



LAND STEWARDSHIP

Land stewardship is the conservation of your property's natural resources and features over a long period of time. The motives of good land stewardship seem to be paradoxical as they are essentially both selfish and altruistic. They are selfish because as a landowner, you want to continue to reap the rewards of your land for many years to come. These rewards may mean quality farm products, high-value timber, songbirds throughout the year, successful wild turkey hunts, large bags of morel mushrooms, peace and solitude, or a great view just to name a few. However, stewardship motives are also altruistic, as you also want to be a good neighbor, one who shares concern for the lands that surround yours and the water that travels downstream from your property. You also want to ensure that the opportunities you enjoy now will continue to be there when your great grandchildren are old enough to appreciate your hard work and dedication.

Many consider the late Aldo Leopold to be the father of modern conservation theory and practice. Leopold believed that land stewardship was not only rooted in conservation but also involved ethics, or the search for a higher mean-

ing. He wrote that all ethics rest upon the single premise "...that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land." This is to say that once we understand that humans are not separate from, but are part of and depend on the natural community, we will develop an ethic to care for the community as a whole.

Stewardship of your land is the greatest gift you can give to present and future generations. This chapter explains what healthy ecosystems are, and what you can do to help restore and maintain them for the future.

Focus on the Building Blocks

Natural resources refer to all the things that are naturally produced, and include water, air, soils, minerals, plants, and animals. The key to good land stewardship is to ensure that the basic building blocks for healthy ecosystems are taken care of. These basic building blocks are healthy soil, clean water and air, and biological diversity. Soil is the foundation of our plants, whether they are natural communities, tree farms, or food crops. Clean water and air are essential for all living organisms.

Biological diversity is simply the variety or diversity of living organisms. Over the last 500 years many organisms have become extinct or extirpated because of human activities, and many more are currently declining in population. Some

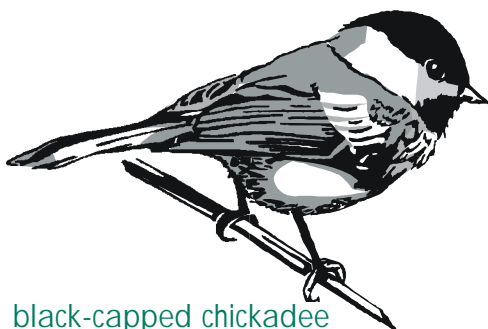
of these species play a critical role in our ecosystems, and others offer medicinal, economic, nutritional, and aesthetic values.



For most species we do not have enough knowledge to fully understand what roles they play in our ecosystems or what values they offer. As a good steward, though, making sure that the native plant and animal communities found in your area continue to live is a priority as important as maintaining healthy soils and clean water and air. This is especially true for rare species such as the Karner blue butterfly, which has a hard time recolonizing within other sites.

Stewardship and the Planning Process

Stewardship is not just about getting outside and appreciating your land, it is also closely linked with creating and carrying out of a good habitat management plan. Stewardship includes everything from sitting on a hillside observing which wildlife species visit your property to getting on your tractor and brushhogging the shrubs and trees that are invading your prairie. The key elements to good land stewardship are very similar to the steps in writing the management plan. First you must identify the soils, topography, plants, animals, habitats, and waterways that occur on your property. In addition to this you should try to understand the relationships between these natural features. You can do this



black-capped chickadee

and talking to neighbors or experts. You can then begin developing a plan. Your plan should focus on maintaining the long-term health of your land, and should be done within the context of surrounding lands. After your management plan is implemented, while enjoying your results, you should monitor your progress and identify any problems. If you have thought out your management plan thoroughly, future generations will be able to enjoy the same opportunities that you have.

Understanding What's There

Good land stewardship is built day by day while spending time on your land observing the various events in the natural world. To obtain the most knowledge from your land you must be very observant. Listen to frogs calling in the wooded swamp in spring, watch the brood of wild turkeys hunt for insects in the grassy meadow, view the songbirds in May as they migrate to places farther north, notice trails created by various animals, look for tracks, nests, or other signs of animal activities. Ask yourself questions about your land. Are there any decaying logs or dead trees in the woods that may be potential homes for wildlife? What flowers bloom in early spring, late summer, and early fall? What types of soils occur on your land? Is the stream next to your property still cool and clear, or is it warmer than usual and filling with sediment?

These informative activities should serve as guideposts for future management decisions. What you observe on your land now can teach you about your land's limitations as well as the opportunities that exist. For example, if you live in an area where the soil is predominantly coarse, nutrient-

poor sand with very little topsoil, growing a forest of hardwoods will be difficult and costly. On the other hand, this location might be ideal for restoring a mosaic of prairies and savannas. Diligent observation, therefore, is a key toward building good land stewardship. Refer to the chapter on **Evaluating the Land** in this section for more information.

Managing Long-Term Health

Taking into account the long-term health of your land helps ensure that today's options will exist several generations from now. Health, according to Aldo Leopold, is "the capacity of the land for self-renewal." What you do with your land today will determine the land's future health. Therefore, whether you manage for specific species, manage for diversity, or take a hands-off approach, it will effect the opportunities that will be available on your land in the future. For this reason, it is important to be very careful in making management decisions. It is always important to take a critical look at surrounding landscapes when developing a management plan. For example, if you live in a largely forested area with few scattered old fields, it may be more beneficial to manage for a forest on your land, rather than a prairie which will require more maintenance and have less benefit to wildlife in this setting.

