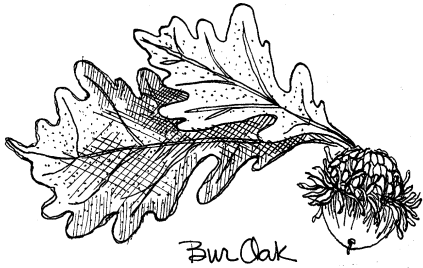


The Mighty Acorns



*I was raised up in the city
And I guess it shows.
I know all about the C.T.A.
But when it comes to things that grow,
they'll always be a puzzle to me.*

Anonymous songwriter circa 1974

Growing up in a landscape of towering skyscrapers and sprawling shopping malls, the air heavy with the exhaust exhalations of civilization, the green earth corralled into tiny squares and rectangles, kids can grow into adulthood without ever having experienced a natural area—an intact ecosystem that builds biodiversity and is self-sustaining over time. And as the numbers of such areas dwindle in the face of human development, the opportunities for doing so become more and more difficult. Our existing preserves are fragmented and besieged by alien species of plants and animals. Humankind's alteration of the movement of water and fire across the land threatens the survival of the natural communities that evolved here. And yet, ironically, it is only human intervention can save these unique and precious lands. If we hope that our children will join us in this worthwhile and formidable task, we must find ways to allow them to build a relationship to these places. We must find the means to provide our children multiple, meaningful, sustained interactions with the land on which we live.

To address this urgent need, **The Nature Conservancy** and **the Forest Preserve District of Cook County** drew upon their acclaimed collaboration in establishing the **Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN)**. This visionary structure allowed thousands of citizens the opportunity to be more than passive tourists in the natural areas of their homelands. Lured by high-quality opportunities to learn science, combined with a promise of helping to develop and implement management plans for the healing of damaged natural areas, thousands of people from truck drivers to lawyers volunteered countless hours of painstaking work in the forest preserves. Whole families dedicated mornings to work in the woods, wetlands, and prairies. Others came to be known as citizen scientists as they pursued higher and higher levels of knowledge about the ecology of our region.

Despite its successes, the VSN leadership was concerned that its message wasn't reaching the younger generation, who is the inheritor of our landscape. Moreover, the VSN hadn't found ways to diversify its volunteer force to include many communities in the Chicago area. In 1993, a small group started meeting—in apartments, over dining room tables, at the Conservancy, over coffee and donuts—to try to create a mechanism to address these needs. VSN leaders, school teachers, and parents spent endless hours debating, brainstorming, forming, and re-forming ideas about how to engage young people from the diverse communities in the Chicago area in stewardship activities.

Finally, by 1993, a framework emerged and the **Mighty Acorns** was born. Its mission would be to:

introduce young people in the Chicago metropolitan area to nature through stewardship and exploration in a way that fosters a personal connection to our natural areas.

In its basic outline, the Mighty Acorns would offer assistance to schools and teachers interested in involving their students in land stewardship. A school would adopt and visit a specific site in the Cook County Forest Preserves that was undergoing restoration. The visits would be in the autumn, winter, and spring and would, ideally, be repeated each year during the 3th through 8th grades. Volunteer docents were sought out, allowing classrooms to be divided up into small groups (4–6 students) for their explorations. It was hoped that the small size of these groups would result in a more focused and intense visit. Over time, as teachers gained experience, Mighty Acorn trips developed three recognizable components:

1. Free exploration—group-guided, unstructured time in the natural area
2. Key concept activities—observations, drawing, listening, interdisciplinary investigations
3. Stewardship activity—seed collecting, brush removal, weeds pulling, seed sowing

Teachers volunteered to create pre- and post-trip briefings and activities that enriched the field trips and focused on connecting the school's curriculum to the Mighty Acorns experience. Over time a handbook was compiled, with suggestions and activities that had been tried in the field, and it was made available to participating teachers. Each school determined the depth of its involvement with the Mighty Acorns. Some had multiple classes taking part in an intensive, coordinated ecology program. Others involved only individual teachers and classes who took the initiative.

