

## MANAGING for ECOLOGICAL RESULTS

At the present time nearly all interactions between the FPD and volunteers are focused on program management and input activities. Little if any is focused on ecological results in terms of objectives or measures of results.

Establishing a clear system of measures of environmental/ecosystem results could provide the basis for better public understanding and support for solving problems.

Better public support could result in more volunteers and more support for FPDCC policies, programs and budgets.

It could also provide the basis for more effective use of resources including volunteer programs.

Stronger public support could have three important results: support for budgets, more volunteers, and support for conservation practices including animal control.

**A well informed public** is a key to building support. Information about the problem and the solutions are essential. The problem needs to be understood in terms of the health of nature in the Forest Preserves.

**The health of the Preserves** can be best understood as a three layered system: 1. living resources, 2. habitats and 3. human activities.

**The health of our living resources** is the ultimate measure of the success for our restoration efforts. The living resources exist primarily within five ecological communities and four assemblages of animals\*:

Woodlands      Prairies      Wetlands      Streams      Lakes

Fish      Birds      Reptiles and amphibians      insects and other invertebrates

**Habitats** are essential to the existence and health of living resources and include physical, chemical, and biological factors

Physical factors include sunlight, fire, soil, hydrology, erosion, and shelter, etc. together with natural processes such as erosion, sedimentation, and seed dispersal.

Chemical factors include nutrients, pollutants, etc.

Biological factors include disease, invasive species, and food (forage, prey, nectar, etc.)

Natural processes occur within habitats and greatly influence them. They include fire, predation, erosion & sedimentation, etc. Disruption of natural processes can have major consequences such as disruption of natural succession by the absence of natural fire or the absence of large predators.

**Human activity** is a major factor in determining the health of habitats in urban areas.

The quality of habitat is negatively impacted by activities such as agricultural and urban development including introduction of invasive species and suppression of natural fire. It is positively impacted by preservation and restoration programs.

**To understand the state of health of our living resources**, we need to have measures of success at all three levels. *Health of living resources* is the highest desired output. *Habitat* is a critical input to ecological health, but it relies on natural processes and human activity as essential inputs to maintain habitat in our urban ecosystems. So what is needed, is a spectrum of measures ranging from health of populations to human activity.

**Our current situation** in Cook County is that the District is focusing almost exclusively on management practices which are one part of human activity. This is a problem because too much of the available energy is going into developing rules and training for allowable management practices such as burning brush piles. But little energy is going into defining desired habitat or populations conditions, nor is much energy going into tracking current conditions, i.e. the condition of either habitat or populations. The result is that management practices are receiving far more attention than the purpose of the practices.

**If a system of measures was created** that would quantify the health of habitat and living resources several important benefits could be obtained.

It would be easier to explain to the media and the public why management is necessary.

It would provide easily understood information to support budget requests.

It would provide clear goals and objectives for management activities.

It would provide a clear basis for evaluating the state of natural areas and their component parts.

It would encourage a focus on ecological outputs rather than program inputs. (And hopefully reduce quibbling about fine points of management practices.)

It would create accountability for volunteers, the FPDCC, and its partner organizations.

It would focus on the benefits of managing the whole ecosystem including deer management rather than fragments of the system and separate management activities.

It would illustrate that resources are needed far beyond those currently available in the form of FPDCC staff and contractors or volunteers. Further, that expanded programs and partnerships are needed if the overall problem is to be solved.

### **Present knowledge of Ecological and Habitat Conditions**

At present, most knowledge of Ecological and habitat conditions in Cook County is based on anecdotes and expert opinions rather than data. Fortunately there are well informed experts who have been willing to share their knowledge which is available in a variety of reports. Unfortunately there is no widely accepted peer reviewed system of monitoring. As a result there is no solid foundation of accepted fact to serve as the starting point for creating a results based plan for restoration of biological health or biodiversity.

There have been studies by IDNR, INHS and other conservation partners that concluded that there are serious problems, but **this has not led to either a strategic system of monitoring or a plan for action to restore and protect the living resources and habitats.**

The 1998 “Land Audit” (or was it the “Woodland Audit”) by the CW funded Audubon Habitat project involved more than 40 of the region’s best botanists and conservationists showed that 68% of the District’s natural land was in poor condition and only --% was of being rated as “good” or excellent. FPDCC studies confirmed the basic finding of the Land Audit. However, the report did not result in an accepted system of measures for monitoring ecological health, nor inspire the District to adopt an overall monitoring system shared with the public.

In 2006 Chicago Wilderness published *The State of Our Chicago Wilderness, A Report Card on the Health of the Region’s Ecosystems*. It found that Biodiversity was declining. “Some of our natural areas are in excellent health because they are being actively managed. Good management simply means doing those things for nature in an urbanized can no longer do for itself, such as controlled burns to cleanse our natural areas of invasive species that force out native plants and animals”

“But the majority of our remaining natural areas are not healthy. Many have received little or no management for decades. Others are not protected at all. By working together, we can put things back on course.”

“Across all community types, the experts agree that the recovery gains made at select natural sites are more than offset by the deterioration of the majority of our natural areas, largely due to insufficient management and lack of formal protection. As a result, most of the region’s natural areas are judged to be in fair or poor condition, and received grades of C or D for this report.”

