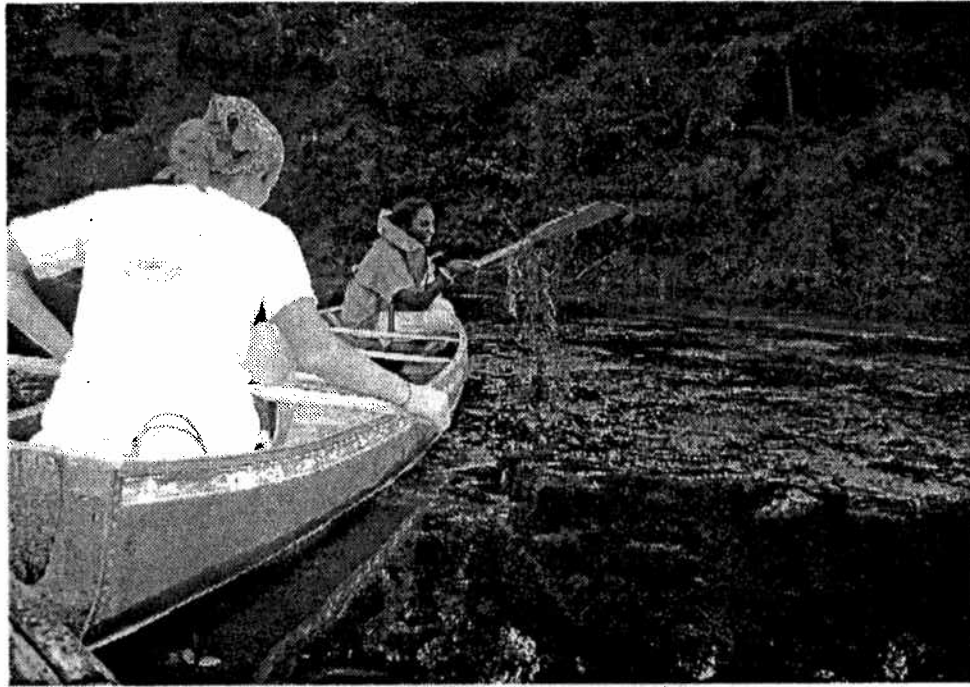


ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Taking the kids out of the city



A Knox College student and a KCHA resident explore Lake Sharvey

by Justin Sornsin & Peter Schwartzman

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Illinois' most popular nickname has got to be the Prairie State. Yet, to those of us that live within its borders, this moniker seems like a misnomer. There just isn't much of the original prairie left — here in Illinois or in the Midwest. Biologically speaking, modern day Illinois represents only a small part of what it was back in 1673 when Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet are thought to have been the first Europeans to navigate through it. In the past 300-plus years, tremendous biological change has occurred in the state, largely due to industrial agriculture and urbanization.

Despite these major land use changes, Illinois still contains a considerable amount of biological diversity, though one has to know where to look for it, as it almost always located off the beaten path—a testament to the success of the agricultural sector of our society. Many of these hard to find locations represent remnant or restored prairies, and many of these prairies are currently being managed by both the public and the private sectors.

Locally, Knox College has been in the process of restoring a nearby strip-mined area for the past 40 years—an area now known as the Green Oaks Field Station which includes over 150 acres of restored tall grass prairie, approximately 400 acres of forest, and a nearly 200-acre Lake Sharvey. Recently, a group of Knox County youth took a trip out to Green Oaks and they had an experience worth retelling.

As part of Knox College's Environmental Studies Program's new initiative to encourage community environmental education, nine Knox County Housing Authority (KCHA) youth spent the weekend of September 8th at Green Oaks. Developed and directed with current Knox students and alumni, the program brought together a tremendous resource base of eager, trustworthy collegiate staff members with a group of students virtually unexposed and largely ignorant about the native landscapes and ecosystems of historic

western Illinois. The group's immediate objective was to explore the prairie and the aquatic biology as well as take part in a canoeing experience.

The program exposed these KCHA students to the unique wonders and ecological values of the diverse environments, from the densely forested lands to the tall-grass prairie. The group hiked to the murky wonderment of the lake where they were able to canoe and explore



the lake's biology—including turtles, fish, and even a pair of beavers which inhabit its depths. The goal of the program was to encourage environmental education to underprivileged youth of the community—those perhaps more likely to be disconnected from "natural" environments.

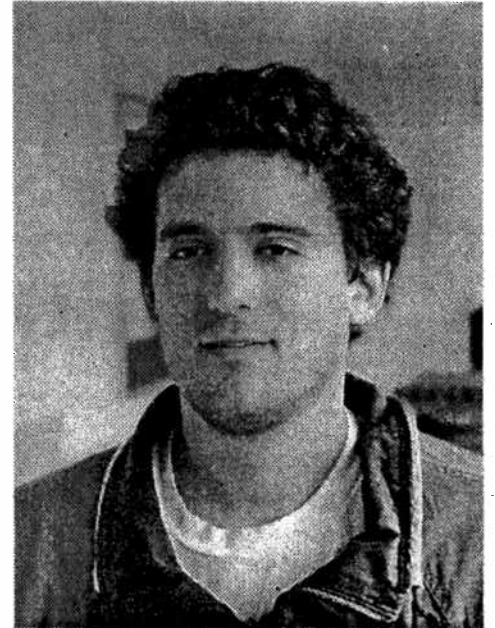
Spending most of their lives behind television sets amidst the concrete-laden environs of the city, these kids had virtually no prior experience in our world's natural wonders. One student proclaimed, "I didn't even know there were any prairies left." It was this type of thinking, one that permeates throughout the contemporary psyche of many factions of society, that the trip was aimed at enlightening.