The results were astounding and reflected in the program's growth from one county and four schools to five counties and 5,000 children annually. The effects of the Mighty Acorns activity were noticeable on the land as well. As students revisited their sites from one year to the next, they could witness how their work had cleared woodlands clogged with alien weeds and restored diverse native plant communities to their homes.



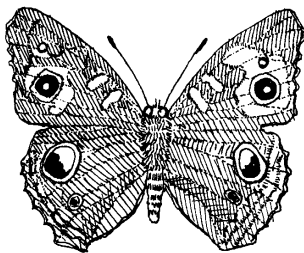
Teaching in Natural Areas

From its humble beginning a rich environmental curriculum began to emerge. Teachers found that familiar natural areas were the perfect places to carry out surveys of biodiversity, tree transects, hands-on mathematics, and team-building activities. Writing took on a new importance and realism in the outdoors. Kids carried journals, took notes, and allowed the peaceful stillness of natural areas to draw out the awe and wonder they felt being there.

*Switch grass blows in the winds
Swishing its fingers towards the sun
From the top it looks like a star
In the rain it sways on its feet*

*Christian Andrew Ambrose
Greeley School*

Excited young artists sketched bugs scurrying around a rotting log, the thrilling first flowers of spring, a butterfly drawing nectar from a savanna flower. Children put on plays and skits, advocating with passion the importance of the work they were doing to rescue our endangered prairies, woodlands, oak savannas, and wetlands.



Buckeye butterfly

Habia una vez un bosque grande y enorme que habian muchos amigos. En este bosque vivian un Scarlet Tananger, una mariposa Buckeye y una flor llamada Spring Beauty. Vivian una vida muy felices. Un dia vino una planta llamada Garlic Mustard, una maleza poderosa, hermosa y con un mal olor. Cubrio todo el bosque bajo la palma de la mano.

Once upon a time there was a great, enormous woodland where a lot of friends lived. In this woods lived the Scarlet Tananger, a butterfly called Buckeye, and a flower called Spring Beauty. They lived a very happy life. One day a plant named Garlic Mustard arrived, a powerful weed, handsome and with a bad smell. It covered the whole forest under the palms of its hands.

From Alien Species, a short play by a Spanish bi-lingual third graders

Ms. Susmarski's 5th grade class used a trip to Sauganash to do tree transects. A length of rope was marked off in feet. Students, equipped with clipboards, measured the length along the rope and the distance off the rope (North or South). They measured tree circumferences, calculated diameters, jotted notes on the characteristics of the trees, and attempted to identify the species. The data collected was used to estimate the degree of infestation of a floodplain woods by European buckthorn. By mapping these activities against the curricular standards of the District, Ms. Susmarski was able to use the activity to cover required skills in math, science, and the language arts.

Thematic units that once focused only on rainforests could now pull that focus closer to home, with actual visits to our globally endangered oak savannas. Endangered species units, once preoccupied with the charismatic orangutans and Siberian tigers, could now be expanded to include our own locally imperiled species, from Cooper's hawk to the most modest sedge.

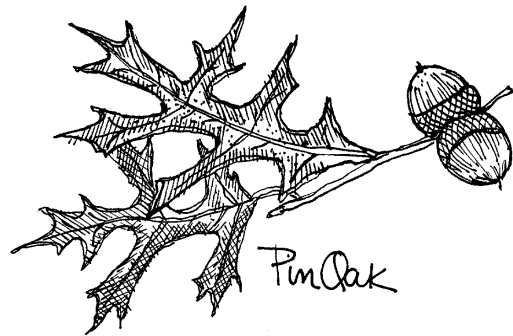
As seasons and years passed, the Mighty Acorns experience influenced the lives of the schools taking part. School gardens sprang up featuring plants long since extirpated from the neighborhoods. Seeds were collected, planted, nurtured, and cherished as beautiful and meaningful components of the schools' curricula. Geography and history acquired a grounding in a locality, bringing the depth of familiarity. Earth and Arbor Days gained in substance as a foundation of understanding of the local ecology fell in place. Classroom discussions of issues of development of roadways, housing projects, and shopping malls could take place with a deeper understanding of the effects such actions have on the ecology of the land. Our students and schools could become empowered as participants in the planning and decision-making processes of our municipalities and counties.

