

**POSITION PAPER**

# **Scaling Up Volunteers**

in the Forest Preserves of Cook County

Adopted by the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners  
on February 24, 2021

# Scaling Up Volunteers

## in the Forest Preserves of Cook County

Adopted by the Conservation and Policy Council on July 10, 2020

### ISSUE

To attain the ambitious goals of its Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP), the Forest Preserves of Cook County and its partners must invest in the best available strategies to engage, train, inspire and retain dedicated volunteers and, especially, volunteer leaders. Forest Preserves staff and contractors will never have the resources to accomplish the job alone.

The NCCP will position the Forest Preserves to address the threats that climate change, biodiversity loss and limited access to nature pose to our well-being. The long-term health of the preserves, and the benefits they offer to the people of Cook County, depend on a constituency that is familiar and involved with the preserves. Agency-wide endorsement of volunteers and a commitment to a best-in-class model of collaboration are critical to success.

### BACKGROUND

Volunteers have been an essential force in the evolution of the Forest Preserves of Cook County over the past century. They have spearheaded public participation in habitat restoration, land stewardship, nature education, trail safety, scientific monitoring and more. As critical partners, volunteers serve as ambassadors and advocates for the Forest Preserves within their communities, throughout Cook County, and beyond.

The Forest Preserves supports many volunteer programs, including Stewardship, Trail Watch and Adopt-a-Site. In the 1970s volunteers initiated the Volunteer Stewardship program. In the early 1990s, the Forest Preserves established its Volunteer Resources division, which is responsible for providing tools and supplies, training, and staff oversight to volunteer groups working across the county.

But there is a critical need for more—yes, more volunteers at large but, more essentially, trusted and empowered volunteer leaders. To restore and maintain ecological health to 30,000 acres, to provide an inclusive welcome to nature centers, to offer a robust array of educational experiences, to have user-friendly presence in the preserves, the Forest Preserves needs the partnership of volunteers and volunteer



Across Cook County, volunteers support local preserves.

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leaders, people who commit to the preserves because they care and because they want to contribute and make a difference. Where they find welcome opportunity for their commitment, they remain.

The hallmark of the volunteer stewardship (ecological restoration volunteers) program has been the empowerment of volunteer leaders. For many of these leaders, commitment to their sites has become a defining aspect of their lives and has remained so for decades. Stable site-level leadership has advanced the art and science of restoration and has developed place-based cultures throughout the county that are committed to advancing the Forest Preserves' mission. Each a bit different, these communities are formed by neighbors and other interested participants working together toward a common purpose. Enabling such personally meaningful work has propelled the mission of the Forest Preserves in ways that would not otherwise be possible and with a relatively modest investment.

Scaling Up Volunteers lies at the nexus of the Nature and People goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan. We unconditionally support the engagement of volunteers in all aspects of the Forest Preserves' work where practicable. This paper focuses on restoration volunteers, as that is the largest and longest-running partnership. The Volunteer Stewardship program is a model, recognized nationally and even globally, of government/citizen collaboration.

The paper outlines the key principles and actions to guide success. We have confidence that it will serve as a model for volunteer programs in other areas of the Forest Preserves.

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**The Volunteer Stewardship program is a model, recognized nationally and even globally, of government/citizen collaboration.**

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A delegation from China came to study the Forest Preserves volunteer program.

## POSITION STATEMENT

**Volunteers are critical to the future of the preserves.** Dedicated stewardship in perpetuity is fundamental in implementing the goals of the Forest Preserves of Cook County and its Next Century Conservation Plan, sustaining the ecological health, function, beauty and vitality of the preserves.

**Increasing the number of competent, knowledgeable volunteers who make an enduring commitment to the Forest Preserves is a high priority.** The Forest Preserves should welcome and empower volunteers and consider every path available to growing participation at all levels while encouraging leadership in particular. Collaboration with relevant nonprofits, foundations and other partners will be key.

**The model of volunteerism should be expanded to attract, welcome and retain a diversity of participants that reflects the diversity of Cook County.** The Forest Preserves should strive not only to be one of the most ecologically diverse and healthy systems of regional preserves in the country, but also one that engages and reflects the diversity of people across the region in a singularly effective and participatory way.

**Volunteer leaders who have deep expertise and experience are essential partners.** The commitment to empower more volunteer leaders, and intentionally integrate them and their expertise into a variety of Forest Preserves activities and departments will provide sustainable results that last for years to come.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 Engage: Involve a variety of partners to attract and enlist volunteers that reflect the diversity of Cook County.