Also, it is important to discuss your plans with neighbors so that everyone interested in improving wildlife habitat can work together toward a common goal. A landowner, for instance, who decides to remove a fencerow should

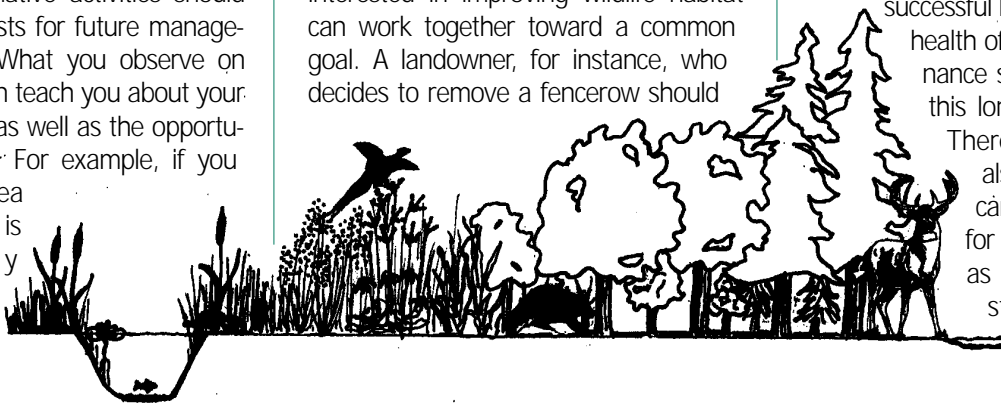
consider the potential impact on the adjacent forests, wetlands, rivers and lakes, and the plants and animals that live there. Perhaps, impacts could be minimized by creating a buffer strip of shrubs, planting a hedgerow, or seeding the area with native grass and wildflowers. Refer to the chapter on **Working with Neighbors** for more information.

Maintenance of Management Goals

Maintaining the habitat you have restored or enhanced will ensure long-term fulfillment of your management goals. Without some maintenance, most habitat plans are doomed to failure. Suppose you own 20 acres of native prairie, which you would like to maintain as such. You will have to do more than merely allow nature to take its course. Historically, prairies were maintained by periodic fires, which were set by lightning or Native Americans. If you want your prairie to be there 10, 20, and even 50 years from now, you will have to take some course of action such as mowing, cutting, grazing, prescribed burning, or applying a selective herbicide. Maintenance also includes smaller-scale activities such as cleaning out bluebird boxes, replacing livestock fencing in disrepair, repairing bird houses and feeders, pruning wild apple trees, and replacing damaged saplings. Maintenance often requires substantial manual labor, but it offers the biggest reward of all—being a good steward.

Because the most important part of successful land stewardship is the health of your land, all maintenance should be crafted with this long-term goal in mind.

Therefore, maintenance also means keeping a careful eye on your land for potential threats such as sedimentation in the stream, soil erosion,



pest and disease outbreaks, overbrowsing, overgrazing, ORV damage, and the invasion of non-native species such as purple loosestrife, glossy buckthorn, autumn olive, or multiflora rose.

Landowners should also consider long-term maintenance to ensure that the lands they are managing remain good wildlife habitat far into the future. Unfortunately, land frequently changes due to development and land sales. However, this need can be addressed partially through legalized tools such as conservation easements, donations, and deed restrictions. These tools can prohibit or restrict future development of the property for parking lots, subdivisions, strip malls, or other projects detrimental to wildlife. A conservation easement, for example, is most commonly used because it can be tailored to suit the property's unique characteristics. It can be flexible, and the landowner typically retains ownership and access. For more information about conservation easements, contact the Michigan United Conservation Clubs office or your local Conservation District office.

Monitoring

Monitoring the changes that result from your efforts at improving wildlife habitat brings the stewardship cycle full circle. Now when you go back to observing the wildlife and plants on your property you can see what differences have occurred. Are the management strategies for eliminating an exotic plant in your wetlands working? Are you seeing more of the species that you managed for? How many new species of animals are visiting your property? Is there sufficient water in spring and summer in the marsh you restored for waterfowl habitat? Do ducks use the marsh for feeding, nesting, or simply for resting during migration?

Keeping track of your progress provides the opportunity to make adjustments before too much time, energy, and money have been invested in the management plan. Monitoring is a great chance to become an even better steward of your land because it helps you become more familiar with its ecosystems, the needs of the plants and animals that live within them, and how your actions directly affect their welfare.

Summary

Responsible land stewardship is essential to improving wildlife habitat in Michigan. It is the foundation of a successful wildlife management plan and

the cornerstone to its success. Because of the fragmented nature of today's landscape, the need for holistic management plans has never been more important. Stewardship is more than controlling competing vegetation, managing deer populations, restoring overgrazed areas, and putting up fencing to keep out unwelcome ORV traffic. It is also about being a careful observer of your land and surrounding areas, and understanding what is needed to maintain its long-term health. Without good land stewardship, most habitat plans are destined to fail, no matter how well-written they are.

In many ways stewardship is the most rewarding part of doing something positive for wildlife because it requires becoming involved with your land, as well as understanding it. Getting your hands in the soil and your feet in the water often helps in appreciating the fact that it is there. Land stewardship is a journey that lasts as long as you own the property, regardless of whether you make a living off the property, live there, or only visit it occasionally. Stewardship is one of the most rewarding things you will ever do, and it is something that your grandchildren and their children will appreciate and thank you for long after you are gone.

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Private Land Partnerships: This partnership was formed between both private and public organizations in order to address private lands wildlife issues. Individuals share resources, information, and expertise. This landowner's guide has been a combined effort between these groups working towards one goal: Natural Resources Education. We hope this manual provides you with the knowledge and the motivation to make positive changes for our environment.

FOR ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE: *CONTACT YOUR LOCAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT*