When Illinois communities voluntarily link together to protect critical watersheds, C2000 keeps the organization flowing.

Conservation 2000

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It's a program created by people interested in making a difference in Illinois.

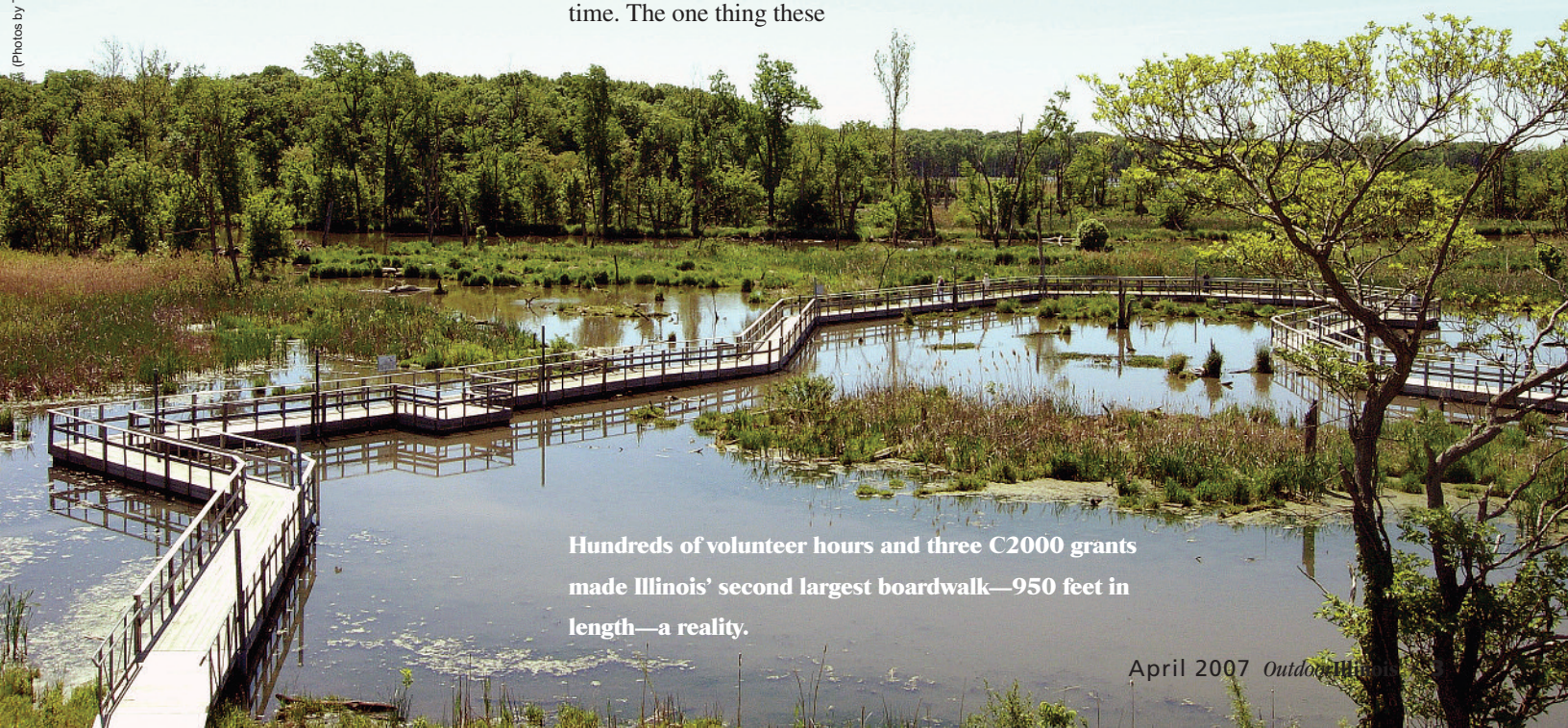
The Conservation 2000 program was developed 11 years ago as a result of suggestions made by a large group of Illinois citizens. C2000 provides a mechanism for local communities, private, public and corporate landowners to participate in enhancing the natural resources of Illinois. Three state agencies, the Departments of Natural Resources and Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency, share in distribution of annual funding for monitoring, projects, technical support or stakeholder organizations.

A large portion of the funding goes to DNR's Ecosystems Program, a unique program that bands together Illinois citizens as volunteer stakeholders working to improve conditions of the natural resources in their watershed. Groups of local stakeholders form Ecosystem Partnerships to assess conservation issues and seek funding for conservation projects within their partnership area. Currently, 41 partnerships cover 85 percent of the state.

Each partnership has unique watershed-related issues—urban sprawl may be the focus in densely populated watersheds while agricultural issues prevail in more rural areas. The role of the volunteer stakeholder is vast, from submitting and ranking projects for grant funding to managing projects, organizing outreach efforts and development of a watershed plan. In addition, they seek cash and in-kind matches for projects to reduce the total monetary cost of projects, and provide opportunities for education and outreach within the community.

