

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

December 23, 2017

Ecology News

Forest Destruction In Southeast Michigan – A few Saturdays ago I had some wetland work in western Macomb County and after, I went to look at a restoration site I worked on a few years ago. Development is suddenly increasing this year and acreage is for sale all over. The most depressing sight on my drive through Macomb County was along the west side of Campground Road, north of 29 Mile Road, in Washington Township, where it appears that about 30 acres of forest has been clear-cut, and another roughly 80 acres of mature oak forest is staked-out and roads are being cleared for a huge residential development. Well, that pretty much cancels-out any gains the TLC made in preservation.



Forest clearing in Washington Township, Macomb County, west side of Campground Road and north

of 29 Mile Road. 2017 December 09.

Just 200 years ago, a very short time in ecological history, about 95% of the Thumb was forested; a small part of a primeval forest that extended across eastern North America and beyond. Most of what remains our forest in southern Michigan is now relegated to highly fragmented woodlots, much of it perpetually degraded and immature due to clearing, over-cutting, lack of forest species recruitment, expansion of invasive species, and tree diseases. These forest remnants are critical havens and living museums for plant populations that colonized the post-glacial landscape thousands of years ago and have held-out since. Most have nowhere else to go but survive in their particular woodlot, or eventually die-off. In the face of global climate change, these isolated populations are doomed without the ability to move north or south across fields, roads, and development. Fragmentation, or narrowing and reduction of forest, increases common edge species while eliminating uncommon interior woodland species by degrading the quality of the habitat. Interior forest exists well inside the edge of forest fragments or woodlots where competition from edge species is minimal, and where normal shade and moisture are maintained. Interior vegetation in southern Michigan includes American Beech, Sugar Maple, Yellow Birch, Eastern Hemlock, Witch-hazel, and a myriad of woodland wildflowers such as trillium. Forest birds such as Wood Thrush are particularly vulnerable to fragmentation, resulting in nest invasion and territorial displacement by Cowbirds and other birds of open habitats.

The largest forests remaining in the Thumb are along the Cass River, the glacial interlobate region of hills and lakes extending from Tuscola County down into Oakland County, and the Port Huron State Game Area. Look at an aerial photograph of the Thumb and you can see there isn't much left. Most of it was cleared decades ago, but just as forest started to make gains in recovery, large-scale clearing for agriculture increased from the early 1990's due to federal ethanol production mandates. Corn prices have since dropped and even with recent technological advances, the wisdom of using corn to produce ethanol is still questionable. So goes the often senseless history of destruction that humans impose on our planet.



Remaining forest fragments in green. 200 years ago it would have been nearly solid green.

The many benefits of forest include wildlife habitat, maintenance of atmospheric and water quality, moderation of climate through carbon assimilation, timber, fuel, food, medicine, hunting, recreation, and scenic and aesthetic values. The value of wilderness, or something close to it, may be immeasurable. Some have even argued that the United States of America owes in large part, its independence to the fact that North America had so much forest, while Europe had little as a result of being cleared for agriculture, habitation, and war for many more centuries than this side of the Atlantic Ocean. With no more than 15% of our landscape remaining forested, most of it highly fragmented, and only about half consisting of mature woodland, it's high time for meaningful forest protection in southeastern Michigan, and across the globe. For one thing, all the climate initiatives in the world won't do much good if we cut down all of our forest. This is a time when we should be increasing forest. If you thought the ash tree die-off caused by the Emerald Ash Borer was bad, just wait. There are several other major diseases moving our way that will kill most of the oaks, American Beech, Eastern Hemlock, and other native trees, leaving us with what; poplars, willows, Boxelder, catalpa, Chinese Elm, Tree-of-Heaven, and buckthorn? Uh yeah. Wonderful, But that's the direction we're headed. It would at least behoove us to maintain local sources of hardwood trees for firewood in case of an extended emergency that interrupts our fragile and vulnerable infrastructure.

What to do about forests? Support your local land conservancy for one thing. If you own forest, or any natural area, let's talk about putting a conservation easement on it. There are ways for neighborhood groups to organize and purchase natural areas near them for recreation, while also increasing the value of each individual residence. Are you interested in working with the TLC on a forest protection strategy? Please contact us. Of course, this is a big issue that will require a lot of work on many fronts.

Merry Christmas one and all.

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