecting and managing invasive species is utilized.

Description: EDRR is recognized as the most effective, and cost-effective approach for managing invasive species. Staff who are trained to identify invasive species will monitor for their presence, and if invasive species are detected, management will be employed accordingly. Invasive species

management may be prioritized at the direction trained staff; species of greater concern for ecological health and risk management (e.g., Dog strangling vine, Giant hogweed, invasive phragmites, oak wilt, oriental bittersweet) will be prioritized.

Recommendation 3.3: Facilitate citizen science opportunities to track biodiversity, and habitat succession.

Description: Citizen sciences involves public participation and collaboration in scientific research initiatives. Modern tools, such as iNaturalist and photo monitoring stations, provide opportunities to engage visitors in the collection and tracking of ecological data while fostering environmental awareness, and appreciation of ARCA's natural values.

Recommendation 3.4: Manage woody species encroachment within the dune habitat, to support habitat diversity.

Description: Significant progress was made to mitigate threats to the dune habitat that had caused uncontrolled erosion and overall habitat degradation. As the dune continues to succeed, ABCA should manage encroaching woody species, as resources allow, to promote dune habitat and the biodiversity that this area supports.

Infrastructure

Recommendation 4.1: Partner with Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation to co-create a Collaborative Learning Space that supports shared learning, cultural exchange, and mutual stewardship.

Description: Conservation areas provide important spaces for community connection and learning, offering an excellent opportunity to establish a Collaborative Learning Space that incorporates Indigenous traditional knowledge and provides space for inclusive participation in traditional ceremonies. The Collaborative Learning Space should be developed in alignment with conservation education goals (Recommendation #2.2) to ensure meaningful, respectful and collaborative learning experiences.

Recommendation 4.2: Explore options for establishing a bed-level canoe and kayak launch to facilitate access to the Ausable River.

Description: Access to the Ausable River at ARCA is currently provided via a launch that must be seasonally removed and is affected by fluctuating water levels and boat wake throughout the recreation season. A bed-level access option, similar to launches located on the Bayfield and Saugeen River, should be explored to support long-term, sustainable river access at this location. ABCA's Water and Planning Department must be closely consulted throughout the planning and potential implementation of this work.

Recommendation 4.3: Enhance the Herbert Street entrance to facilitate access for the adjacent neighbourhood in Port Franks.

Description: The Herbert Street access exists at a lower standard than other property access points. Recognizing that over sixty properties are located within a one-half kilometre walk of this entrance, it is recommended that the entrance be improved, to provide an active transportation asset in the community. The entrance should be enhanced by delineating it through signage, and trail markers; and addressing the narrow entrance, to ensure safe passage. The entrance may be further enhanced by installing a bicycle storage rack, encouraging visitors to use active transportation methods, while adhering to the rules of the conservation area. The entrance should continue as a single-track natural pathway that facilitates access, and outdoor recreation while mitigating its ecological footprint.