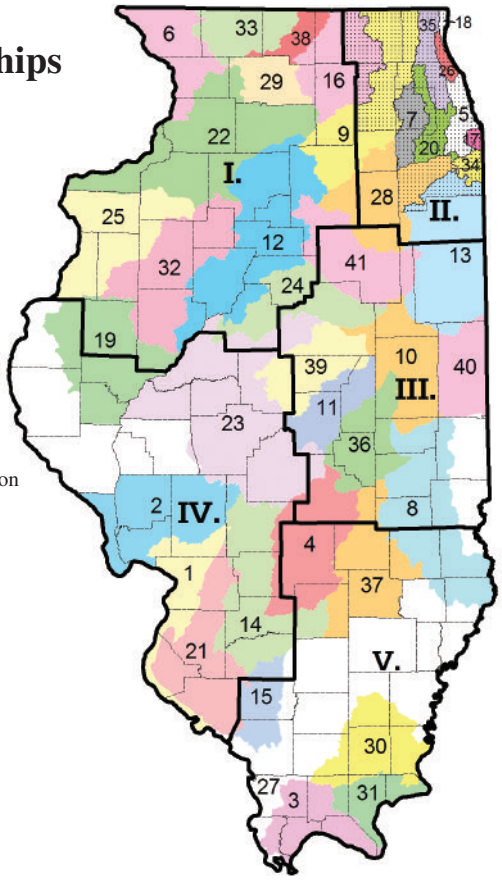
Landowners, teachers, students, farmers, professors and retirees are just a few of the people volunteering their time. The one thing these people have in common is that they care about a truly unique resource and have dedicated thousands of hours to maintain it, restore it and teach about it. About 2,300 member volunteers representing more than 1,000 organizations belong to one or more Ecosystem Partnership. Below are a few of the groups and brief descriptions of the contributions to the C2000 Ecosystems program:

(Photos by Tammy Watson.)



Hundreds of volunteer hours and three C2000 grants made Illinois' second largest boardwalk—950 feet in length—a reality.

Conservation 2000 Ecosystem Partnerships



1. American Bottom
2. Big Rivers
3. Cache River
4. Carlyle Lake
5. Chicago Wilderness
6. Driftless Area
7. DuPage River Coalition
8. Embarras River
9. Fox River
10. Headwaters
11. Heart of the Sangamon
12. Illinois River Bluffs
13. Kankakee River Basin Commission
14. Kaskaskia River
15. Kinkaid Area Watershed
16. Kiskwaukee River
17. Lake Calumet
18. Lake Michigan Watershed
19. LaMoine River
20. Lower Des Plaines
21. Lower Kaskaskia
22. Lower Rock River
23. Lower Sangamon Valley
24. Mackinaw River
25. Mississippi Western Five
26. North Branch Chicago River
27. Ozark Hills
28. Prairie Parklands
29. Rock River
30. Saline Basin
31. Shawnee
32. Spoon River
33. Sugar-Pecatonica Rivers
34. Thorn Creek
35. Upper Des Plaines
36. Upper Kaskaskia
37. Upper Little Wabash
38. Upper Rock River
39. Upper Salt Creek of the Sangamon
40. Vermilion
41. Vermilion Watershed Task Force

Big Rivers Alliance

The Big Rivers Alliance of Volunteer Organizations was spearheaded by The Nature Institute and funded by C2000 in 2003. BRAVO was designed as a volunteer clearinghouse for the Big Rivers Ecosystem. To date, volunteers have donated nearly $10,000 toward projects from invasive species control and seed collection to environmental education and construction.

One of the most dedicated groups of BRAVO volunteers manages a greenhouse at The Nature Institute's Olin Nature Preserve. Thousands of native plants are grown in the greenhouse each year for use in restoration projects or sold to promote the use of native plants in home landscaping. Administered by The Nature Institute, a not-for-profit conservation and environmental education organization located in Godfrey, staff recruit, train and place volunteers in conservation work. As a service within the watershed, BRAVO assists in placement of volunteers for stakeholder-organized events.

> "A secret to life is to make stepping stones out of stumbling blocks."
>
> *—Jack Penn*

Plum Island Restoration

When Plum Island, the "front porch" of Starved Rock State Park, became an Illinois Audubon Society sanctuary, the primary restoration project for this prime, winter bald eagle site was reforestation of the former airstrip. Coordination of the effort was a considerable challenge as the required materials, equipment and personnel had to be ferried to the island, and the trees protected from an enormous deer herd. The combined efforts of volunteers, a few paid professionals and the Living Lands and Waters river cleanup specialists made undertaking the two-year,

(Photo by Tracy Evans.)

Restoration of large tracts of land is made easier when a tree-planting machine is used.

(Photos courtesy Illinois Audubon Society.)

Throughout the state, Ecosystem Partnerships conduct educational field trips on a variety of topics, including tree planting (above and inset) and carbon sequestration and its relationship to plant communities and their associated soils (right).