Although Green Oaks is located approximately 20 miles east of Galesburg, these youth had no idea that there was such an ecologically rich environment such a short drive from their hometown.

Upon arriving at the facility, the youth were very apprehensive about their surroundings. After spending countless hours behind the "idiot box" of our society, their idea of a trip to nature involved large mountains, fast-flowing rivers and species that were dangerous to them. "Where are the bears, man? Don't y'all got bears here... I mean, this is the woods, right?" exclaimed one student. "I ain't going out there man. I

see what happens out there in the woods... people get bitten by snakes and stuff and that ain't for me!" proclaimed another. It appeared to be an uphill battle from the get-go, but, luckily, after a few hours of exploring the prairies and examining samples of biota under microscopes, these youth felt very comfortable.

Once the weather cleared up, we were able to take the kids out in small groups to travel Lake Sharvey in search of the unexplored. Rounding a bend in the lake, a crane dipped gingerly in front of a pair of girls on a kayak. Later, a beaver splashed around in search of his afternoon snack. All the while the students took in the sight and sounds of the place. The colors of the prairie were vibrant with gorgeous hues of yellow and red. The lake mirrored wondrous greens and brown off the shores. After a few hours, the kids were hooked; one said, "What else can we go see, Justin? Can we go swimming? How about a night walk in the prairie to see the stars?" It was amazing to see the transformation of a group of unexposed youth after only a few hours amongst nature. Through just a little bit of planning and sharing of a wonderful pool of resources at Green Oaks, the group had learned to appreciate and respect the delicate environments of historic Illinois. Although the weather did not pan out on Sunday afternoon to continue with the exploration, the goal of providing a safe, educational environment for those with no



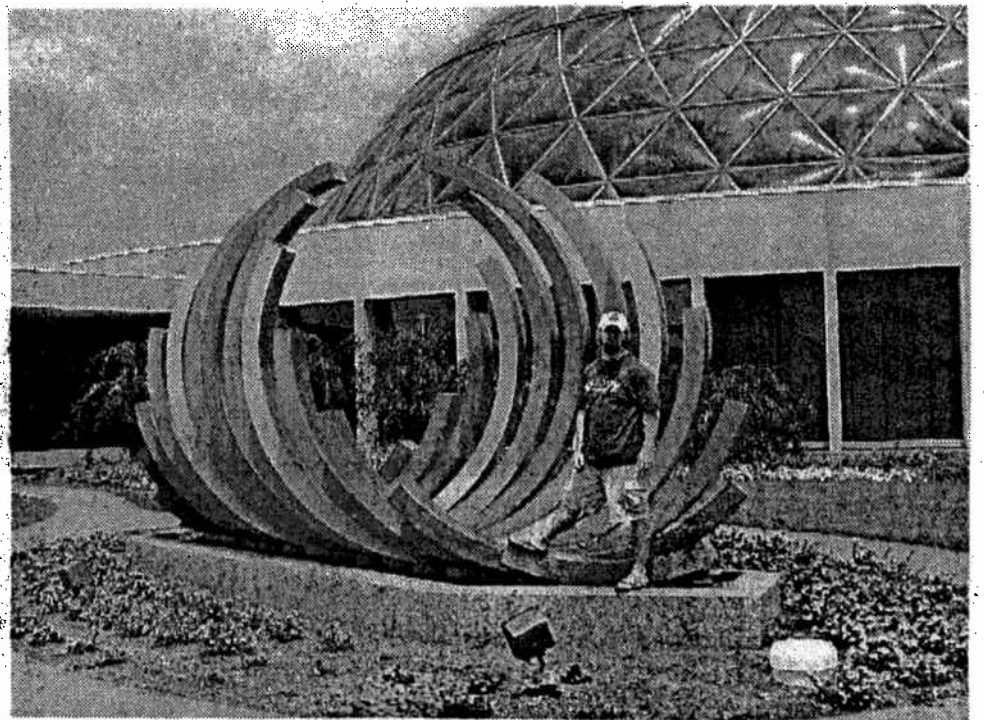
Peter Schwartzman

The organizing staff approached the event as something that the kids could learn a great deal from and leave with a new-found sense of living and interacting amidst nature. Hopefully, the trip has provided some initiative for these students to explore further, whether with Knox or alone. We envisioned the experience as catapulting them to exposure of the "natural kind" in other ventures. Realistically, however, many of these secondary motivations were overshadowed by the experience itself. If these youth took their experiences at Green Oaks and ran with it, so be it. If spending a few days amongst the prairies and animals inspired them to new heights all for the better.

In reality, though, the trip was a success in its own right. It provided an opportunity for local youth to interact with something very unique and educational. We firmly believe that children, as well as adults, need exposure to our natural environments as much as anything else—how else are they going to come to appreciate them? It helps the person grow, understand, and hopefully interact with the natural world in a positive, unobtrusive fashion.

What these nine kids do with their experience at Green Oaks is, in this sense, secondary. What does matter is that they were given a valuable opportunity—the opportunity to be free from the pressures and stresses of city life at least for a while. Maybe it was just another trip for these kids; hopefully it was more. What matters most is that for once they saw something they didn't know existed, something majestic, something inspirational, and something connected to local history. This alone makes the trip one to remember, and the natural setting allowed for it to happen.

experience interacting in one had been accomplished. Perhaps the culmination of the experience, both for the student participants and the Knox volunteers is summed up with one comment at the end of the venture: "Can we come back next week? Please?" That seemed to make all the work put into it worthwhile.



Justin Sornsin at the Des Moines Botanical Garden