



By the Books

How Burt Township School Forest Follows Their Forest Stewardship Plan

Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/Christine Hall

Grand Marais, Michigan - School forests were pioneered by Negaunee Schools in 1925 when the Upper Peninsula school established an official school forest for educational purposes. The idea soon caught the attention of Michigan State University.

In 1929 the MSU Cooperative Extension Service held a conference “to encourage, promote and foster an educational program by the establishment of school and community forests.” The conference, which was attended by educators, state and federal foresters, and even economic development authorities, really established the idea of school and community forests. In 1931, the Michigan Legislature passed the Municipal Forest Act (Community Forest Act) authorizing the Department of Natural Resources (then known as the Department of Conservation) to convey tax-reverted land to school districts and other local units of government (county, township, city) to establish community forests.

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At first, many of the land transfers were of significant acreage. The largest block, some 25,000 acres, was conveyed to Gogebic County over a number of years. Gradually, the Natural Resources Commission policy requiring tax-reverted lands to be managed for forestry and recreation at the state level restricted the conveyance of large tracts, cutting the program blocks back to 40 acres. By 1949, the state had deeded 65,433 acres of tax-reverted land to various schools and local units of government, creating 642 school forests and 223 community forests.

During the twentieth century, many schools decided to return their school forest to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR). “Today, I only know about 250 or so schools that own forest land,” says Mike Smalligan, the DNR Forest Stewardship Coordinator. In Michigan, one of the largest remaining school forests is hosted by one of the smallest schools – Burt Township Schools in Grand Marais on the south central shore of Lake Superior in Alger County. The 1,326 acre school forest was obtained from the State of Michigan via the Municipal Forest Act in 1935, 1939, and 1940.

“Even in a small town in the middle of the woods, many kids just don’t get outside enough,” said Rob Wiener, a natural resource program instructor with the Alger County Conservation District. Wiener works closely with schools in the Upper Peninsula. “Kids here are just like anywhere else. When something is right in your backyard, it just doesn’t seem as interesting,” he said.



School forest entrance along H58 in Alger County, east

*Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/
Tina Hall*

At Burt Township Schools, one of the school systems that Wiener works with, he conducts classes with both students and adults within the Grand Marais School Forest. Wiener jumped at the chance to give students some hands-on experience with ecology and wilderness survival skills. Originally from Wisconsin, he says that the school forest is one of his favorite projects.

“In Wisconsin, school forests are very common, but there just doesn’t seem to be many left in Michigan. Most of the kids here had probably never even been to the school forest,” Wiener said.

“The forest is unique because it includes a lot of ecological diversity,” Wiener said. The variety of habitats in the forest makes it a great tool for classroom expansion. Wiener has taught classes on wolf ecology, orienteering, survival skills, animal tracking, macro invertebrate sampling and white-tailed deer. The students look forward to these classes, Wiener says, because being outdoors for school is a refreshing change of pace compared to traditional classroom instruction.

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One memorable class focused on winter survival skills. Students learned about hypothermia, how to build shelters and how to build a primitive fire. Despite wet conditions, each student was successful at building their own fire.

“The students impressed me, but I think they also impressed themselves. I like to instill a desire to learn through experiences. I want to show students how they can be a wise user of our sustainable resources,” Wiener said.

There are groomed cross-country ski trails during the winter, and the school forest is used by many blueberry pickers in August and September. An 18-hole disc golf course is located within the forest and was funded in part with money from the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians. Both the community and the school have been very supportive of the educational classes and recreational uses being held there, Wiener says.

Currently, educational programs in the forest focus primarily on middle school students. Wiener hopes to soon expand the use of the forest to high school students, and then to eventually set up a permanent compass course for public use.

The whole point of the school forest program is to get people outside and create enthusiasm in the community to learn about the natural world. “That whole mentality of being a wise user of our sustainable resources is incredibly important to me,” Wiener said.

In 1992, the Burt Township School Board worked with DNR forester Bob DeVillez to develop a Forest Stewardship Plan for the school forest. Grand Marais School students implemented the plan in 1993 by planting jack pine seedlings in the school forest. In recent years, the school has worked with the Grossman Forestry Company in Newberry to manage the school forest. The school obtained cost share from the DNR Forest Stewardship Program to update their Forest Stewardship Plan with Grossman Forestry in 2002 and 2007.

The forest is primarily a dune and swale system (small sand ridges followed by small dips in the topography) dominated by red, white, and jack pine, with scattered hardwoods and hemlock. The forest management recommendations in the plan include:

- Commercial timber sales as scheduled in the plan
- Protect rivers, creeks, and wetlands
- Protect state recognized critical dune areas
- Maintain a white pine old growth stand

Burt Township School has actively managed their school forest with about 14 timber harvests between 1993 and 2009. The school earned \$276,000 in gross revenue from these timber harvests and obtained favorable bids for their timber sales by using consulting foresters to obtain multiple bids for each timber harvest.

The school forest supports a variety of wildlife species, including the spruce grouse in the areas of dense pine trees. A three-acre old growth area of mixed white pine and red pine was identified in the 1992 Forest Stewardship Plan. This area was marked with red paint to be preserved for its aesthetics and old growth characteristics.

The 1,326 acre school forest will continue to be managed for education, economic, wildlife and recreational uses long into the future for the benefit of the Burt Township students and the Grand Marais community.

If your school has forest land, the DNR continues to provide funding to schools to develop a Forest Stewardship Plan to help manage a school forest. Matching funds are not required. Contact Mike Smalligan at 517-284-5884 or smalliganm@michigan.gov for an application. Information about the Forest Stewardship Program is available at www.Michigan.gov/ForestStewardship.

If your school does not own forest land, but would like to visit a nearby forest for an educational field trip, the Michigan Tree Farm Committee provides transportation funding through its Wheels to Woods grant program. The application form and more information is at www.WheelsToWoods.org.