

Wetlands and You: A Call to Stewardship

CHAPTER 1



Delicate lady's slippers bloom among the cedars... Mallards slice the last rays of the sun as they settle into the cattails for the night... chorus frogs usher in an April twilight... a big buck takes cover in the lowland brush... a statuesque Great Blue Heron awaits its prey...

Such are the sights and sounds of Michigan's wetlands. In addition to their beauty, wetlands are some of our most valuable ecosystems that provide us with important functions that enhance our quality of life. As a private landowner, you can play an important role in wetland protection and management.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality estimates that over 75% of Michigan's wetlands are privately owned. Probably an even greater percentage of the potentially restorable wetlands occur on private property. Private land owners are ultimately responsible for the level of protection that a particular wetland receives and whether or not a former wetland will be restored.

In 1949, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* was published. That book presents the concept of land stewardship. Professor Leopold, a wildlife biologist, encouraged us to realize that all things are connected and to think about the long-term implications of our land management activities. In essence, he urges us to consider the implications of our actions on the entire ecological system, and then act in a way that maintains its integrity. By maintaining ecological integrity, he contends, we would guarantee a functioning ecosystem that ultimately benefits all plant, animal, and human members.

Nowhere are the benefits of environmental stewardship more evident than with wetlands. Property owners benefit from wetland protection in many ways. Most obviously, they have their own nature preserve that provides opportunities for a range of recreational activities. Even very small wetlands can provide an excellent stage upon which to view the drama of nature. If you are fortunate enough to have wetlands that border a lake or stream, you directly benefit from the water quality

and erosion control functions of wetlands. For some landowners, the privacy that a wetland offers by serving as a natural sound and visual buffer between other homes, commercial uses, and roads is its most valuable function.

Wetland benefits go beyond property boundaries. Many birds use wetlands at every stop in their migration from their summer homes in the arctic to their winter homes in the tropics. Wetlands help protect property owners from flooding, maintain the quality of our lakes and rivers, and provide fish and wildlife habitat. Wetlands that protect vulnerable aquifers benefit everyone who draws drinking water from them. Wetlands provide habitat for endangered plants and animals—an important part of our natural heritage. Because the functions of wetlands benefit people other than the property owner (and conversely, wetland losses impact people other than the property owner), wetland landowners have a higher call to be good stewards than most landowners. In addition to maintaining ecosystem integrity, good wetland stewards are good neighbors who accept their responsibility to manage their land in a way that does not harm others.

Unfortunately, Michigan and the United States have lost alarming amounts of wetlands. Since European settlement, the lower 48 United States have lost over 53% of their original wetlands. In the most recent survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan has lost 50% of its original wetlands. The percentage of Michigan's coastal wetlands that have been lost is even greater—70%. In total, over 5,600,000 acres of wetlands have been destroyed in Michigan.

It is hard to quantify all that we have lost with the conversion of so many millions of acres of wetlands. We can get an idea of the substantial losses by considering the increases in flood damage, the degraded water quality, the number of wetland dependent plant and animal species that have become extinct, the reduced populations of waterfowl, and many other indicators of poor ecosystem health. Another way to visualize the impacts of wetland conversion in Michigan is to consider that we now only have one-half of the valuable functions that wetlands provide.

When we consider that over 50% of Michigan's wetlands are gone and that 75% of Michigan's remaining wetlands are in private ownership, we can see how crucial it is that wetland property owners answer the call to stewardship.

As you will see in the following chapters, there are many ways to become a wetland steward. Wetland stewardship does not obligate you to costly or time-consuming activities. In fact, what you don't do is often more important to good stewardship than what you do. For example, a "hands-off" approach may be the best option for a well-functioning, intact wetland.

Wetland stewardship can be very rewarding. If you are like most Americans, you support protecting our country's rich natural heritage. Being a good wetland steward is one of the most beneficial ways to contribute to a quality environment for this and future generations. In addition to the benefits that you will receive, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you helped to ensure good water quality, flood protection, and abundant fish and wildlife for your neighbors.

Aldo Leopold wrote that, "the evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process." Many wetland owners care deeply for their land. As you learn more about your wetland through this book and your own stewardship activities, the emotional bond between you, your family, and the land will surely increase. As this happens, Michigan's wetland property owners will take the lead in developing a more positive relationship between the people and the land.