Mighty Acorns Sprouts

The tallgrass prairies of our region were once ten thousand times more extensive than they are today.

Oak savannas have been reduced even more dramatically. One hundred and eighty-one of the region's species are listed as threatened or endangered. Faced with this stark reality,

conservationists realized that their individual organizations' heroic efforts were not enough to save our area's unique natural heritage. In April of 1996 a dramatic new strategy was born: regional conservation planning carried out under the guidance of an alliance of our public and private conservation organizations. This structure, named Chicago Wilderness, transcending political and institutional boundaries, pools the expertise and resources of its member organizations and thousands of volunteers—to *protect, manage, and restore the natural heritage of the central Midwest region.*



The Chicago Wilderness region stretches in a broad swath from Kishwaukee Prairie in southern Wisconsin, southeast to Goose Lake Prairie near Joliet, and around the shores of Lake Michigan into northern Indiana. Initially funded by federal and state grants of \$2.4 million, Chicago Wilderness has attracted vigorous additional public and private support. The governing structure of Chicago Wilderness, the Chicago Region Biodiversity Council, channels these funds to critical projects proposed by its member organizations.

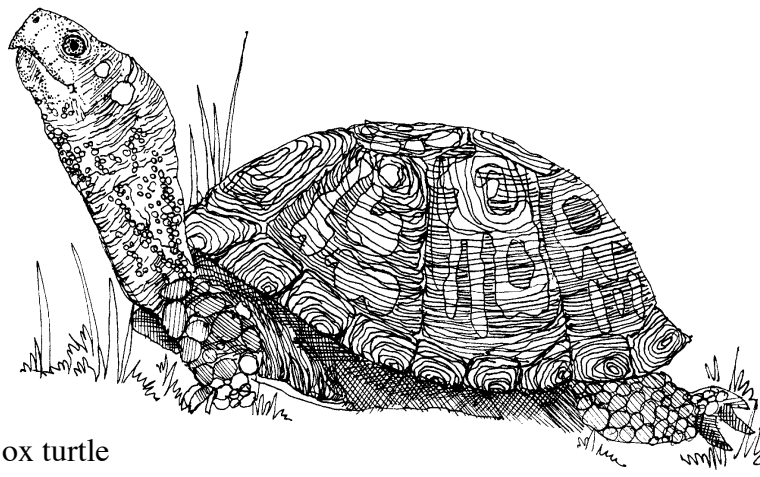
One such proposal was the expansion of youth education and outreach throughout the Chicago Wilderness region. In 1998 the Chicago Wilderness Education and Outreach Team identified Mighty Acorns as a model program for guiding students through a comprehensive learning experience in environmental education, from building awareness to taking action. Funding was awarded through a grant from the Grand Victoria Foundation, allowing the Mighty Acorns program to expand and offer its unique stewardship education to students in Cook, Will, DuPage, Kane, McHenry, and Lake Counties.

Funding from the Grand Victoria Foundation also allowed for the original Mighty Acorns program curriculum to be rethought and evaluated, and for a new manual to be developed. The Mighty Acorns expansion project now supports 17 conservation organizations in becoming partners to schools that desire to engage in stewardship education through the Mighty Acorns. Capacity building for recruiting and maintaining volunteers and for training and supporting teachers are included. The expansion project also enables the creation of this comprehensive Mighty Acorns Resource Manual, which contains assessment tools, activities correlated to state educational goals, and strategies for sustaining future stewardship education in the schools.

The Mighty Acorns expansion has made it possible for hundreds of children from underserved schools and communities to create linkages to our natural areas. Through special events, the Mighty Acorns expansion will promote public awareness of the splendor of our natural heritage and the urgency of our conservation work.

Never before have the pieces been so firmly in place and the resources so readily available for our schools to engage in hands-on science, history, and social studies based on place, this place, our homeland. We invite you to take part of the adventure of the Chicago Wilderness with the Mighty Acorns.

Written by: Peter Leki, Mighty Acorns volunteer



Box turtle