- 1.1 Work with the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners to connect with constituents and local leaders.
- 1.2 Connect Forest Preserves staff, nonprofit partners and volunteer leaders with local communities in an enduring way. Learn what residents value about their local preserves, recognize barriers to volunteering, and understand the needs and wants of the community at large.
- 1.3 Communicate the value of healthy preserves in culturally relevant language, emphasizing the enhanced quality of life for all inhabitants. Volunteer programs should

### VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

- **30,000** acres to be restored
- **600** volunteer site leaders (stewards) needed
- **96** current volunteer site leaders (stewards/stewards in training)
- **500** new site leaders to be recruited
- **326** current ecological restoration volunteers
- **8,968** acres under volunteer stewardship
- **46,525** ecological restoration volunteer hours logged in 2019
- **75,483** volunteer hours logged throughout all Forest Preserves departments



Helping hands for healthy lands.

apply the racial equity lens outlined in the Conservation and Policy Council paper “Moving Towards Racial Equity in the Forest Preserves of Cook County.” Reach out to and welcome all communities.

- 1.4 Enact new approaches for volunteer programs that match the opportunities and local conditions in diverse communities across Cook County, increasing the visibility and benefits of volunteerism, including learning life and job skills that can lead to potential employment.

## 2 Train: Work with partners to foster a culture of learning and teaching among volunteers.

A strong training program demonstrates to volunteers that they have a key role in advancing the Forest Preserves’ mission.

- 2.1 Review existing training programs; target areas where expanded educational opportunities, including technical training, can entice new volunteers and inspire current volunteers to deepen their involvement.
- 2.2 Provide additional online and in-person classes and certifications that increase existing volunteer skill sets, such as plant identification and ecology, fundamentals of ecological restoration, and invasive species management.
- 2.3 Include experienced volunteer leaders as lead trainers or co-trainers, expanding the current capacity of the Forest Preserves. Work with key leaders to develop advanced educational topics identified by the volunteer community.
- 2.4 Work with volunteer leaders to develop a more robust Volunteer Leadership course that provides training relevant to a variety of skills, including topics such as community engagement, workday planning and management, work site safety and public relations.



Volunteers help the Forest Preserves with public education.

## 3 Retain: Embrace and empower volunteers as critical partners in the common mission.

To retain committed and effective volunteers, the Forest Preserves must demonstrate that volunteerism is one of the primary forces sustaining our natural areas.

- 3.1 Ensure robust communication with volunteers; solicit input and regularly engage volunteer leaders on pertinent issues. Strengthen and expand consultation with the broad volunteer community.



- 3.2 Incorporate volunteer leaders into the design of new, customized volunteer roles based on their interests and skills, encouraging participation and engagement across departments.
- 3.3 Recognize and integrate the enrichment and strength brought to the work of the Forest Preserves by volunteers who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility and pride in the Preserves. Incorporate the vision and experience of leaders into the land management plans through collaboration with ecologists and other staff.

## 4 Sustain: Ensure that the resources, relationships and systems are in place to continue and expand volunteer programs.

Volunteer programs are a powerful resource, but they require long-term support and innovation to be effective.

- 4.1 Ensure that there is sufficient investment in volunteer resources—including the department of Volunteer Resources, partner co-investment and philanthropic support—to accomplish the recommendations herein.
- 4.2 Pursue long-term, joint goal-making with nonprofit partners. Work to find the intersection of the Forest Preserves and partner goals that meet the ambitious goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan and find adequate funding to accomplish these goals in the short- and long-term.
- 4.3 Be prepared to monitor and adapt to changing community needs over time. Nurture a leadership pipeline by identifying and empowering younger volunteers ready to take on significant responsibility.
- 4.4 Provide consistent communication with the Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board on volunteer activities and opportunities to support these efforts.



Volunteers work side-by-side with staff on prescribed burns.

# Position Paper

This position paper is one of four published in 2020 by the Conservation and Policy Council of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Each of these documents outlines a set of principles and recommendations about a key issue that faces the Forest Preserves today and in the foreseeable future. It is our intention that these papers will set clear guidelines for the actions and direction of the Forest Preserves staff, its Board of Commissioners, and its partners and supporters.

These position papers continue an important legacy of civic leadership related to the Forest Preserves. While natural areas no longer remain in many Midwestern counties, in Cook County, natural communities have survived because of the vision of civic leaders.

From the beginning, the Forest Preserves has struggled, at times unsuccessfully, to uphold its mission and protect its land. Earlier Advisory Committees provided published reports in 1929, 1952 and 1959 to guide land acquisition, development plans, protection, operation and public use of lands, and methods of finance. These early advisory reports provide an important foundation to build on. The 1959 Advisory Committee, for example, wrote, “The Board has kept in mind the fact that the great holdings of the District are the property of all the citizens of Cook County and has refused to dissipate them for community, municipal or other purposes not in the interest of the general public,” and that it takes “vigilance, effort and courage” to sustain and enforce these policies with firmness and resolution.

