



From D.C. to U.P. Making environmental restoration happen

By *Katelyn Durst '13 AS*

Driving by the Carp River coming into Marquette, **Chris Kovala '02 BS, '12 MS**, saw a pile of tires by the mouth of the river, which flows into Lake Superior, and thought to himself, “I should see if I can organize something to get this cleaned up, so people can enjoy this spot, and so it’s better for the river and the lake.” These musings are a microcosm of what Kovala is tasked with as part of his Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

After initial training in Washington, D.C., Kovala is currently on a six-month placement in the Upper Peninsula working with the Ottawa National Forest on Lake Superior restoration. He is building partnerships to identify and restore vulnerable watersheds and stream crossings in order to protect habitat and biodiversity and preserve economic activities such as tourism and logging.

This project was designed specifically for Kovala, a native of Bruce Crossing. From his base at the Ottawa, he is reaching out and creating what he calls a virtual Rolodex of environmental groups, government agencies, towns and cities, tribal groups and others who have a stake in regional watershed management, and may already be undertaking efforts to protect or improve them. “My goal is to eventually have an event where we can get everyone at the table. We can leverage more money by working together,” he says. “Fish and wildlife make a difference in the environment, especially in the U.P. I feel fortunate to get a position in leadership where I can help improve policy and create real change.”

Of more than 9,100 applicants for the prestigious

fellowship, Kovala was one of a few hundred selected, based on their commitment to public service and their leadership qualities. “The fellowship is intended to develop a cadre of advanced-degree leaders,” he explains. “It offers challenging work assignments, 160 hours of formal leadership training, and at least one developmental four- to six-month assignment.” With NMU degrees in environmental conservation, secondary education - biology and geography and biology, Kovala is serving as a wildlife and fisheries biologist, with a guaranteed position after the fellowship period.

Prior to the U.P. assignment, he was working with the branch of Environmental Response and Restoration, dealing with areas impacted by disasters such as hurricanes Sandy and Irene. One task was developing and presenting a webinar on laws regarding endangered species to about 100 practitioners who dole out FEMA grants for cleanup after natural or industrial disasters, to ensure recipients know and are following the laws.

He has been able to experience the inner workings of the nation’s government, and says he has been impressed by the cohesion and caring he sees. “The director of the Fish and Wildlife Service sometimes attended our meetings and knew everyone by name. Well, except for me, but I introduced myself afterwards,” Kovala jokes. “Or you feel the effect of budget concerns from people across the country. Sometimes money dries up for certain things, so you have guys in downtown D.C. talking about one individual in Colorado and what they can do for this person. I was surprised by how much they cared, because it is really hectic and busy, but the amount of concern is really cool.”

He also notes that it’s nice to have such a wide variety of professionals with whom to collaborate. Even remotely from Ironwood, he can share his computer screen, and get help with creating a GIS map, for instance, or consult an engineer on a road culvert project.

It’s a bit like his experience at NMU, where he credits his accomplishments to the incredible support and facilities and working closely with biology faculty Jill Leonard and Patrick Brown. At Northern he also served as an ASNMU representative, and played a crucial role in starting a bike share program. “Taking opportunities at Northern is key to success, using your passions and motivating yourself to pursue your goal,” he says.

He is following that same wisdom today. “A lot of times you can talk about a project, but it never gets done—that’s true in general,” he says. “With this watershed project, we’re going to partner and make restoration happen, and do the greatest amount of good for Lake Superior, which is, I think, awesome.” ■