$48,000 Illinois C2000 grant possible.

Two controlled burns and an aerial herbicide spray knocked down most of the 15-acre stand of reed canary grass and set the stage for the Sept. 30, 2006 work day. Prior to that day, a corps of dedicated volunteers prepared 400 planting kits containing landscape cloth, fence posts, ground staples, cable ties and chicken-wire fencing, and then flagged and prepared planting sites. In the final days before the planting they set up watering stations. With preparations complete, they sat back and worried about the rain in Saturday's forecast and whether enough volunteers would show up to plant 400 trees in one day.

The work day dawned clear and mild and by 8:30 a.m. 160 volunteers—Audubon members from Will and Kane counties, Springfield and the local Starved Rock chapter, Elmhurst Boy Scouts and their parents, Northern Illinois University student environmentalists and many other groups, families and individuals—began the ambitious invasion of Plum Island. By noon, 400 trees filled a section of the former airstrip and over lunch volunteers enjoyed a few moments of well-earned pride. The reforestation of Plum Island is half finished and plans are under way for completion in 2007.

Atwood Prairie Restoration

Atwood Prairie is a 40-acre complex of dry-mesic sand prairie located within Atwood Park and is owned and managed by the Rockford Park District. The site serves as an environmental education center reaching more than 5,000 school children each year. A C2000 grant provided funds to remove unwanted invasive species and restore native vegetation. The Sinnissippi Audubon Society is involved in management of the prairie. Between August 2004 and March 2005, volunteers contributed 1,162 hours in clearing brush and removing logs from felled trees.

(Photo by Tammy Watson.)

Kankakee Adopt-a-River Program

The annual Kankakee and Iroquois rivers Clean-up Program, sponsored by the Northern Illinois Angler Association, is considered the oldest cleanup effort of its kind in the Midwest. Modeled after the Illinois Department of Transportation Adopt-a-Highway program, Adopt-a-River participants are required to conduct two cleanups each year for a minimum of three years, with an option to continue. Funding for supplies is supported by donations from businesses and organizations including

C2000 Ecosystems Program Accomplishments

524,000 stream feet restored
71,000 acres restored
5,500 acres acquired
888,000 students/citizens educated
3,700 sites monitored
100,000 hours of volunteer time

C2000 Ecosystem Grants Awarded

920 projects
$34,916,645 in C2000 funds
$33,128,341 in match

local waste haulers, sportsman's clubs, Aqua Illinois, Coca-Cola and many others. Currently, 27 groups have adopted approximately 80 percent of the Kankakee River, portions of the Iroquois River and sections of many Kankakee River tributaries.

Vermilion River

The Vermilion River Ecosystem Partnership started in 1997 with 11 members, and to date has been awarded more than $1.2 million to fund projects ranging from education and installation of 1,000 acres of native grasses, forbs and shrubs to development of wildlife habitat and construction of the wetland boardwalk and observation tower at Heron Park on West Newell Road in Danville.

While the amount of funding the partnership has received is impressive and the number of completed projects is notable, it is the way the projects are completed that is most remarkable. Volunteers from local communities and organizations are the backbone of what the partnership is and does. It takes a whole community coming together to make a partnership work—and to make it successful.

DNR C2000 Ecosystems staff Randy Holbrook and Paula Martel review engineering designs for a C2000 Project on Kinkaid Lake in Murphysboro.

(Photo by Tammy Watson.)

(Photo by Tracy Evans.)

Integral to any ecosystem project is gaining an understanding of the plants and animals unique to the area.

Cache River Wetlands

The Cache River Wetlands volunteer program has multi-agency connections. Volunteers assist the Cache River Wetlands Joint Venture which includes DNR, Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This unique public-private partnership shares a common goal to protect and restore 60,000 acres along the Cache River.

Volunteers have played a critical role in fulfilling the mission of the joint venture. For 15 years, volunteers have planted trees, surveyed wildlife, monitored water quality, assisted with maintenance projects, led school field trips and planned special events. And today, volunteers assist the refuge and DNR with day-to-day operations at the Henry Barkhausen Cache River Wetlands Center.

"There is no way we could continue to offer school programs or events like the Birding Fest or Insect Expo, or keep up with routine maintenance, without volunteer assistance and support," said Liz Jones, assistant refuge manager.

Volunteers support DNR management efforts and are necessary for any successful management program. They perform a service for the protection of the natural resources of this state that would be impossible for DNR to provide manpower to accomplish otherwise. Being a volunteer is one way to show appreciation of these resources and aid DNR in its ongoing efforts to manage these resources. Various organizations and groups have developed an army of volunteers dedicated to protecting these resources and they need to be encouraged and thanked for the services they provide.

> "Volunteers are not paid—not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless!"
>
> ***—unknown***

How much are volunteers worth? Simply look at the beauty of the resources they are protecting for future generations and it becomes impossible to place a monetary figure on their worth.