The Council thanks the following for their assistance developing this paper: *Jane Balaban (Committee Co-chair), Sylvia Jenkins, Ph.D. (Council member and Committee co-chair), Wendy Paulson (Council Chair), Cathy B. Geraghty (Forest Preserves of Cook County), Joanna Huyck (Forest Preserves of Cook County), Radhika Miraglia (Friends of the Forest Preserves), Nicole Pierson (Forest Preserves of Cook County), Daniel Suarez (Audubon Great Lakes).*

**APPENDICES**

# **Scaling Up Volunteers**

in the Forest Preserves of Cook County



# Scaling Up Volunteers

## in the Forest Preserves of Cook County

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### CHARTS, TABLES, MAP & GLOSSARY 1

- 1.1. Volunteer Ecosystem
- 1.2. Tables: Volunteer Roles
- 1.3. Map
- 1.4. Glossary

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### COMMUNITY BASED CONSERVATION 2

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# The Volunteer Ecosystem

of the Forest Preserves of Cook County

Volunteers play many different roles in keeping the preserves safe, clean and healthy—and every role matters. In 2019 alone, volunteers contributed 75,483 total hours.

## Ecological Stewardship

**15,961** Volunteer visits\*  
(or pairs of boots on the ground)

**46,525** Hours

Habitat restoration volunteers remove invasive brush, collect seeds, organize workdays and assist in site management planning.

\*Number of volunteer visits to the preserves, including repeat visits by a single individual. "Volunteers" refers to unique individuals in a program. All figures reported by volunteers. Reporting for 2020 is open until 2/29.

## Monitors

**216** Volunteers  
**1472** Hours

Record populations of plants and animals for research and management

## Trail Watch

**410** Volunteers  
**13,108** hours

Help keep preserves safe by traveling regular routes and reporting to FPCC police

## CAMBr Workdays

**247** Volunteers  
**988** Hours

Chicago Area Mountain Bikers help build and maintain trails and restore areas around them

## Adopt-a-Site

**609** Visits  
**1424** Hours

Clean up litter at a selected grove, river, lake or trail

## Litter Obliterators

**3007** Visits  
**8110** Hours

Team up to clean litter at group workdays

## Nature Centers & Outreach

**96** Volunteers  
**4845** Hours

Provide information to visitors and support events



feel free

[fpdcc.com/volunteer](http://fpdcc.com/volunteer)

Some people volunteer for just a few hours, while others put in weeks of hard work each year and develop a deep understanding of their sites. No matter what your skills or interest, there's a niche for you.

TABLE 1 - FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY VOLUNTEER ROLES

CATEGORY	VOLUNTEER ROLES (# VOLUNTEERS)	2019 #VOL VISITS	2019 HOURS (%)
Adopt-A-Site	143 Sites	609	1,423.56 (1.9%)
Litter Obliterators	77 groups	3,007	8,110 (10.7%)
Ecological Stewardship	Workday leadership Site Steward & Apprentice in training (84 & 12) Workday Leader (62) Brushpile Burn Boss (202) Chainsaw Feller I & II (99 & 47) Herbicide Applicator and Operator (213) RX burn (91) Tree Health Monitor (19) Tool Doctor (7)	15,961	46,524.55 (61.6%)
Monitors	Bird (63) Frog (49) Butterfly (41) Odonates (12) Plants of Concern (51)	382	1,471.8 (1.9%)
Trail Watch	410 volunteers	7,913	13,108.14 (17.4%)
CEP Volunteers	<b>Event examples:</b> (Nature is Accessible; Fall Fest Projects: Librarian, Naturalist Intern Long-term roles: Mighty Acorns Field Trip Assistant, Front Desk Greeter, Nature Ambassador (96 volunteers)	606	4,845.25 (6.4%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>Total visits</b>	<b>28,478</b>	<b>75,483.3</b>

