

Humans have need to understand nature

By Penny Wright
special writer



'A thousand years ago, shepherds and farmers . . . were the interpreters. As we have urbanized and people have left rural areas, naturalists have assumed the role of nature explainers.'

— Tom Smith
Metroparks naturalist

"Slow down . . . Stop! . . . Open your eyes and senses and look at the nature about you."
Tom Smith has conveyed this message to countless men, women and children during his 23 years of service as park naturalist with the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority.
He is certain that once you heed his advice and "find out how wonderful it is to experience nature, you're caught."

"THERE IS a human need to understand nature," said Smith, who is chief of Interpretive Services for the 13 Metroparks.

"The naturalist helps satisfy that basic need to understand nature by acting as an 'interpreter' or 'explainer' of natural plant and animal happenings."

Smith notes an historical precedent for his role. "A thousand years ago, shepherds and farmers who depended on their knowledge of nature for a livelihood were the interpreters. As we have urbanized and people have left rural areas, naturalists have assumed the role of nature explainers."

The park nature center — with its educational offerings of wildlife exhibits, programs and nature trails —

plays a key role in accomplishing the naturalist's job.

"It's a center of orientation — a stepping stone between the city and the woods," Smith said.

TO MAKE YOUR own park visit more enjoyable, Smith recommends coming during off-peak times when the weather is less than perfect and crowds are down. At such times, you

may have a better chance of spotting such rarely sighted creatures as the pygmy shrew, bald eagle or barred owl.

"It's best to be on your own and sit very still and watch. You will likely have a fantastic experience," he said.

Metroparks' nature centers receive increasing numbers of visitors every year. Currently one-sixth of the 6 million people who visit the Huron-Clinton park system stop at a nature center.

"We are not a minor part of the programs offered by the authority," Smith said.

HURON-CLINTON Metropolitan

Authority is the brainchild of two men: Dr. Henry Curtis, one-time director of playgrounds for New York City, and Professor Harlow Whittemore, chairman of the department of landscape design at the University of Michigan.

Their research and studies led to a proposal for a system of parks stretching along the Huron and Clinton rivers from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie.

In 1936 a group of citizens from Wayne, Washtenaw, Livingston, Oakland and Macomb counties urged public support for the Curtis-Whittemore system of parks. The authority was sanctioned by the Michigan Legislature in Act 147 of the Public Acts of 1939 and was approved in 1940 by the voters of the five counties.

The Metropark system is largely financed by a .25-mill property tax (25 cents per \$1,000 of state equalized valuation) plus vehicle admission fees.

THE 13 METROPARKS cover some 24,000 acres. Kemington, near Milford, was the first to open in 1948. It is the new location for the authority's administrative offices.

They are "day" parks offering water-related recreation — picnicking, nature study, golf, scenic drives, fishing, boating and winter sports.

Four of the 13 Metroparks presently have nature centers: Stony Creek, near Rochester; Indian Springs, near Clarkston; Kensington; and Oakwoods, near Flat Rock.

Interpretive facilities are planned for the Wolcott Mill, at the Wolcott Mill Metropark in Macomb County.

SMITH NOTED that the programs offered at Metropark nature centers draw individuals and families as well as schools groups.

"While we still invite school groups out to the centers, and also continue our in-school programs, we are aiming more of our programs toward the whole family." As examples, he listed such programs as ice fishing, tracking wildlife, woodcarv-

ing, moonlight skiing, and making maple syrup.

"We have to compete with TV. We use a spoonful of sugar to make the learning about nature fun," said Smith.

"Traditional nature walks are still held, but our naturalists are branching out into the more participatory activities."

Natural world goes unnoticed

By Timothy Nowicki
special writer

AS WE go about our daily business, we see many objects around us. We hear the sounds of voices on the radio, or cars in the street, and we curl our noses at the odor of a blue, smoke-belching car we get stuck behind.

Occasionally we notice the softness of a sweater or the cold wind on our faces. Sights, sounds or sensory stimulation that we encounter every day becomes monotonous. We have become so conditioned to all of these stimuli that we hardly even notice them.

A memorable example of conditioning happened while I was in Africa. Most animals are afraid of man and run or hide when he approaches. Two lions that were in the Masi Mara were so conditioned to visiting tourists that they allowed us to drive our jeep to within 15 feet of them.

Even animals learn to ignore what which is commonplace and non-threatening.

IT IS impossible for us to take time to notice all the things in our environment. Society has become too complex to do that.

I was made aware of my conditioning to our environment by my 2-year-old daughter.

From her rear carseat, she began pointing out all the American flags that are flying as we drove down the street. I never took the time to notice all the flags that people display, until she alerted me to their presence.

Did you know, that from Livonia to Sterling Heights along Eight Mile Road and then north on I-75, there are 87 flags flying?

BECOMING AWARE of even the commonplace can be a very rewarding experience. Learning something new about the commonplace that you had not known before is also rewarding.

Our natural world is all around us. And although it is being reduced at a tremendous rate, we may think of it as the commonplace also. But until something, or someone, alerts you to the beauty and fascination of the natural world, it may go unnoticed by many.

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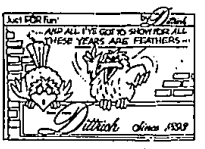
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