

natural

LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Bill Diehl's vision and Defiance College's hard work created the Thoreau Wildlife Sanctuary

by Michele Tinker, Director of Annual Giving

In 1989, local businessman Bill Diehl came to Defiance College to tell of his inspiration to turn 200 acres of overworked farmland he had purchased into a wildlife sanctuary. He wanted to see the area returned to native condition or at least as near-native as possible. It was an exciting vision, and Defiance College welcomed the opportunity to be part of it.

Professor David Reed of the biology department started working with the Diehl family on behalf of the College to make what is now the Thoreau Wildlife Sanctuary an outstanding educational resource as well as a sanctuary. Reed developed a master plan of restoration that heavily relied on efforts provided by DC students. The students in turn were thrilled to get real field work in restoration ecology, botany, zoology and other science fields.

In the first year, 15,000 trees were planted, the worn-out soil was fertilized, and prairie and wildflower meadows were planted. The lake was stocked with largemouth bass and bluegill; quail and pheasants were released into the prairie. A dike was constructed in the second year of the restoration plan. The wetland was established and seeded with cattails and water plants. And so the work continued over the years.

Today, the college is still collaborating with the Diehl family to preserve and maintain the Thoreau Wildlife Sanctuary. Since the retirement of Professor Reed, Dr. Doug Kane, assistant professor of biology, has devoted much time and energy to the project. Most of the goals of the original master plan have been accomplished. Thoreau now has many components: a 23-acre deciduous forest, a 3.5 acre white pine plantation, a wildflower meadow, a 12-acre

prairie, a 1.5 acre pond aptly named Walden Pond, in addition to the half-acre created wetlands and lake, a screen of hybrid poplar trees and several other areas.

For DC students and the community at-large, the sanctuary is now the perfect setting to learn about environmental issues and the process of ecological restoration. At Thoreau, students study the importance of preserving, enhancing and conserving habitats and restoring ecological systems, and conduct environmental research, surveys of flora and fauna, and water quality testing.

The latest step in the collaboration is a formal agreement recently reached between Defiance College and the Diehl Family Foundation for the College to officially take over the management of the property.

This new contract makes the college responsible for maintaining the Sanctuary: mowing and maintaining current paths and adding new paths where appropriate based on wildlife and environmental studies, conducting prairie burns as needed, and removing obstructions to normal use. Defined responsibilities also include the removal of invasive species of plants and animals determined by an approved wildlife and habitat management program, and introduction of species of native plants and animals as determined by a responsible wildlife and habitat management program. The college has responsibility as well for trying to expand the opportunities for the Sanctuary to be used for educational purposes. In return, the Diehl Family Foundation will provide an annual contribution to the college to manage, operate and supervise baseline maintenance and management.

Dr. Kane notes that while much of the restoration plan has been accomplished, the management of the habitat will continue to offer a variety of challenges and potential projects for DC students. His plan for

In the first year, 15,000 trees were planted, the worn-out soil was fertilized, and prairie and wildflower meadows were planted. The lake was stocked with largemouth bass and bluegill; quail and pheasants were released into the prairie.

the future of Thoreau includes getting departments outside the sciences to utilize the facility. For example, a mock crime scene was conducted there this past year, and he'd like to see more such projects.

Kane also envisions having the wildlife sanctuary utilized by the greater science community, such as the recent foray conducted by the Ohio Moss and Lichen Association. He has also participated in a global project on mustard garlic in conjunction with Duke University at the TWS, and anticipates using the property for similar activities.

One of the most attractive features of this great resource is its proximity to the college, just a couple miles away. "The wildlife habitat can be incorporated into the labs and students can easily check on projects. Having it close is really cool," Kane noted. Kane also appreciates the variety of habitats available to the students to study at Thoreau. Students can get a first-hand understanding of the different wildlife in each habitat, and how those habitats respond to different management.

All in all, the property has provided a wealth of research and practical experience for DC students, and Dr. Kane anticipates many more years of fruitful collaboration between Defiance College and the Diehl family. ♦



Insets: Senior Bryce Baker and Dr. Doug Kane identify their Thoreau finds; Diehl family at the Thoreau Wildlife Sanctuary entrance.