

Chicago Wilderness 2030: Visions for the Future

By Stephen Packard

No major achievement of any kind is possible without a vision.

Chicago Wilderness, the coalition born ten years ago that helped to galvanize hundreds of individual programs into a regional conservation movement, arose from the common vision of thousands. They have been heads of institutions, weekend volunteers, scientists, conservation organizers, journalists, carpenters, computer programmers, teachers, moms, dads, and students, all sharing the idea that the remnants of wild nature that still survive among us are worth saving and restoring. Considering the status quo in 1996 – rampant suburban sprawl, advancing invasive species, widespread ecological ignorance, and a generally shallow regard for our forest preserves – these ideas may have felt a little out of touch with reality.

One visionary who was accused of having reality problems was Henry David Thoreau, who wrote in 1854: “Do people accuse you of building castles in the air? Fine. That’s just where they’re supposed to be. Now put the foundations under them.” He seemed impractical, but his ideas launched the conservation movement.

Some ambitious visions inspire great work. Others waste people’s time. But without vision from people such as Daniel Burnham, Dwight Perkins, and Jens Jensen, the land that is now our forest preserves – refuges for play, study, art, exercise, and inspiration – might all have become just more development. We live in a world made richer by visionaries and dedicated implementers. And whatever the future becomes – for nature and everything else – will result from what we envision now.

The First Vision

In 25 years, half of our region’s 250,000 acres of conservation lands (mostly the forest preserves) will be restored to good-quality prairies, wetlands, and woodlands, rife with red-headed woodpeckers, cerulean warblers, yellow lady’s slippers, ginseng, purple fringed orchids, and nearly every species of plant, butterfly, mammal, and frog that lived here for thousands of years.

On those 125,000 acres of quality habitat will live four pairs of bobcats and 100 packs of coyotes. The coyotes will avoid people, because the tamed and therefore aggressive ones have consistently been shot, while the wild, compatible, wary ones have been protected. There will be about 3,000 white-tailed deer. (On that same land there are very roughly 10,000 deer today – so more isn’t always better.) This is one vision.

The Second Vision

The conservation community increasingly suffers from squabbling and shortsightedness. The volunteer movement gradually dries up as professionals take over every aspect and existing volunteers age or move on. In the absence of a vibrant constituency supporting their work, the natural areas professionals are some of the first to go at budget cutting times. Our high-quality areas continue to degrade and shrink as they are doing today, except that the process speeds up. Fire is less and less used as a tool, as the remaining dedicated staff have less and less time to solve political challenges. A few aggressive species entirely supplant biodiversity on most conservation

lands. Some preserves become “deer parks,” where people bring their kids to see the deer living pet-like in badly degraded ecosystems. This vision is not an optimistic one. But it’s possible.

The Third Vision

Here’s a big one. By the year 2030, our region’s conservation land has increased from the 250,000 acres of 2006 to 2.5 million acres. The tenfold increase in just 25 years was a response to public demand and economic necessity. We needed the oxygen, the recreational amenities, and the prestige of being the first metropolitan area to surround itself with national, state, and county parkland – including large acreages of permanently dedicated organic croplands and pastures. These preserves, largely converted from cornfields, halt most suburban sprawl forever and make Chicago Wilderness one of the world’s great places to live. The inner suburbs and city thrive, in part because misspent sprawl dollars have been redirected to improve the infrastructure and jobs where the people live. These changes save billions of dollars in road construction, as well as water, sewer, and other infrastructure. They mitigate flooding, improve water quality, and increase air quality by sharply reducing driving. They contribute to rising real estate values and overall business climate. Average commuting time has decreased to one-fifth the 2005 level.

In 2030, every young person studies ecology and restoration in primary, secondary, and high school. Each does one year of community service in ecological, military, or social work, as they choose. (The military has become more like the Army Corps of Engineers, since there have been no actual wars since 2015.) Conservation jobs in government, private, and research sectors are up from about 400 in 2006 to about 32,000 jobs today (a full-time job is four days a week, of course). One in four people during their free time are stewards, citizen scientists, nature teachers, or other Chicago Wilderness participants. About 2,000 gardeners raise \$500,000 worth of rare local seed in their yards annually to donate to forest preserve restoration (currently, there are 200 such gardeners). And helping out on controlled burns has become a seasonal ritual—as much a part of our culture as are clambakes or surfing somewhere else.

