

# Envisioning a Dynamic Network for Great Lakes Islanders

*How the Great Lakes Islands Alliance can bolster social capital  
across island communities*

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The Stewardship Network

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# Executive Summary

Inhabited islands within the Great Lakes region represent some of the most unique communities in North America. Local cooperation, volunteering, and resourcefulness are essential components of everyday life; however, these communities have long been underrepresented in state, provincial, and regional affairs due to demographic constraints, economic turbulence, and relative geographic isolation.

The Great Lakes Islands Alliance (GLIA), a network of U.S. and Canadian Great Lakes islands, was founded in 2017 to link these extraordinary communities and provide islanders with a support network to communicate more effectively and connect on issues that matter to them. This report was created to help develop dynamic structures and processes within GLIA to guide the Alliance as it grows and evolves in the coming years. Our recommendations are based on 18 months of data gathering including islander interviews and surveys, professional outreach and networking, and analysis of current organizational structures.



This has culminated in the creation of an Action Plan for GLIA, in which we have laid out detailed strategies and recommendations for enhanced member communication, funding techniques, outreach tactics, and more. Additional organizational capacity gained from this report will assist GLIA in developing platforms for dynamic action and discussion within the Great Lakes region while providing a valuable space for connection across states, provinces, and nations.

This document represents a smaller, condensed report meant for casual public consumption. A full report of our project and findings containing in-depth analyses of many topics covered in this document was delivered to GLIA leadership in April 2023. The release of this larger report for public consumption is at the discretion of the Great Lakes Islands Alliance.

# Information Gathering and Islander Insights

## Foundational Information Gathering

In preparation for engaged research with Great Lakes islanders, we assayed the current state of GLIA in their own words. This included reviewing foundational GLIA documents such as the organization's Charter, previous grants from the Mott Foundation, and yearly organizational reports. Outside of GLIA, we sought valuable information from the growing academic field of community development that can guide the organization's progress. Additional information from this literature review can be found in the full report.



## Interviews

The team retrieved qualitative data through interviews with islanders and relevant professionals from around the Great Lakes region to learn more about the benefits and challenges of island life. From 13 local islanders, we found detailed insights on issues ranging from transportation and healthcare to community dynamics and connection with mainland cities. Many more informal conversations with islanders throughout the project broadened our understanding of these topics. From various professionals we interviewed – many of whom worked for island community organizations and networks similar to GLIA – we gained valuable information about successful organizational structures, funding techniques, and community outreach tactics. Additional information from our interviews can be found in the full report.

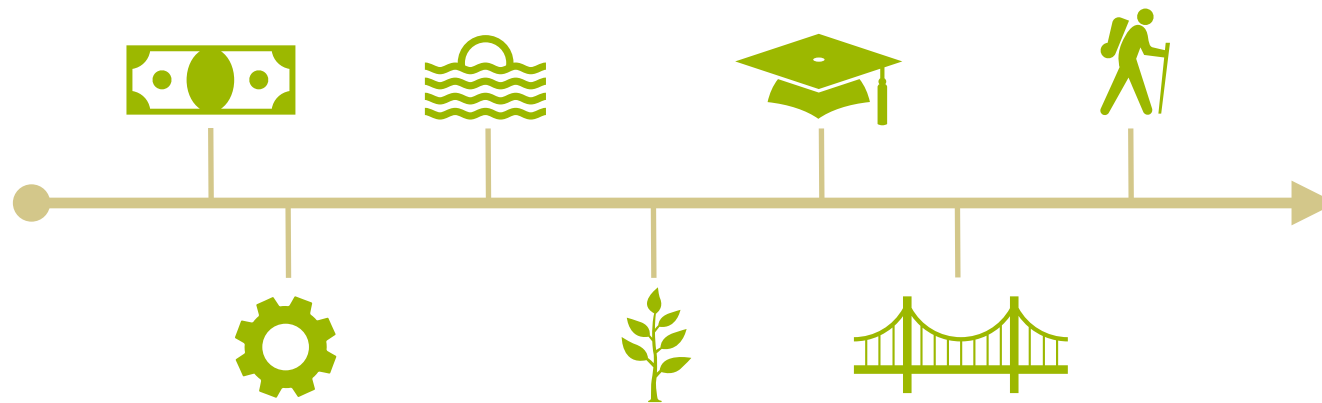


## GLIA Member Survey

We built, distributed, and analyzed a survey to understand islander preferences and thoughts about GLIA more uniformly. We made the survey available for five weeks, distributed the survey three times (once via QR code at the GLIA 2023 Summit and twice via URL in general GLIA membership emails), and received 47 responses. The survey included 24 questions with four short answer questions (three as follow-up questions for more information via closing comments or questions and 21 multiple choice questions). Additional information and results from the survey can be found in the full report.