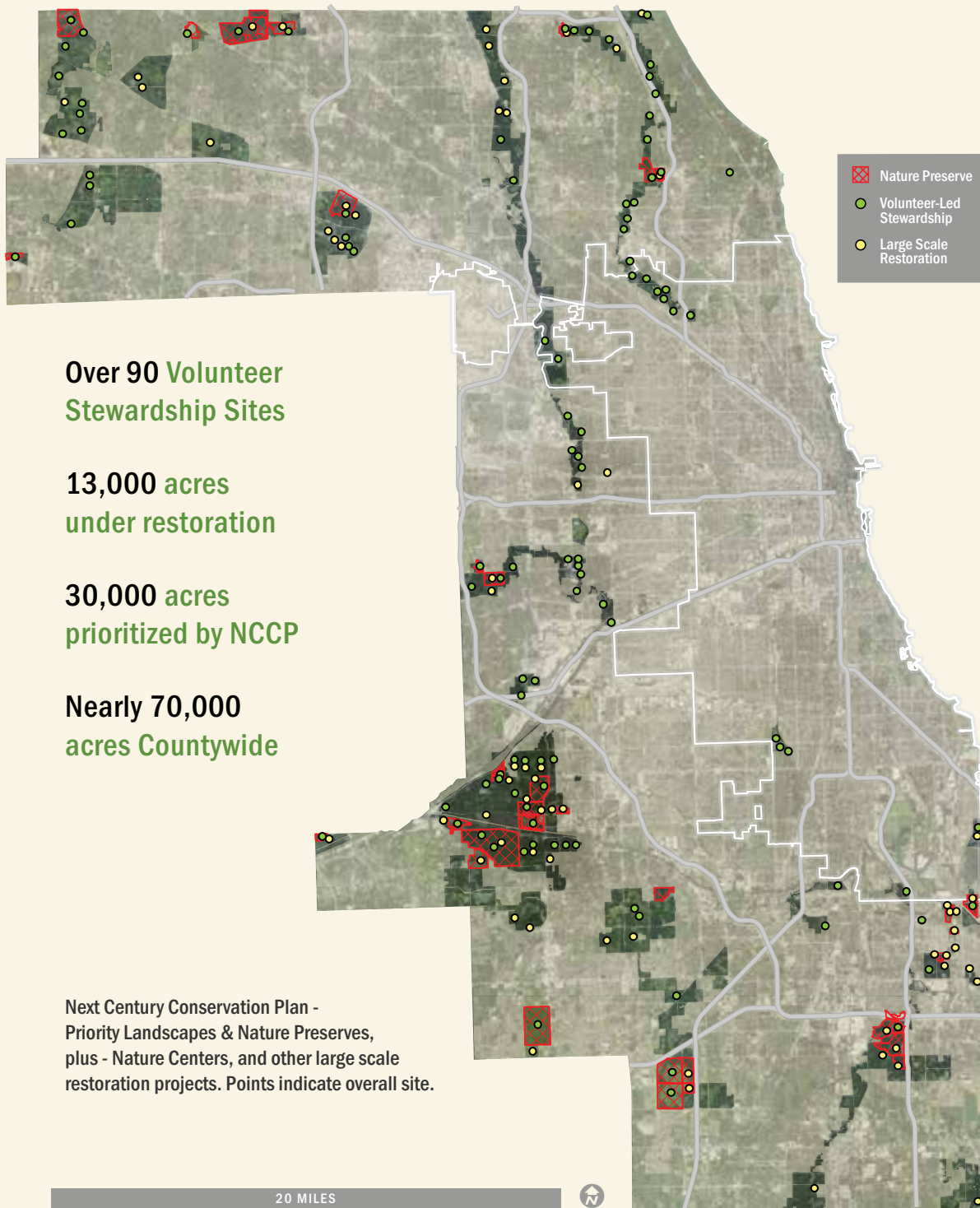
TABLE 2 - FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY VOLUNTEER STATISTICS

FPCC acres approx	70,000
Priority acres per NCCP	30,000
Acres currently under active management	13,000
Stewardship sites*	149
Volunteer Stewardship sites	91
Approximate Ecological Stewardship Volunteers	326 volunteers logged at least 12 hours in 2019
Site Stewards, Stewards, Workday Leaders, and Apprentice Stewards	155

\* Includes: Volunteer Stewardship Sites, Next Century Conservation Plan -Priority Landscapes & Nature Preserves; Nature Centers; Other large-scale restoration projects

## FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

# Conservation Restoration 2020



## GLOSSARY

**Next Century Conservation Plan Adopted** by the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners in 2014, the NCCP lays out a set of bold actions to make Cook County a national leader in urban conservation. It calls for massive restoration and expansion of protected lands, as well as a commitment to making the preserves more accessible to the diverse people of Cook County.

**Four Committees** were established to lead the implementation of the four pillars of the NCCP: Nature, People, Economy and Leadership.

The **Conservation & Policy Council** was established to guide overall efforts to implement the Next Century Conservation Plan. The council's eleven civic leaders review the Forest Preserves annual budget and makes recommendations on conservation policies, practices and strategic priorities.

**Volunteer leader:** Individuals who step up to take a broader role in stewardship, who are deeply committed to protection of the Forest Preserves and who bring experienced thoughtful insights to the stewardship program.

**Volunteer Stewardship Network:** A collaborative partnership between local land conservation agencies, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and the Nature Conservancy actively supporting ecological restoration volunteers throughout Illinois.

**Steward:** One of the most important volunteer positions in the efforts to manage public lands and effectively restore and maintain the flora and fauna of natural communities.

