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Northwest Indiana has stellar examples of 'rewilding'

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Provided

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On Dec. 7, The Times ran an article by John Flesher, an environmental reporter for the Associated Press, titled “Extinctions, shrinking habitat spur 'rewilding' in cities” that addressed the alarming die-off of species and how cities can help by “rewilding.”

One of the stellar rewilding projects cited was the creation of the 6,200-acre Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, located about 30 miles south of downtown Detroit, that includes islands, wetlands and former industrial sites along the river and Lake Erie in Michigan.

The article may as well have been talking about globally rare dune and swale habitat in Lake County, Indiana, also referred to as ridge and swale habitat. Similarly, the preserves here, also owned by various entities, are made up of many different intact habitat remnants adjacent to or near the Grand Calumet River. In addition, both the refuge and our dune and swale habitat are significant for their ecologies, hydrology and biological communities.

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Rewilding has different meanings here in Northwest Indiana

I'm sure there are other similarities between the two conservation areas, including species that are returning during restoration, like bald eagles. But several things here strike me as different. Note that I previously used the words "intact habitat." According to Flesher's article, rewilding generally means reviving natural systems in degraded locations.

While the Grand Calumet River is definitely a degraded natural system that has been remediated and revived in some areas, much of the adjacent and nearby dune and swale habitat was not entirely degraded and amazingly retained a great amount of biodiversity and habitat structure. Examples include TNC's Ivanhoe Dune & Swale Nature Preserve in Gary and Seidner Dune & Swale Nature Preserve in Hammond, owned by Shirley Heinze Land Trust, plus at least 10 other sites conserved for future generations.

Amazingly, this habitat remained intact for several reasons. Some sites were too wet to develop and later became protected under the Clean Water Act due to their rareness and the presence of state-endangered species such as Blanding's turtles, American bitterns and blueheart flowers. For example, Lake County Parks-owned Gibson Woods Nature Preserve in Hammond, primarily dune and swale habitat, was previously owned by a railroad and miraculously remained mostly undeveloped before TNC purchased it in 1980.

While most of these sites were never developed, that does not necessarily mean they were undisturbed. Perhaps that is where true rewilding really comes into play. For example, approximately 211 acres of the 258-acre Pine Station Nature Preserve, owned by the Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources in Gary, were previously mined for sand or impacted by fly-ash dumping and other activities. Nevertheless, it has one of the highest concentrations of rare, threatened and endangered flora and fauna in Indiana. While the conditions existed to support these species, humans had to intervene through ongoing restoration to prevent degradation by invasive species, including the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), that aggressively drive out native species.

Rewilding is a process

In the Dec. 7 article, a statement was made by John Hartig, a lake scientist at the University of Windsor, Ontario, that especially caught my interest:

"We created the conditions, things got better environmentally and the native species came back," he said.












This also applies to dune and swale habitat as well as the Grand Calumet River. Conditions were created by hard-working TNC partners over the past 35 years, including Indiana's Departments of Environmental Management and Natural Resources, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife. They diligently worked together with the U.S. EPA to make sure industries that had previously degraded the river paid damages that then leveraged federal funds to help acquire and connect properties, clean up the river, and restore wetlands and adjacent dune and swale

habitat. A lot has been accomplished to restore nearly 900 acres with more efforts underway. Plus, several miles of the river and riverine wetlands have been remediated or are in final planning stages for cleanup.

Native species are definitely responding to these rewilding efforts. TNC and IDNR staff are frequently rewarded with calls of secretive marsh bird species such as Virginia rails and soras, and Blanding’s turtles now have access to both wetlands and uplands needed to thrive.

Rewilding’s purpose here is to lessen impairments to the point where wildlife and humans can coexist and benefit from the habitat in productive ways, including having clean water, an improved and healthy food chain — especially with regard to fish — and opportunities to safely use the natural resources without exposure to contamination. I believe work here is a stellar example of what can be accomplished now and in the future for both humans and wildlife. I hope you also will embrace rewilding’s principles and take pride in these efforts as well as the unusual dune and swale habitat itself. With only approximately 17,000 acres remaining on the planet, we have a lot at stake.

Susan MiHalo is a long-time, nature-loving Northwest Indiana resident who works for The Nature Conservancy in Indiana and is a past-president of Save the Dunes. Comments or questions may be directed to slmr-in@tnc.org. The opinions are the writer's.

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