

Saving A River Starts On The Land

By Matt Krueger

For thousands of years, the Kickapoo River has flowed through the rolling hills, hollows, and bluffs of southwestern Wisconsin. The surrounding valley is a special place. Making it even more special is that it was almost lost: a massive dam at La Farge was proposed, halfway built, and fiercely debated for decades. River conservationists beat back the dam, and the Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR) was created in 2001, protecting the Valley for generations to come.

“We feel a personal responsibility to help steward the lands, waters and wildlife of our ecologically-unique and fragile Kickapoo Watershed region”

Out of the same community dialogue that created KVR, Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) also formed, in 2000, to empower local Valley residents to monitor and care for the Kickapoo.

“We feel a personal responsibility to help steward the lands, waters and wildlife of our ecologically-unique and fragile Kickapoo Watershed region,” says executive director Shelly Brenneman. Since its founding, VSN’s focus has been to bring to residents of the Valley the resources they need make informed conservation decisions that will ultimately help the river. A centerpiece VSN program is its citizen water quality monitoring program featuring over 150 citizen volunteers since its inception. Monitoring has built awareness on the part of local residents about the importance of the Kickapoo. “Clean water is a quality of life matter,” says Brenneman.



As part of a Valley Stewardship Project field day, Dave Vetrano (far right) explains how managed grazing practices keeps soil and farm nutrients out of the vulnerable trout streams of the Driftless Area. VSN’s Tom Lukens is the man on the left in the white hat. (Photos courtesy Valley Stewardship Network)

VSN’s work with Kickapoo Valley residents has smartly expanded to more intentionally building partnerships with farmers and others in the agricultural community, as their practices, for good or bad, have an incredible influence on water quality.

“You can’t be in the business of saving rivers without working on the land,” declares VSN board chair Tom Lukens, “and it starts with education and outreach.”



This scene defines the word “bucolic.” It signifies another important constituency of Valley Stewardship Project — school-age kids. This is a group from the Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School, dangling their toes in the bucolically named Sidie Hollow Creek.

Back to the future in Coon Valley

Part of this expansion of VSN’s programming was prompted by the Kickapoo River Watershed Assessment, a compilation of ten years of VSN monitoring data that showed excess nutrients were harming water quality. This isn’t unique to the Kickapoo region—excess agricultural nutrients are the biggest pollution source to rivers statewide—but the best-known example of a critical mass of Wisconsin farmers changing behaviors to benefit water quality is in the Coon Valley watershed, just one valley to the west. And as VSN knows, though that occurred nearly 100 years ago, the region is still, pardon the pun, fertile ground for agricultural producers engaging in conservation.

“You can’t be in the business of saving rivers without working on the land, and it starts with education and outreach.”

For several years, VSN has promoted sustainable agricultural practices that benefit water quality, namely, rotational grazing. Pasture walks in partnership with the Kickapoo Grazing Initiative and Great River Grazers have built a community of technical support for grazing, and a local market for grass-fed beef. Hundreds of acres of agricultural land have been converted to permanent pasture, keeping soil and nutrients in place and out of waterways.

Next up for VSN is expanding the organization to better support agricultural conservation work in the Valley, and in several small watersheds in the immediate area outside of it. Developing grazing plans and sustainable land use practices on farms will be a focal point, made permanent by a complementary effort to utilize land use agreements, such as rental contracts, to enhance, and require conservation practices. With the current demographic shift in agriculture that has seen countless older farmers and farm families turn land over to renters, significant opportunity exists to make permanent conservation improvements on the land, a fact that VSN is wise to recognize and act upon.

We will watch with interest VSN’s latest evolutionary turn, and look forward to continuing to partner with them, as we’ve done since their earliest days, on all facets of protecting the special place that is the Kickapoo Valley and the winding river within it. ●