

Homegrown Conservation

The Revolution is Here

All around Wisconsin, residents are taking conservation into their own hands by forming groups to protect their local natural surroundings. What is community-based conservation, and why is it such a vibrant movement?

Our special feature takes a look at some of the state's most compelling stories, written by the people and groups that helped make them happen.

BY CURT MEINE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GROUPS WHO SHARE THEIR STORIES

A QUIET REVOLUTION IS OCCURRING IN THE WORLD of conservation and environmental stewardship. This revolution has arisen over the last decade in response to problems, needs, and opportunities that traditional approaches to environmental reform have been unable to fully address. The revolution has no single leader or manifesto, and its expressions are as diverse as the landscapes and human communities where it has emerged. It is challenging assumptions about environmental politics even as it reinvigorates the spirit of citizen involvement in conservation. In the articles that follow, we hear about Wisconsin places where community-based conservation is occurring, from the people who are making it happen.

Community-based conservation is a catch-all term for a wide array of locally driven activities. It may refer to a watershed organization restoring a local stream, lake, or wetland; a land trust working to protect open space in a threatened rural landscape; an urban group revitalizing its neighborhoods while enhancing environmental quality; a partnership of farmers and conservationists coming together and finding ways to merge their interests. Diverse though they are, community-based conservation projects share the basic goal of building healthier connections between human and natural communities. They rest on the conviction that, over the long run, conservation and community well-being depend on a caring commitment to the land. They reflect a willingness to work hard, forge new relationships, and overcome boundary lines (real and metaphorical) in meeting that commitment.

Why have community-based approaches taken hold in the environmental arena? To answer that question, one must take a long view of conservation as (in Aldo Leopold's words) "the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between

people and land." The conservation movement coalesced in the early 1900s in response to decades of unchecked exploitation of the continent's forests, grasslands, waters, and wildlife. Government stepped in to protect diminishing forests, scenic parklands, and important wildlife areas, especially in the nation's public domain. With the rise of the environmental movement as a political force in the 1960s and 1970s came an increase in the regulatory role of the state and federal agencies charged with environmental protection.

As necessary as these governmental actions were and are, they have been unable to achieve the goal of restoring and maintaining healthy ecosystems. Public lands constitute only 30 percent of the American land base, and even our best protected public forests, parks, and refuges are under increasing pressure from forces that arise beyond their borders. Private land conservation efforts have only recently begun to experience a badly needed renaissance. Community-based approaches have stepped into the void in our public policy. They are experimental efforts that take seriously the proposi-

tion that *all* lands and waters are of conservation value, and that they need and deserve attention if those values are to be retained and enhanced.

The movement toward community-based conservation reflects new realities and new knowledge. Conservation biologists and resource managers have had to "scale up" their response to a wide array of challenges, from improving water quality to protecting wildlands, from recovering endangered species to confronting the relentless march of urban sprawl. That means having to work in new ways across old boundaries. Public agencies have themselves realized the limits of "top-down" approaches in land management, and the need to engage local partners in their stewardship work. More than anything else, however, community-based conservation

From a site conservation workshop in Merrimac with Gathering Waters.



reflects the basic intent of motivated citizens, landowners, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and local governments to assume a greater share of responsibility for the biological diversity, ecosystem services, and environmental quality of their home places.

These efforts are flowering across the American landscape, but Wisconsin can claim a special place of distinction. In 1933, the Coon Creek watershed near La Crosse became the site of a novel approach to land management. More than 300 area farmers, collaborating with university researchers, the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, and technicians from the U.S. Soil Erosion Service (predecessor to today's USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service) formed the Coon Valley Erosion Project. Together they made Coon Valley the world's first watershed-scale erosion control and integrated resource management project. We may justifiably return now to a much-improved Coon Valley as one of the birthplaces of community-based conservation.

For each of the stories told here, there are a dozen others unfolding across Wisconsin's landscape. Conservation is revitalizing not only our landscapes, watersheds, riverways, farm fields, and neighborhoods, but our sense of community and citizenship as well. There is no assurance that these experiments will all work, and all face the challenge of sustaining themselves beyond the initial period of inspiration. However, these projects have a way of producing their own creative

energy. That energy may allow the current revolution in conservation to mature into a still richer *culture* of conservation.

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A River Runs Through Us

BY TODD L. AMBS,
RIVER ALLIANCE OF WISCONSIN

If the old adage that "all politics is local" is true, then certainly all river and watershed protection must ultimately be local if it is to be effective. Thankfully, the state of Wisconsin is blessed with a wide array of community-based conservation groups and initiatives that are producing positive results for our waterways and watersheds.

A recent survey conducted by the River Alliance of Wisconsin identified more than 100 grassroots organizations that list river and watershed protection as part of their mission. Eighteen of these groups were formed within the last three years. As this community-based conservation movement continues to grow, such organizations, joined by the large number of lake associations and land trusts in Wisconsin, will play an increasingly important role in proposing water policy, designing conservation and restoration programs, and advocating for changes in how Wisconsin's water resources are managed.

This sudden explosion of river and watershed organizations is due in part to a grant program that was created by the state of Wisconsin in 1999. The Rivers and Streams Protection Grant Program is unique in that it provides funds for activities to help form or build the capacity of such grassroots organizations. River Protection Grants cover up to 75 percent of eligible project costs; recipients are responsible for providing the other 25 percent, which may be cash, in-kind contributions, or donated services. Water-focused groups that were previously loosely knit associations are now able to organize, formalize, receive training, and become more effective advocates for their home waters. Interested individuals, local and county government entities, and existing citizen organizations have also used this grant program.

A brief glimpse at these 100-plus groups shows that they are distributed around all of Wisconsin. Their activities include a wide range of projects, including outreach and education, river restoration, river cleanups, water-quality monitoring, land acquisition, watchdogging the activities of natural resource agencies, and direct advocacy.