

Protecting wild areas in Indiana takes all of us: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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This guest column is by Mike Baker, member of the board of directors of Sycamore Land Trust.

I live in one of the prettiest parts of the hill country of southern Indiana, west of Bloomington in the Beanblossom Bottoms. I love walking on the Beanblossom Bottoms Environmental Education Trail, built by over 300 volunteers for Sycamore Land Trust.

I am proud that I helped build this monumental boardwalk, which opens up to people — scientists, artists, children and my own family — two square miles of unique bottomland hardwood forest. I am even more proud of SLT, the nonprofit organization that now protects more than 5,500 acres of fields, farms and forests. And it aims to protect 20,000 acres by the year 2020.

These 600 acres of rare, unfragmented wetland habitat are an ecological treasure. I am grateful that it will still be here for my great-grandchildren, that they will be able to understand and appreciate it. I am grateful that they will run along the boardwalk to stay active and strong and that this marsh — filtering toxins from our soil, water and air — will help keep them healthy, too.

I think most people of my generation value the wild lands like I do. But many folks do not realize that Indiana lags far behind its neighboring states in protecting public land. Michigan, for example, has 20 percent of its land set aside for public use, while Indiana only has about 5 percent. Government is not adequately balancing built development with the open spaces we need to stay healthy and sane. If we want to see our natural landscapes protected and restored, we have to do it ourselves.

As a board member for SLT, I get to see how this apolitical organization uses conservation easements, land donations, land purchases and estate planning to help voluntary land donors preserve their families' legacies. These are parents who teach their children to leave a place better than they found it. These are people who want to stay connected with the natural world. They want to honor the land and labors of their ancestors, and they need the kind of help that SLT provides.

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels has proclaimed Feb. 22-28 as Sycamore Land Trust Week. We are all encouraged to invest in preserving our natural spaces, keeping farmland undeveloped and protecting the varied wildlife that needs such protected property to exist.

I encourage everyone to join SLT and support its important work, preserving southern Indiana's disappearing landscape. Take a drive out to the Bean Blossom Bottoms and hike the trail when the snow clears and again this spring when the birds are in full migration, the eagles are fishing and spring flowers start blooming. Bring your binoculars and look for the mink, beaver, deer, birds, frogs and other wildlife making this part of Monroe County home!

Down to Earth welcomes reader submissions of no more than 350 words on topics of interest to the local environmental community. Submissions will be edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, length and good taste. Authors must provide first and last names, as well as relevant affiliations. Submission is no guarantee of publication, and there will be no compensation for articles. Please send contributions to dte@heraldt.com.

Beanblossom Bottoms
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