# Action Plan

This Action Plan is a guide for GLIA leadership that envisions productive futures and pathways for the organization and its membership. Included are a number of recommendations based on current organizational structure and capacities, interviews with islanders and field experts, a member survey, and contemporary community development literature. **With this Plan, GLIA can lead conversations and work collectively to chart a path forward over the short, medium, and long terms.** New questions and opportunities will arise as GLIA grows and changes. While some of the particularities of the plan may not be relevant within all changing contexts, the underlying procedures and proposals may still be applicable.



We divided this plan into two main sections: **Organizational Structures**, which include recommendations for the internal functioning of the organization, and **Operational Processes**, which include recommendations for the operations used to promote the goals of the organization. We organized each recommendation into short (1-2 years), medium (2-5 years), and long (5-10 years) term goals. It is up to GLIA leadership to decide how to prioritize the recommendations. A more detailed version of this Action Plan containing an in-depth analysis of each recommendation can be found in the full project report.

## Organizational Structures

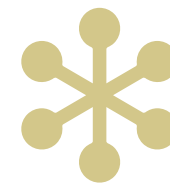
Organizational structures refer to the internal framework around which GLIA operates. It includes everything from core organizational philosophies to leadership positions to committee roles. These are the foundations of GLIA.

## Operational Processes

Operational processes represent GLIA's methods to engage its members and the Great Lakes Island community. They are the strategies employed to boost organizational development through islander connection and participation.

# Organizational Structure Recommendations

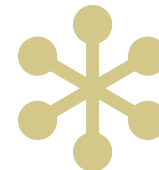
	short	medium	long
<b>Organizational Model</b>	Continue as a network Maintain TSN relationship	Increase member engagement for envisioning GLIA's future DEI Statement	Increase support staff capacity
<b>Canadian and Indigenous Representation</b>	Indigenous outreach Include French in GLIA comms Indigenous speakers & seminars	Formalize Canadian fiduciary Canadian and Indigenous Project Managers	Partnership with Canadian and/or Indigenous educational institution
<b>Fundraising</b>	Continue grant applications Continue small-gift donation effort	Engage more large-gift donors Grow TSN partnership	Hire fundraising specialist Examine endowment opportunities
<b>Marketing and Communications</b>	Update social media and website Establish marketing committee	Publish bi-monthly newsletter Greater TSN-involved outreach	Increase visibility of interest groups
<b>Transitioning Leadership</b>	Conduct exit interviews Engagement for strategic direction	Create Historian position within GLIA	Establish member mentorships



# Operational Process Recommendations



Interest Groups	Conduct shared interest surveys	Establish Interest Group fair or teleconference	Coordinate events to maintain involvement Establish group change procedures
Liaisons and Subcommittees	Appoint Liasions Outline Interest Group needs	Regular gatherings among leadership, liaisons, and groups	Establish procedures for changing leadership
Onboarding	New member introductions Create entrance surveys	Develop orientation modules	Conduct new member seminars
Discussion Boards	Assess board needs and uses Choose digital software	Establish moderation procedures Pilot various discussion boards	Newcomer member trainings Adapt to changing needs and uses
Islands Summit	Publish multimedia reports after Summit	Establish in-person seminar presentations from Interest Groups	



## Discussion

This project required all three team members to grapple with complex questions about effective community engagement and organizational development to produce meaningful deliverables for GLIA. As individuals, we each brought different skills, experiences, and knowledge to the project, making it essential that we found positive and supportive ways to engage cooperatively in every aspect of our work. We exceeded our goals as a team, and we intend for GLIA to benefit and grow from our experiences as much as we did as students and young professionals.

Despite the numerous obstacles faced by island communities, we found that islanders continuously build the social capital needed to support local success, reflected in their various community attachments. In every interview conducted - sometimes without the interviewer's prompting - interviewees expressed profound gratitude and respect for the local community on their respective islands. These community bonds emerge from the desire to be close to one's neighbors but also out of necessity due to limited access to resources.

To establish and maintain the same community feel in GLIA as we witnessed and heard about on islands (a community where everyone may not be in agreement but will support their neighbors whenever asked), the voices of wide and diverse groupings of peoples across the Great Lakes islands must be incorporated, heard, and valued. Appreciating more perspectives will link and bridge islanders across geographic, social, and economic confines.

At the core, the cooperative underpinnings of islander identities will buttress GLIA regardless of the financial resources accessible to the network. While a lack of resources can impede GLIA's goals, GLIA leadership should prioritize relationships over the pursuit of growth or financial goals. Change will foment by getting people talking and interacting, and new opportunities will arise. The best way to capitalize on those opportunities is to have faith in the relationships with the people making the change.

The Great Lakes Islands Alliance's purpose is to foster shared visions for the Great Lakes island community, thereby bolstering islanders' social capital and strengthening the ability to shape their futures. With the islander-derived guidance, knowledge, and recommendations contained in this report, GLIA will optimize local social capital to meet the collective needs of Great Lakes islanders.