#### Within Cook County

Conditions are generally worse than in the region as a whole.

Management practices are well known (what needs to be done)

Restoration is being done by: staff, contractors, interns, and volunteers; but it is far short of what is needed.

Budgets for contractors have grown, but less so for staff & interns.

Volunteer programs are not growing because of FPDCC policies (no new sites and difficult requirements)

The FPDCC is failing in its conservation mission. But too much emphasis on this fact is likely to stimulate more defensive and hostile behavior from staff and demoralization of FPD supporters.

What can be done to solve the problem? 1. Somehow monitoring of environmental/ecological results must be improved with respect to both living resources and habitats. Reporting on program inputs can also be helpful in terms of tracking effort and giving the District a chance to brag, but it must not eclipse the higher levels. As data on the state of the ecosystem becomes better documented, accountability can be established and a better case for resources can be made. 2. It would be very helpful if a straight forward action plan could be developed by the FPD defining the problem in terms of needed ecological results and the actions needed to attain them.

## **An Action Plan**

The core of all plans is to: define the current state, define the desired state, identify barriers, identify needed actions and who should take them, define desired measures of success, and define how they will be monitored. If this could be done for the FPDCC in terms of ecological results, great things could be accomplished.

## **Barriers**

There has been tremendous inertia within the District with respect to change. This may be changing. Many managers do not see ecological health as a priority or that they will be rewarded for giving it priority.

Managers value a system of command and control. (They worry that they will be blamed for things beyond their control.)

Some managers perceive volunteers to be a threat to control and not something that will be of benefit to them.

The prevailing attitude among at least some managers seems to be that if the volunteer program can't be avoided, at least it should be minimized.

Some staff are defensive because some volunteers have equal or greater expertise.

Most staff and managers appear to be strongly motivated by a fear of criticism.

Innovation has not been valued or rewarded.

The unspoken motto seems to be "see no evil, hear no evil, deny all evil".

Reliable ecosystem data perceived as a threat, especially if not controlled by the District. Managers fear that if problems are identified, they will be blamed.

Accountability is avoided.

Rewards and punishment within the organization are focused on the care and feeding of the organization not on its mission.

## **Assets**

Some staff within the FPDCC are motivated, goal oriented individuals who support change.

Volunteers provide a huge resource of optimistic energy

Conservation partners (Friends of the FPD, IDNR, INHS, Audubon, Open Lands, The Field Museum, The Nature Conservancy, and others) all support change.

A major segment of the general public cares deeply about conservation issues and loves the forest preserves.

## **How to Turn the Situation Around?**

The biggest challenge is to convince the General Superintendent and District managers that managing based on ecological results is a win/win solution. It can benefit the quality of the preserves and it can help them succeed. Similarly the challenge is to convince them that the volunteers and the volunteer program can help them succeed. Part of this can be done by figuring out what can be done to help them succeed within the existing system. Another part is to change the system.

### **Directly Helping managers & staff succeed**

Volunteers and their organizations should provide awards and recognition for good performance.

Stewards should show the way by drafting management plans that emphasize ecological results.

Other steps??

### **Changing the system**

Shifting the system to produce and focus on ecological results would provide immense benefits. How can the District be convinced to move in this direction? The Woodland Audit conducted by the CW/Audubon project several years ago provided useful data, but was perceived as being adversarial. Similarly, the CW Report Card was despised by then General Superintendent Bylina. He candidly stated that from his perspective, such reports were not useful and just provide ammunition for the media which was constantly hunting for information to use in criticizing public officials in general and him in particular. His view of the political process was that all negative news is harmful and only leads to reducing support for his programs. He did not accept the view that clearly defining the problem could be used to seek needed resources. Apparently his view was that politicians would only respond to good news and internal maneuvering. His reaction to the recommendations of the Cook County President's Community Advisory Committee (PCAC) recommendation on the need for a monitoring strategy including ecological results was similar, although he did forward to the County Board with a tepid endorsement.

Finding a way to get the current General Superintendent to see the advantages of a clearly defining needs based on ecological monitoring could make a major difference. Friends of the Forest Preserves and perhaps the emerging Stewards organization could make the case and have influence, but it would be better if recommendations came from non-advocacy sources. Chicago wilderness has dropped the ball on this issue in the past, and now with the General Superintendent as chairman seems unlikely to be helpful. Perhaps university or State or Federal sources could be brought into the picture.

The General Superintendent's commitment to develop a plan for natural areas may provide a major opportunity to change the situation. The contract current work by the State Natural History Survey (right organization??) is probably the most important ongoing activity.

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\*These categories were used in the 2006 CW Report Card. The CW Biodiversity Recovery Plan contains a more detailed list of communities and assemblages.

Source documents:

Chicago Wilderness *Biodiversity Atlas*

Chicago Wilderness *Biodiversity Recovery Plan*

Chicago Wilderness *The State of Our Chicago Wilderness*

FPDCC President's Community Advisory Committee: *Report and Recommendations on Monitoring and Management of Natural Areas Within the Preserves*

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