A **Site Steward**, recognized and authorized by the Forest Preserves:

- Engages, coordinates and educates the hundreds of volunteers who participate in ecological stewardship at Forest Preserves management sites.
- Plays a pivotal role in restoration efforts, workdays, planning and site administration.
- Possesses a solid understanding of the basic principles and best practices of *ecological restoration*.
- Acts as an ambassador for their site and for the Forest Preserves by actively engaging volunteers and the public.
- Promotes growth and continuity of a volunteer group.
- Collaborates with Forest Preserves staff and other volunteers to create management schedules which are the basis for all work at their site.



**Ecological restoration** strives for the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded or damaged, resulting in the loss of native species and interruption of natural processes. The goal is to restore or replace impacted processes and the individual components to the extent possible. Restoration tools include the use of managed fire, movement of seed, removal of *invasive species* and prevention of erosion. Equally important is public education on the value of natural lands and why they need intervention if they are to persist as healthy functioning systems.

**Ecosystems** are dynamic communities of interconnected plants, animals and microorganisms interacting with the physical environment. The result is a complex network whose health depends on a multitude of functions, including pollination, periodic fire, movement of water and adequate sunlight, to name only a few. Each individual element of the network is part of one or more pathways. Like pulling a thread on a carpet, losing one element ripples through the whole complex in ways we may barely understand.

**Invasive species** are often those that have been introduced from other parts of the world or even other parts of our country. Many—but not all—*non-native* species are able to compete effectively with native plants and animals, reducing biodiversity and altering habitats. Some *native* species can also be invasive in the presence of altered ecological functions, the prime example being overgrowth of woody species when periodic fires are prevented.

**Native species** are plants and animals that are known to be part of the local ecosystem, based on past records and current observations of various remnant habitats. Of the more than 2,900 species of plants in this region, more than 1,700 are deemed native.

**Non-native** species are those that were not part of the local ecosystem historically, and which have been inadvertently or purposely introduced to the region. Of the nearly 1,300 number of introduced species, only a small percentage are problematic in our natural areas.

# Appendix 2:

## Community Based Conservation

“No species, no habitat, no place or piece of land can be ‘saved’ without a community. How that community is constructed and empowered to conserve is the question.”

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1977, a handful of citizen conservationists petitioned the Forest Preserves of Cook County for permission to collect and sow seeds and clear a little brush from a few sites along the North Branch of the Chicago River. Top Forest Preserves officials agreed, and the novel collaboration of public citizens and government agency began. Recognizing the extraordinary potential of volunteers, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Illinois Nature Preserves (INPC) provided training and other support for a growing volunteer movement, establishing the Volunteer Stewardship Network in 1983. In 1989 the movement recruited volunteers for preserves in Poplar Creek, and again in 1990 for Palos. Around the same time, new volunteer projects were forming at Jurgensen Prairie in Calumet, Thatcher Woods and Kloempken Prairie along the DesPlaines River, and Bluff Spring Fen and Deer Grove in northwest Cook County.

From 2000 on, a regional collaboration of conservation organizations, including The Nature Conservancy, The Field Museum, Audubon Chicago Region, Openlands, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Friends of the Chicago River and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission have supported Forest Preserves stewardship volunteers in various ways. Today, there are more than 90 Forest Preserve sites with volunteers involved in ecological restoration on a regular basis. Many other partners such as Master Naturalists, CAMBr, BCN, Faith in Place and Shedd Aquarium support the Forest Preserves volunteer initiatives. Partners support volunteers in meaningful ways. The Illinois Nature Preserve Commission funds the Volunteer Stewardship Network. Friends of the Forest Preserve established the Centennial Volunteers program. Great Lakes Audubon supports Orland Grasslands,

They have advocated on behalf of the volunteer-led restoration projects and have raised millions of dollars to dedicate toward community engagement, volunteer recruitment, mentorship, training and other volunteer-based projects that improve Forest Preserves land and waterways.

Throughout this history of nature-loving citizens drawn to volunteer

for restoration work, certain individuals developed a sense of responsibility, ownership and deeper commitment to restoring and protecting a certain plot of land. These individuals (known as Stewards) became certified in specialized skills, studied and learned the land intimately, and became champions for their sites. They led workdays for members of the public, developed management plans with Forest Preserves ecologists, and even formed their own grassroots organizations (such as North Branch Restoration Project, Palos Restoration Project, and Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards, etc.) to ensure that local communities gathered in support and stewardship of their public lands.

The vitality and endurance of many volunteer led projects are testament to site stewards, often self-recruited, who welcome the hard work and the joy of caring for the land. They are magnets for like-minded people who share the ethic of stewardship. The results are growing constituencies centered on protecting the preserves. Much more than on-the-ground labor, leaders become the face and voice of the Forest Preserves during daily encounters with the public. They implement some of the most effective training and recruitment programs extant by their consistent mentorship of both new and seasoned volunteers.

