

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.

