

Is Habitat Restoration in a Municipal Park Setting

Destined to Fail?

The de-listing of Western Michigan's White Lake as an "Area of Concern" (AOC) represented a huge triumph resulting from a long, determined grass roots effort by the White Lake Public Advisory Council and its volunteer members. The project to restore the lake with the removal of polluted sediments culminated with the restoration of native habitat at ten locations around the lake.

One of the areas benefited by a significant portion of public dollars was a city park in Whitehall. Svensson Park had its difficult beginnings in 1951 with a generous donation of lakeshore property for a city park by local resort owner Nora Svensson. It took forty-one years before the city responded to the contingency that the donation be developed into a park, and due to lack of maintenance, it didn't last. When in 2010 the park was selected as one of ten sites around White Lake to undergo an extensive reshaping and habitat restoration, it looked like the park finally had a bright future. Since its donation it had become a priceless piece of natural lakefront, surrounded by urban sprawl on both sides and growing industry across the street.

As a natural park, it stands out in pleasant contrast to traditional city parks with their expanses of turf grass, plastic playgrounds and concrete. It is very popular as a result, and it could be so much more with its educational potential for the public. This makes it even more tragic that the habitat restoration failed.

What Went Wrong

The physical habitat restoration of reshaping the topography and selecting and installing plantings was carried out with excellent initial results. It took only three years for what went wrong to begin to visibly manifest itself, and only two more summers for it to have all but lost its intended function. What went wrong can be expressed in the line by the character Jeff Goldblum played in the movie Jurassic Park when he said: "Life finds a way!" Competition among plants is ruthless, especially when a few are allowed to have a built-in advantage.

The root of what went wrong was that the developers "Tossed the keys" back to the city and left without a management plan to transition the park maintenance from traditional turf grass and concrete, to the unique requirements of habitat-based landscaping. A four-acre example of native diversity in landscaping will not assume some magical balance and maintain itself as designed. With the competition of exotic invasive plants and aggressive native plants, it will become a free-for-all that will eventually be dominated by only a few undesirable winners. Four acres in a city, is a microcosm of what native diversity might be like. For this reason, small invasions of exotics or aggressive natives can quickly overwhelm their neighboring plantings. It's a

delicate balancing act that requires specific skills for it to last. The professionals who design native landscaping must realize that designing native plantings in a small park setting is landscaping. By comparison to conventional residential landscaping, it is low input, doesn't require watering, mowing, fertilizer or chemical applications, but it is landscaping just the same.



During the first four years following its restoration, Svensson Park had lost the view of White Lake due to tall growth having taken over the intentionally low, shoreline plantings, the heart of the park was a wall of towering

Japanese honeysuckle and olive trees, the native wildflower area had completely lost the battle to a single variety of goldenrod, and grape vines were beginning to blanket trees. It was no longer what was designed.

What Went Right

When these issues and others were brought to the attention of the public and the City of Whitehall, the response was very encouraging. City funds were dedicated to what might be called a remediation of a restoration. A work bee of thirty volunteers from Howmet Corporation, the Boy Scouts and city council members gathered and removed an immense volume of woody invasive plants that had developed since the restoration project. The Muskegon Conservation District was engaged and assisted in re-establishing the wildflowers and eliminating more invasives. Volunteers from the Police Department and DPW constructed a huge pergola in the park on their own time that is now a lakefront landmark.



What Now?

The sort of community and city involvement that rescued the park was exceptional and it gave it a lease on life, but the lease will eventually run out again. Volunteer, crisis-management cannot become an expected routine. A diverse habitat installed in a small-scale park needs committed, professional oversight and support for the long

term. For now, the granddaughter of Nora Svensson and I are once again fighting a losing battle to stay ahead of invaders but the effects of age has now intervened.



My correspondence with John Riley, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) confirmed their familiarity with the habitat restoration of the park and their understanding that the Muskegon Conservation District (MCD) would take the lead to support the city to carry out the ongoing maintenance of the habitat restoration that they



coordinated. This was also the response plainly stated by MCD in 2010 to that specific question by the Svensson family during the familiarization tour. So far, support has been limited to the MCD making “house calls” in response to requests by the city using amateur oversight, with the city shouldering expenses. This is clearly not the approach those involved in the habitat restoration of the park anticipated. No fund, trust or grant, specific to MCD recognizing a permanent commitment to the habitat restoration of Svensson Park has come to light. Simply turning the responsibility over to transitional volunteers without professional oversight is not the answer.

The habitat restoration was never intended to be a fleeting demonstration. It should remain “restored” to give evidence that we are committed to protecting the health of our lake and the investment in time and money it took.

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