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### **COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION**

These efforts embody the understanding that the long-term viability of any protected area and the resources found within depend upon the support, sense of ownership and participation of local residents. Many of the world's protected areas were established with a "fortress" model in mind: keep the people out in order to protect the natural areas within. While this strategy offered short-term protection from external threats, top-down attitudes of government and conservation organizations alienated local people. They became resentful of their expulsion, and cultures became disconnected from land. At the same time, conservationists realized they could not manage wildlife in isolated islands of protected areas. They needed local communities to support the creation of corridors and safe edges in order to meet the behavioral and genetic requirements of healthy wildlife populations.

Thus began the movement to return to community-based conservation, in which local residents are active partners in the management and protection of their land. Research demonstrates that protected areas can only remain strong and viable in the long term if local people value them for their benefits. These benefits can be economic, social, moral, spiritual and/or in the form of ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, flood control and temperature regulation. In addition,

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**No species, no habitat,  
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Families help take care of the Forest Preserves.

no protected area will be fully protected without the presence of active local guardians. Resources for law enforcement will always be limited, and laws can be changed with politics. People must feel part of the system in order to vote to keep it alive and well.

Forest Preserves “volunteers” are more than volunteers who donate a few hours of their time toward a good cause. They are guardians of these lands. Through their hard work and dedication, they develop a sense of ownership, love and connection to the land and each other—all key components of successful community-based conservation. The strong collaborative partnership between the Forest Preserves and volunteers is another critical key to success and a model for community-based conservation in urban landscapes. Though it is more challenging to navigate the diversity of needs, viewpoints and power structures when working in partnership with communities, the investment of time and energy results in a strong and sustainable community of support.



Collecting seeds for restoration.

# Appendix 3:

## Case Studies

### A. DEER GROVE EAST-OPENLANDS PARTNERSHIP

The Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards (PCPS) was used as the model for starting a new stewards group for Deer Grove East. Launched in 1989, PCSP quickly empowered more than a dozen leaders, and among them were people who also perceived a need at Deer Grove West. That group has come to be known as the Deer Grove Natural Areas Volunteers. They began in the 1990s and have worked to restore ecological health to areas of Deer Grove West ever since.

In 2011, the Forest Preserve District and Openlands combined to launch a major restoration of Deer Grove East, a site that was mostly known for its paved trail and picnic areas that were heavily used by the public. The central area of approximately 185 acres was to be restored to prairie, savanna and woodlands, including wetlands. Understanding that a strong volunteer group is an important component for a successful project, Openlands contracted with Audubon-Chicago Region to organize the volunteer component.

Following the Poplar Creek example, Audubon:

- Reached out to all known stakeholders and requested advice and help
- Identified volunteer leaders who would help with the launch
- Agreed to hold a kick-off event, co-sponsored by many
- At the kick-off, explained the major effort and needs envisioned
- Explained that volunteer leaders would be key to many parts of the effort
- Invited potential volunteers and leaders to express (on a form and/or verbally) their interests and strengths
- Personally met with individuals to assess and empower them, as seemed best
- Helped the group establish principles, strategies, outreach materials, a website, etc.
- Helped lead weekly workdays until the group leadership could (stretching their comfort levels) do that themselves.



In time, the leaders (working with the staffs of the Forest Preserve, Openlands and Audubon) developed skills and expertise needed to lead recruiting, planning, seed gathering, brush cutting, brush pile burning, weed scouting, bird monitoring, invertebrate sampling and many other components of stewardship.

In 2016, the Deer Grove East Volunteers and the Deer Grove Natural Areas Volunteers merged into one group, strengthening both.

## B. SHEDD AQUARIUM PARTNERSHIP

Wanting to make the most of the successful launch of their **Amphibians** special exhibit, **Shedd Aquarium** partnered with the Forest Preserves of Cook County to restore habitats across the county critical to local amphibian species. Together, the two organizations launched a series of Amphibians Great Lakes Action Days (GLADs), providing local volunteers the opportunity to visit one of three forest preserve locations (Somme Woods, Bob Mann Woods and McClaughry Woods) to engage in a handful of restoration and conservation activities that seek to protect native plant and animal species.

Today, 41 percent of the world's 6,000 amphibian species are threatened. In addition to the chytrid skin fungus, amphibians are adversely affected by habitat destruction, pesticides and herbicides, invasive species, climate change and ozone depletion.

By teaming up with the FPCC to eliminate or decrease some of these factors, volunteers joined Shedd in making an immediate impact on our local wildlife by preserving biodiversity.