In this third vision, our 2.5 million acres of natural land, in both public and private ownership, include everything from neighborhood pocket nature parks, where every child in the region can discover grasshoppers and frogs, to five 100,000-acre wildernesses, each with bison, wolves, whooping cranes, rare fish and mussels in the streams, and Swainson’s hawks.

By 2030, the Chicago region will be proudly funding more ecosystem research than any other region of the country. Other scientific advances include improved crops from the native genes of crop plant relatives. We discover and promote fungi, algae, and bacteria that help maintain the richness of agricultural soils.

As early as 2010, people will have launched a program to transplant rare remnant ecosystem fragments in peril. Every shovelful of transplanted virgin soil restores the soil biota in nearby habitat restorations – contributing fungi, bacteria, nematodes, and a long list of other life forms, many still unknown to science. People will have catalogued every scrap of high-quality ecosystem left, and matched the scraps with conservation landowners. They keep tabs on development plans so they can alert squads to perform celebratory rescue dramas.

By 2030, Chicago Wilderness will have celebrated the return of the regal fritillary – one of the prairie’s great butterflies. A long list of other small animal species – from crayfish to Franklin’s ground squirrels and Kirtland’s snakes – will have benefited from the establishment of additional populations on large restored sites

What about larger creatures that humans mostly moved from this landscape long ago? Bison on some of our larger prairies will teach us a powerful lot about eastern tallgrass prairie ecology. Deer, bobcats, timber wolves, and geese will be the focus of many groups and efforts. A “Friends of the Coyote” group will help establish a better relationship between predators and the public. Chicago Wilderness will continue its world leadership as the urban area most in touch with wild nature.

Laying Foundations

What will it take to support our sky castles? Many would argue that we've laid a good portion of the foundation already. Hundreds of trained citizen-scientists already monitor plant and animal populations. Thousands of restoration volunteers chip in a few days a year. Youth education programs reach thousands of students. Populations of prairie white fringed orchid are increasing dramatically thanks to volunteer-fueled pollination programs. All these little bits add up. We work much like medieval townsfolk who helped build the great cathedrals, a task that took generation after generation. In a way, contributions like this can make us immortal.

One ambitious plan already under way in Chicago Wilderness could require many people to devote major parts of their lives to it, and yet the results could be extraordinary. In cooperation with Chicago Metropolis 2020, a program launched by the Commercial Club of Chicago (which gave us the influential Burnham Plan a century ago), Chicago Wilderness has prepared a plan to restore many preserves of 20,000 to 100,000 acres each. The areas have been mapped and published. They include areas of high biological significance that are remote from major roads. The plan also proposes smarter planning of roads, water and sewer systems, and other infrastructure.

To restore minimal good health to our 43,000 acres of forests would cost an estimated 56 to 107 million dollars. That's in addition to hundreds of thousands of hours of staff and volunteer work – to conduct burns, pull weeds, gather seeds, and more. Additionally, immediate “first aid” must be given to more than 100,000 acres of the region's most significant savannas, prairies, and wetlands. Remedial work, followed by continuing care, may require 2 to 4 billion dollars or more. It's a lot. But considering the benefits in health, economy, flood control, aesthetics, recreation, and other areas, the necessary resources could be raised.

Realizing this vision will require a lot of dedicated people, including leadership by elected officials, volunteers, and professionals with many types of expertise. It will also need advocacy group volunteers to summon the public will and funding to accomplish it. But some people, it always turns out, just love to take on significant challenges.

So perhaps it's best to end with some options for people who are thinking about what sorts of things they might like to do. What is it in life that really sings to you? What are your best skills? Do you wake up thinking about plants, birds, children, engineering, poetry, zoning laws, journalism, or what? Have you ever enjoyed negotiation? Are you the “glue-ball” kind of person who can assemble and motivate thriving groups of people? Might you like to become an expert on identifying rare nematodes or symbiotic fungi? Every scientific challenge, every social and economic challenge is looking for people to invent, or popularize, or implement. Whether you're a beginner or a veteran, Chicago Wilderness is a welcoming community that could use you.

This article was adapted from a talk Stephen Packard gave at the “Wild Things” Conference for People and Nature in 2005. He is senior editor of Chicago WILDERNESS, director of Audubon-Chicago Region, and steward of Somme Prairie Grove in Northbrook, Illinois.