

Marianist Environmental Education Center

Mount St. John
Dayton, OH

In 1985 the state of Ohio dug a 14-acre, 40-foot deep gravel borrow pit on the Mt. St. John property, home to the Society of Mary, and order of Catholic priests and brothers, to build an interstate around Dayton. The excavation removed some 2.7 million cubic feet of sand and gravel deposits, left by the retreating Wisconsinan glacier 17,000 years ago. Bro. Don Geiger, SM, Ph.D., a plant biologist at the University of Dayton who lives at Mt. St. John, knew from more than 40 years of experience with plants and their environments that very little could survive in the harsh, dry, rocky pit left on the land. After dialogue with his superiors and members of his community, he laid plans for an Eastern tallgrass prairie, an ecosystem adapted to harsh environments and nearly extinct in Ohio. At the time of European settlement, Ohio contained more than a million acres of prairie. Today, just a few acres remain. A host of insects, birds and other wildlife dependent on prairies have experienced corresponding declines.

Today, the prairie is a thriving community of more than 100 native forb and grass species which provide food and habitat to the local wildlife. Perhaps just as important, however, is that the experience served as an impetus to restore other acres of the 140-acre Mount St. John property. In 1991 the Marianists formed the Marianist Environmental Education Center to: 1) continue prairie restoration and undertake woodland and wetland restoration on an additional 85 acres, and 2) share with others the ethics of land restoration and help them develop the skills to protect and restore property where they live, worship, or minister. Since 1992, the staff and volunteers of MEEC have raised more than 20,000 wildflower and grass plants and more than 500 shrubs life in our native plant nurseries. The MSJ Nature Preserve was designated as an Ohio Natural Landmark by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), who recognized it as “an outstanding environmental education area possessing exceptional value in illustrating and interpreting the natural heritage of Ohio.” ODNR is not the only agency to recognize the value of the site; since 2001 the pond in the prairie has served as a reference target for the restoration of an old Department of Energy nuclear site now on the National Priority (Superfund) list.

MEEC provides educational experiences through a program model called Mutual Service. Participants learn first how the land cares for them, and then learn how to best care for the land in return so that it can continue to sustain the diversity of life, the human community, and future generations. MEEC targets two groups for environmental service learning outreach: inner-city youth with limited access to natural areas, and local religious education groups. They work with the inner city youth because they are more likely to bear a disproportionate burden of environmental problems and less likely to have positive hands-on experiences of nature, and through the programs MEEC seeks to empower them with knowledge from a young age. MEEC works with the second group because religious groups steward significant land holdings and because faith traditions are well-equipped with moral and spiritual teachings on caring for creation. Cultivating awareness and integration of these teachings into the lives of faith is a powerful way to develop a dedicated, active constituency. The educational displays and access to nature provide occasions to contemplate the beauty and healing power of Earth as well as work toward its restoration.

Volunteer involvement in research and ecological restoration projects, programs and presentations are designed to increase awareness and appreciation of the workings of the Earth, to develop skills and to promote the preservation, restoration and enhancement of our landscapes and their life sustaining systems. Hundreds of volunteers have contributed thousands of hours to help heal the land of Mount St. John. In 2003 alone, 474 volunteers donated more than 5,000 hours of service. Since 19998, MEEC has worked with 20 schools and universities, 16 Catholic parishes, eight Protestant churches, and nine additional religious organizations including vowed communities.

MEEC also offers free workshops for the faith community throughout southwest Ohio. All participants receive free interfaith climate change resources for congregations, including a five-session bible study guide for congregations, the National Council of Churches video *God's Creation and Global Warming*, the Energy Stewardship Guide for Congregations, the National Council of Church's Environmental Justice Covenant Congregation Program, and the U.S. Catholic Bishop's pastoral statement on climate change, as well as scientific resources from the Union of Concerned Scientists and an educational curriculum suitable for traditional and non-traditional educators.

Workshops are facilitated by Dr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI, Ph.D., a plant ecologist specializing in climate change.

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Pictures from website:



Before restoration:



After Restoration

