

CONCLUSION

The communities of living things in our region have developed as a result of the ebb and flow of natural forces since the end of the Ice Age. For much of that time, humans have been present and shaping the landscape. Native Americans influenced animals and plants through hunting and the use of fire. Settlers and farmers cleared out many native animals and plants, suppressed regenerative wildfires, changed the movement of water, and introduced invasive species. Urbanization accelerated these changes, shrinking our remaining natural areas to remnant islands amid a sea of development.

But those remaining islands contain invaluable stores of our natural heritage—diverse communities of native plants and animals that, in some instances, occur nowhere else on the planet. Because of intense pressures from urbanization, much of our biodiversity is threatened. However, it can be protected and restored through coordinated efforts. It is for just this reason that Chicago Wilderness alliance was formed; an acknowledgement that people have had a tremendous impact on our native landscape, but people—working together—can save what prairie, woodland, wetland and water resources remain.

The most direct thing people can do is volunteer

their time. Throughout our region, bands of volunteers—from all walks of life—regularly roll up their sleeves to help clear out invasive species, collect and sow native plant seeds, and monitor populations of indigenous plants and animals. Volunteer stewardship is fun. It's effective. It's a way to learn firsthand how nature works and how it needs our help. It connects us not only to the landscape, but to a larger community of people who share an interest in passing along healthy natural systems to future generations.

Closer to home, people can heal local nature and promote biodiversity by using native plants in their gardens and installing rain barrels. Communities can incorporate sustainable and people-friendly design principles into their local land use plans and ordinances.

But perhaps the best thing anyone can do for nature is to take a child out for a walk in one of our many nature areas. A growing body of research reveals that spending time outdoors in nature is critical to a child's physical, social and emotional development. A child who grows up with a strong connection to nature is likelier to be not only healthier, but a leader in the next generation of those who care about our natural world.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn More: Visit the web sites of Chicago Wilderness and its members to learn what they are doing and where you can help. One important action is to support municipal, county, and state referenda that provide for acquisition and management of natural areas.

Volunteer: Among the best sources for learning about volunteer opportunities in our region is the Chicago Wilderness Habitat Project: <http://www.habitatproject.org>. Another is The Nature Conservancy's Volunteer Stewardship Network: <http://www.nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/illinois/volunteer/art9844.html>.

Talk to Your Community Leaders: The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's Go To 2040 plan outlines many ways to make our communities more livable by protecting open space and natural resources. The plan is a resource for communities across our region and is available for download at www.cmap.illinois.gov/. Also, the Chicago Wilderness Ecological Planning and Design Directory is a terrific source of information for individuals, businesses, governments and others to help build healthier, more sustainable communities: www.chicagowilderness.org

For more information on these and the many other things you can do help secure a "greener" future, visit www.chicagowilderness.org.