

Como Woodland Restoration Outdoor Classroom project begins November 2006

White-throated sparrows were kicking up the fallen leaves, red-bellied woodpeckers were chipping bark off the bare oaks, and a noisy flock of Canada geese flew overhead towards the lake. The Como Park woodland off Horton Avenue was also alive with the sounds of EcoPartner's chainsaws, the cracking of falling buckthorn trees, and the laughter of over 115 buckthorn busters.



The high spirits of the 65 Como High School students and Fresh Force service-learning students was contagious on the morning of the October 28th. Val Cunningham, a St. Paul Audubon Society volunteer, noticed that our long line of volunteers, which were carrying out freshly cut buckthorn branches, resembled a colony of hardworking leafcutter ants.

Our cities would be a much poorer place without our public parks and open spaces. The natural settings they provide are clearly important to our well-being, but urban forests have become rare. However, an idea for restoring a little wooded corner of Como Park and opening it up for educational purposes has been slowly taking shape in the minds of a small group of local volunteers.

The site of the buckthorn bust is a degraded 16-acre woodland just south of Horton Avenue between Hamline Avenue and Lexington Parkway. The woodland is just a few minutes walk from the Conservatory Visitors Center and a short walk or bus ride from 20 public and private schools. The "Como Park Woodland Restoration and Outdoor Classroom" would be the perfect place for children and adults to study natural history in a local setting. Of course, human history is also natural history.

The Joyce Kilmer Fireplace (also known as the Dutch Ovens) is at the heart of the woodland site. Once restored, it could be used as a meeting place and a story circle for the students.

The outdoor classroom will have gravel paths with numbered posts. Those numbers will correspond to information in study guides. The current plan is to make the study guides accessible online, and these guides could have different content for different subjects like history, art, literature, or science. Educators and their students will be encouraged to develop and contribute content to those online study guides. And no buildings will be built – there is no shortage of building in Como Park, but there is a shortage of healthy woodlands.

The woodland itself was in a sorry state not many years ago. Since 2003, community volunteers and EcoPartners have been removing invasive plants, dismantling illegal bike jumps, and hauling out trash. Hopefully, next spring, a limited biological survey will be taken of the existing native plants still found in the woodland. And there are plans for a habitat analysis. After that is done, areas within the forest will be allowed to regenerate naturally or will be replanted with native plants.

Right now, multiple ecosystems are planned for the site. One important goal of the project is to involve students in the process with the hope of fostering feelings of stewardship for this community-held forest.

Why do we need outdoor classrooms? Our economic wealth is totally dependant on natural ecological systems, yet the understanding of those vital systems is hard to teach in traditional classrooms in a way that connects students to the real world outside. A well-educated public is necessary if we are going to solve the serious ecological problems we face.

It's important that people make meaningful connections to the natural world at an early age and throughout their lives in order for them to understand and appreciate the ecological systems they depend on. A random survey of 1,000 Minnesotans, conducted in 2003 by Hamline University, reported, "There is a connection between increased environmental knowledge, a more positive environmental attitude, and behavior changes to protect the environment."

The restored urban woodland will absorb stormwater runoff and pollution. It will provide habitat for wildlife. It will offer us a place to study and reflect. Restoration takes time and effort. And, with all the help from the community and local kids, it looks like the project is off to a good start.

Many sincere thanks to Como Woodland project supporters and volunteers: Como High School students and their teachers, Fresh Force, District 10 Environment Committee members, St. Paul Park and Recreation's EcoPartners, St. Paul Audubon Society, Ramsey Conservation District, Tree Trust, Students Today Leaders Forever, Single Volunteers Twin Cities, ROTC Navy, and involved community residents.

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