In addition to learning about local species of plants and animals, Amphibians GLAD volunteers of all ages will engage in activities that make a direct and immediate impact on local habitats, including:

- **Invasive plant species removal**—The removal of invasive plants at each of the sites improves light, soil, oxygen and native plant conditions for local amphibians to thrive in their environments. Volunteers assist in removing plants such as European buckthorn and Asian bush honeysuckle.
- **Water quality testing**—Because amphibians absorb water through their skin, they are especially susceptible to toxins and parasites in their environment. Water testing and

monitoring allows teams to ensure an area is healthy enough to support these species.

- **Amphibian/local vegetation monitoring**—Watching sites regularly and recording amphibian sightings allows Shedd to understand which areas are improving in overall health and how the local environment is responding to the clean-up efforts.

Restoration activities at the Forest Preserves do more than benefit nearby toads and salamanders. Removing invasive species helps promote native plant growth by freeing up resources like soil nutrients, water and sunlight. Sometimes, native seeds left dormant for years in the dirt will begin to grow once these non-native plants are no longer present. At the Forest Preserves, this means a wider variety of native species for guests to observe, learn about and protect.

This partnership with the Forest Preserves extends to other existing education programs at Shedd.

For the past five years, Shedd has been working with the Forest Preserves by adopting Black Partridge Woods as a work site for the **Teen Work-Study** program and Guest Engagement Volunteers. During this time, Shedd teens and volunteers have made a major impact on the health of this ecosystem through actions such as removing invasive plants and building a walking path to encourage visitors not to walk on sensitive native vegetation. As part of the expanded partnership between Shedd and the Forest Preserves, the Teen Work-Study participants and Shedd volunteers will now focus their efforts on sites that are home to local amphibians. These work days will be led by Shedd Aquarium staff members upon completion of the **FPCC Path to Stewardship** trainings, a program that certifies volunteers to work at the three different sites.

### C. **“DOCTORS” IN RESIDENCY (TOOL DOCTORS)**

Forest Preserves volunteers can often be spotted in plain sight. They’re out in the field cutting brush or collecting seed, monitoring trails or leading a craft at a nature center event. But there are also volunteers who work quietly behind the scenes whose contributions might not be so obvious. Two such volunteers are Ellie Shunas and Lee Witkowski.

Both Ellie and Lee hold various volunteer roles in the

Preserves, but their love of working with their hands and knowledge of tools attracted them to a fairly new volunteer role, Tool Doctor. Tool Doctor is a pilot program for the maintenance and repair of tools used in stewardship activities across the Preserves. Since the first training session in February of 2018, volunteers have put hundreds of broken bowsaws, loppers, and fire pumps back into use in the field, which also fits into the bigger picture of the Forest Preserves' continued efforts towards increased **sustainability**. It was even highlighted at a **Conservation and Policy Council** meeting.

Ellie—a valued bird monitor, stewardship volunteer, seed collector, brushpile burn boss and herbicide applicator—comes to the Volunteer Resource Center every Friday to work on broken tools, and at times uses those very same tools with the Northbranch Restoration Project. For Lee Witkowski, working with tools is something he too has known all his life, and he takes great satisfaction in getting dependable tools in the hands of other volunteers in the field. He says, “The opposite of satisfaction is frustration. So if someone gets a broken water pack, that volunteer gets frustrated. Will they come back? Maybe, but they haven’t had a great experience.”

But even with incredible volunteers, programs require buy-in at a higher level, and that’s a major reason why this program has gotten off the ground—buy-in from, and collaboration with our Resource Management Department. Matt Hokanson led the fire pump/water pack repair training session. He and Phil Prohaska continue to be a resource for our volunteers, and have advised on replacement parts needed to support this program. We hope that with continued collaboration, the Tool Doctor program can grow, and we can tout volunteers’ achievements as we move towards an even more sustainable next century in the Forest Preserves.

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#### D. **RIVER TRAIL NATURE CENTER**

River Trail Nature Center is a great example of volunteers being integrated in nearly every level of operations, beyond answering phones at the front desk. Staff is always willing to host schools and corporate groups for stewardship workdays or for special projects like the new pollinator garden that is currently under construction. Nearly year-round, but especially during the summer months, River Trail is bustling with interns like Nina Tilley who shared her thoughts this summer.

Nina recalls, “I found out about this internship opportunity through my advisor at school who recommended I reach out to Michele Mottlowitz, the director of River Trail Nature Center. There had been some interns from Northeastern that had previously gone to River Trail and Michele herself went there for her degree. So, I reached out to her and she was more than happy to accommodate me. When I came here for my interview, I knew immediately that I wanted to complete my internship here. Everyone was just so warm and welcoming. So far I’m doing a lot of cleaning, gardening, doing some observing of animal feedings and interpretive programming. I’m helping out wherever I’m needed and just learning about all the things that River Trail offers and how to educate the public about it. There’s something new to learn every day. I love it.”

