

Restore the Shore

When I was in college at UW-Manitowoc, I was introduced to the writing of Aldo Leopold. I was and still am fascinated by his eloquent essays on a system of ethical thought and behavior that includes caring for the land. He wrote long before anyone had coined the term sustainability, and he was one of the first people to teach about habitat restoration, which he practiced on his hobby farm in south-central Wisconsin. He paid attention to the wildlife on his land, researched what kind of habitat was appropriate to the place, and then planted and tended the appropriate vegetation which would in turn provide homes for native animals. Through his position as a professor at UW-Madison, he also worked with others throughout the countryside to restore habitats that made the area better for wildlife and improved water quality of streams. You can still find those places today, and researchers are seeking them out to measure the long-term effects of his work.

Every once in a while, someone remarks to me that people can only inflict harm on the environment, that we're never able to do any real good. Leopold was an expert in his field, and he certainly didn't think that was true. And he influenced many of us who see great potential to do promote positive change.

The first step is fostering awareness- an inventory of what we have in terms of natural resources and what state they are in. In our preserve, we have an idea what's going on ecologically, although we will never understand all the complex relationships. But based on our observations and the data we've collected, we know this: there are a remarkable number of plants and animals here and at other places along the Lakeshore, but they are being altered especially by introduced foreign invasive species. Some native plants are being replaced with non-native ones, and the non-natives are not as good for wildlife.

The shore of Lake Michigan is an important migration route for migratory birds, and they stop and feed along their migration route. If high-quality habitat including plants that provides food and shelter for birds diminishes, birds will weaken as they migrate, and may not survive long. Our area, with many large and small natural areas along the Lakeshore, is very important to birds who spend most of their lives in the tropics, just coming here to nest during the summer. Think orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, indigo buntings, scarlet tanagers- a lot of our most beautiful species.

When we realize these things, we have two choices. Complain, or act. Is there anything we can do? Of course there is, and that's where the Restore the Shore project comes in. At Woodland Dunes we've increased our efforts to not only remove invasive species, but then, based on our best information, restore habitat by recreating wetlands which hatch insect food for birds, and by planting native trees, shrubs, and flowers which are particularly beneficial to summer and fall migrating birds. There is no magic to this process. All that is involved is taking the time to understand the ecology of the land and doing what makes sense.

There are many natural areas along and near the Lake, and because of the things that people have done without thinking, if they are unmanaged they will decline in value for wildlife and people as well. Many species of native plants and animals will disappear from areas, and even the composition of the soil will change, and we probably won't like it.

Restore the Shore is a cooperative venture, and is anchored by Woodland Dunes, Lakeshore Natural Resources Partnership, and the Lakeshore Invasive Species Management Area. Anyone can participate, and our intent is to provide help and freely share information on improving habitat along the shore. Many groups are already partners- the Cities of Two Rivers and Manitowoc, the Wisconsin Stopover Project through DNR, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Friends of Mariner's Trail, Aurora Medical Center, residents of Manitowoc's Lakeside Boulevard, and others. The West Foundation provided a grant last year to begin the project, which so far is also being aided by another local foundation, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, and US Fish and Wildlife Service. Others will be joining this partnership, and we invite anyone who would like more information to contact us.

Improving habitat for migratory birds can result in more diverse and healthy ecosystems and a more beautiful and healthy community. Think of a spot, perhaps your yard or neighborhood park, and imagine what it would be like if it were really managed to help wildlife and became a haven for cedar waxwings and butterflies. You and your neighborhood can become a part of Restore the Shore, and everyone benefits. Plus, your legacy of good stewardship can live on, like Aldo Leopold's has.

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