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## **LAND STEWARDSHIP: WHAT, WHY, and HOW**

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**What is Land Stewardship?** People who own land do so for many reasons, and northeast Michigan is no exception. For some, it is strictly economic - the intention is to hold land for awhile and then sell it for a profit. Others may develop the property for residential or commercial uses like retail shopping. These uses will always be an important part of land use planning. In such cases, the land serves as a foundation, or a platform, for activities to occur upon. The land on which retail shopping malls are built does not actively interact with parking cars, buying clothing, and eating fast foods. All of these activities occur on commercial properties but they do not need the natural systems of that land to happen successfully.

Other people own tracts of land for the active and integral role the *land itself* plays in the activities that unfold in, and on, that space. The waters, forests, soils, and wildlife are all reasons why people choose to use their land for activities like growing farm crops, growing trees, and enjoying outdoor recreation. The natural resources that are intrinsic to the landscape of the property are what drive this group to purchase land. In such uses, the land is more than a platform - it is a living and active participant in the activities and interactions that it supports. In these situations, how we as landowners interact with our environment determines how the land and the ecological processes it supports will function. This interaction determines the type and intensity of land stewardship we engage in.

“Intensity” here refers to the *quality* of the stewardship activity not the *quantity*. Stewardship activities can be small projects that yield big returns because they are focused on maintaining or enhancing the natural resource values present in the land, which the owner recognizes as valuable. The *Dictionary of Forestry*, published by the Society of American Foresters, defines stewardship as “the administration of land and associated resources in a manner that enables their passing on to future generations in a healthy condition”. Stewardship is activity that occurs now that will positively influence the land for the future.

**Why do Stewardship?** Landowners who value their land for the worth provided by clean air, clean water, a rising trout, a towering pine, or howling coyotes, understand that being active stewards increases the ecosystem integrity of their property in the long-term and for future generations. These people recognize that their individual plot is connected to a larger environmental system and because of this interconnection they understand the economic value of good stewardship. For example the decision to leave surfaces unpaved and vegetated actively protects watersheds but in addition to this, it saves the landowner and their community money down the road. By choosing not to harden surfaces means a reduction in soil erosion, contamination of water sources, and the need for increased drainage infrastructure. All of these are added costs that result from the increased volume of stormwater runoff no longer being captured by healthy soils, plants, and roots. In these times of concern over climate change, it is worth noting that vegetation also removes carbon from the atmosphere and cools the air, therefore saving the costs of energy production and use. Stewardship, like ecosystems themselves, functions on numerous scales.

**How to do Stewardship?** Many landowners recognize that their property contains a number of different natural values – forest, riverfront, wetlands – and they want to conduct daily activities without harming these features for future generations. A good land stewardship plan brings together a landowner’s personal goals for the property and respect for natural systems. To begin planning a landowner must assess the property for both the natural features they wish to protect and any problems like soil erosion, rutting of vegetative areas, or the presence of invasive or exotic species, that may exist. Following this assessment the landowner can begin to research and implement stewardship activities. Restoration projects may include placing large woody debris structures along a river bank to reduce erosion and provide fish cover, or removing invasive species through professionally recommended methods. In the case of agricultural land an owner may put methods in place to water livestock in a way that reduces erosion around natural water bodies.

Stewardship plans also include methods to enhance aspects of the landscape, such as active timber management for forest health, or the creation of wildlife food plots and vegetated corridors to provide wildlife cover. These are all examples of good stewardship practices that work with natural systems and result in specific outcomes, driven by the landowner’s unique goals and values. A number of programs and organizations are available to help with planning and implementing appropriate stewardship projects, and in some cases these agencies have cost share programs to help defray costs and encourage good stewardship.

In upcoming articles specific stewardship practices will be discussed and the agencies available to help with planning projects will be highlighted. Programs are available through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) or Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and both agencies are available to landowners thinking about conducting natural resource improvement or enhancement activities on their property.

This article was originally published in the *Currents* newsletter and can be found on the web at:  
<http://www.headwatersconservancy.org/files/publications/Summer10.pdf>

For more information on Headwaters Land Conservancy visit their website:  
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