An outlet for those who love nature

Idelle Kerzner | Apr 9, 2014, 4:07 p.m.

Stewardship Director Paul Quinlan, far left, talks to some hikers at Shirley Heinze Land Trust. The nature preserves are open to the public for hiking, nature study, photography, and similar passive activities. PHOTO PROVIDED

Pam Thompson of Michigan City is 71 years old and claims she is retired — or is she? Between her botany hikes, beach restoration projects, volunteer plant surveys, master gardening programs, and involvement in environmental studies, one wonders if her retirement is restful.

"I have had a passion for the natural world since I was a child," said Thompson. "I always loved being outdoors, enjoying the plants and the animals."

Thanks to the Shirley Heinze Land Trust area individuals, like Thompson, have found an outlet for a love of nature. They have also found a yearning to make the world a better place than it was found. According to Trust Stewardship Director Paul Quinlan, the organization's mission can be summed up in three words: preserve, restore and educate.

"We protect habitats and ecosystem of northwest Indiana through acquiring, restoring, and protecting environmentally, significant landscapes for present and future generations," explained Quinlan. "We inspire and educate people of all ages about the value of land conservation and how to protect our natural world."

Shirley Heinze Land Trust is a non-profit organization established in 1981 as a charitable trust to preserve and protect the unique ecosystems of the Indiana Dunes region. The land trust has been protecting natural land in the southern Lake Michigan watershed ever since. Shirley Heinze Land Trust has nature preserves in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

Quinlan is well aware educated volunteers are the backbone of the organization. Shirley Heinze Land Trust is funded by donations and grants. Quinlan and his staff provide hands-on training and helpful information that provides an understanding and appreciation of the Calumet region.

"Our volunteer leader training series that we are hosting, along with our partners through the Calumet Stewardship Initiative, will expose volunteers to the ecology of the Calumet region and improve their knowledge and skills to enable them to lead other volunteers in restoring and sustaining our local ecosystems," Quinlan explained.

Adults and children alike who attend the programs offered, not only walk away with invaluable information about how to live in harmony with the environment, but experience first-hand what it means to hike a trail, read interpretive signs, and enjoy the beauties of nature.

"In our modern world, where humans have mastered a good deal of technology to conquer the elements and make ourselves comfortable, it can be easy to forget that we are still a part of the ecosystem, and depend on nature for our basic needs: food, clean water and clean air," said Quinlan.

These nature preserves and little pieces of habitat may have little direct economic value, but they provide invaluable services, said Quinlan. Wetlands store storm water runoff and help reduce flooding, native plants provide year-round habitat for native insects that also pollinate many of the food crops. The wooded areas provide shade and windbreaks that reduce heating and cooling needs for developed areas, he added.

"Equally important is the quality of life found in a region that has diverse natural areas nearby for people to recreate and recharge," he said. "More and more businesses and local governments are realizing the role a healthy environment plays in creating a healthy economy and community."

Stewardship classes offer hands-on experience in caring for the land and the camaraderie of like-minded people who have a passion for environment preservation. Become involved by contacting Quinlan at pquinlan@heinzetrust.org, call (219) 242-8558 or visit www.heinzetrust.org.

- See more at: http://seniorlifenewspapers.com/news/2014/apr/09/outlet-those-who-love-nature/#sthash.yvA5C2aE.dpuf