River Trail is shining example of inclusivity in the Forest Preserves. They work with volunteers from Misericordia Heart of Mercy to educate the public about some of the animals that can be found in the forest preserves through Misericordia’s Wildlife Connections Ambassador Program. Charlie, one of the Ambassadors said, “I really enjoy volunteering here and teaching the kids about wildlife animal species. My favorite topic to talk to kids about is birds. I really like the duck that we get to demonstrate to the kids, and how to pet it correctly. Kids ask questions like ‘How many different birds are there?’ I really enjoy coming here and I enjoy seeing the staff. I enjoy that it’s in a lovely nature setting and I really like communicating with everybody.”



Charlie, a member of Misericordia’s Wildlife Connections Ambassador program.

#### E. NORTH BRANCH SEED GARDEN

Thanks to a generous donation from the Xylem corporation’s local office in Morton Grove, North Branch Restoration Project is building a seed garden that will produce valuable seed for Forest Preserves restoration.

Xylem Inc. is a large American water technology provider, enabling customers worldwide to transport, treat, test and efficiently use water in public utility, residential, commercial, agricultural and industrial settings. The company does business in more than 150 countries, according to Wikipedia.

The connection between Xylem’s focus on water and NBRP’s focus on lands bordering the Chicago River North Branch is clear. After Xylem employees participated in workdays at Linne Woods & Prairie and Blue Star Woods, they petitioned the main office to direct a contribution to the work of our volunteers.

Surprised and delighted by this unexpected gift, the group brainstormed how best to use the funds to benefit the work of restoring management sites. The concept of a seed garden to complement the harvest of native seeds from our sites was a winner. Seeds are a critical and necessary resource for restoration. That matrix of native plants—beautiful and rich in their own right—support the many other denizens of the ecosystem that depend on food, shelter and a place to raise the next generation.

The seed garden will contain plants collected and grown from local North Branch sites, but will be focused on species that are either difficult to collect in the wild or are unusually rare on the sites. Thanks to Forest Preserves' Resource Management Director John McCabe's strong support, we were allotted a vacant area adjacent to the Maintenance facility at Harts Road. Friends of the Forest Preserves agreed to facilitate managing the grant funds. Construction began with a great deal of help from Resource Management department. Joel Rosario's crew cleared a large area and installed around 400 feet of deer fence.

With fences and gates in place, the volunteers held the first workday, building the initial four raised beds for planting. The first collection of seedlings have been planted; more will be planted in the fall. The area inside the garden compound has ample room for future expansion, and additional beds are planned soon.

Shooting stars, purple milkweed, butterfly weed, Jacob's ladder, woodland phlox, prairie phlox are some of the plants already thriving under the care of enthusiastic volunteers who come almost daily to water and weed the garden. The garden will produce seeds of some of the best and rarest plants to return to the Preserves, where they will provide important habitat for wildlife while delighting the eye of human visitors.



The volunteer seed garden at the Forest Preserves' Harts Road facility.

## F. CENTENNIAL VOLUNTEERS COLLABORATION

The Centennial Volunteers Program (CV), launched with support from the Chi-Cal Rivers Fund, has been accomplishing habitat restoration and community engagement goals in forest preserves along the North Branch of the Chicago River and the Little Calumet River since 2014. CV is a collaborative project led by Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Forest Preserves of Cook County and Friends of the Chicago River. Audubon Great Lakes, Field Museum, Faith in Place, North Branch Restoration Project, and Calumet Outdoors, among others,



have and the have also contributed to the effectiveness of this movement to grow the volunteer communities at particular forest preserve sites.

Since its inception, CV has accomplished significant ecological and community engagement outcomes. For example, the average percentage of native plant coverage, across all sample areas, rose 22 points from 2016 to 2018 (46% to 68%) and community members have actively spent nearly 80,000 hours caring for and learning about the preserves. Thriving stewardship teams now care for preserves like Labagh Woods, Forest Glen Woods, and Somme Woods, without the need for dedicated field organizers.

The program continues to evolve as new strategies are identified based on the wants and needs of local communities, as well as a formal program evaluation completed in 2020. Long-term community connections are achieved through the intimate community-building aspect of the program that is so unique to the program.

Stewardship teams around the county are concerned about a lack of new volunteers to carry on their legacy. To address this, Friends of the Forest Preserves has expanded the CV model of organizing to other parts of the County, and employs a team of field organizers dedicated to recruiting and mentoring individuals and building the capacity of local communities to become true partners in the restoration and celebration of their local preserves. Field organizers are currently active at Poplar Creek, Spring Creek, the North Branch, and Calumet regions, and plans for adding organizers to other regions, such as the Palos region, are in place.