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Preserved Education

The scope of this paper is to determine through comparison whether there is a justified need for education coupled with a concerted effort to correct environmental issues once land has been protected, or if just the act of preservation is an end in and of itself. Pearl Lake in Almira Township, Michigan and the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania will act as our case studies. They are similar in acreage, and both represented and cared for by hard-working grassroots and non-profit groups. They are both protected from development as well. The Center is the largest private undeveloped urban tract of land in the country. Pearl Lake was saved from becoming sprawl and is now incorporated into the neighboring Pere Marquette State Forest. The Center has been an “island of green” in Philadelphia since 1965, while Pearl Lake was permanently saved in 1999.

As with most development on new land , there were a multitude of environmental concerns with the proposed houses on Pearl Lake. The township of Almira, in 1990, first began to notice the influence of sprawl as populations and development increased. When the McKeough Land Company first bought the land, these problems were up front and personal with the locals. Two groups were independently established, later combined and still exist to watch over the delicate wonder that is Pearl Lake. If not for the efforts of the Concerned Citizens of Pearl Lake and Save Pearl Lake, the problems of runoff, trash, sewage and increased traffic might have done irreparable damage to the fragile lake ecosystem. Currently, the lake is home to a varying degree of flora and fauna while acting as a wildlife

corridor between its current home in the Pere Marquette State Forest and state protected open space.

The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education sits on 360 acres of land that backs up to the Schuylkill River at the edge of Philadelphia County. The mission of the Center is “to promote, through environmental education, the preservation and improvement of our natural environment”. () They attempt to do this in many arenas. Since the land is already private, they do not have to worry about potential development, and could essentially leave the land to the people of the Roxborough neighborhood. However, working as a non-profit education center allows more chance for increasing the general knowledge of the local people in environmental areas. Each year, the Center works with upwards of 56,000 students, many of whom have never set foot in the woods, or taken the time to play in the dirt or under a tree. There is a working belief that education is the key to intelligent decisions.

Along with the environmental education, the Center also supports other outreach programs. It is the home to the Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic, which is the only licensed clinic in Philadelphia. They recently made the news with a heartwarming story about a driver on Kelly Drive who stopped in rush hour to rescue a juvenile red-tailed hawk. They will also care for all animals found injured or without a home, and are the first source for all wildlife handling questions in the area. The Center has also a thriving Land Restoration department. They are working to help reestablish the American Chestnut, and are focusing on a project called Penn's Native Acre. The native acre is prevented from deer predation in an attempt to return the native plants to a full acre within the grounds. Fran Lawn, the department Director, feels “that the restoration department ties in to the mission of the Center because ultimately...we are changing the face of environmental education; not only is it about ecology

and environmental ed, its also becoming about conservation, ecological restoration and sustainability” (Lawn). The main goal of the Land Restoration department is to create an environment that shows the highest level of plant and animal diversity in south eastern Pennsylvania. The Center also supports local environmental art and uses its gallery space and land to display many techniques and projects while every other year hosting an Artist in Residence program. In the end, by looking at the Center, “you can see that the mission that was developed in the early years has been developed and polished and improved on, until you have today, you have a successful open space” (Meigs).

Pearl Lake is preserved. It is a part of the state forest system in Michigan. The various non-profits, grassroots organizations and public trusts have worked very hard to prevent shoreline development. This is a spectacular start. However, there seems to be a missing component. By taking a look at a few maps of Benzie County, the location of Pearl Lake, it is easy to find the proximity to Lake Michigan. Pearl Lake is five miles from Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. When Pearl Lake is first searched for under a popular search engine, the first hits are for lake house rental properties, or local real estate. The state forest websites are hard to navigate and list very little useful information about the lake. The EPA lists basic assessment data which tells little except that Pearl Lake is not threatened in regards to both recreation and aquatic life harvesting or consumption. This is not to utterly say that the preservation of Pearl Lake should not have happened. That is not true. Even if the only reason was aesthetic, that is still reason enough. Anything that brings awareness to the public on the topic of sprawl is reason enough. However, there does seem to be an opening to help educate the public onto the environmental problems that abound.

Policy is the governance of most everything. Public opinion, however, has the power

to change policy. To change public opinion, though, there needs to be one of two things. The first is catastrophic education. There is evidence that the levees in New Orleans would not hold up, but this was not proved certain to people until Hurricane Katrina came through. Quick-strike education. Change might be happening, sure enough people are upset and striving for a change in policy. The second method is slow education, education of our youth, to foster intelligent decisions as they grow and become leaders. This takes energy, patience, time and more energy. This requires more than a stopgap fix by placing a moratorium on development and donating a lake to the state forest system. This requires progressive attitudes instead of preventing development but still allowing off-road vehicles and high boat traffic. How do the many influence the few who control policy? By becoming educated, dedicated and motivated, and by speaking as one voice, leading by example, and increasing awareness.

I am not saying that Pearl Lake should not be praised, or that it should not be in *Solving Sprawl*. However, when compared to a similar plot of land, there seems to be not much comparison as to which is acting more forward. I am just calling for more from the grassroots groups associated with Pearl Lake. They have a good foundation to build upon. They achieved a great conservation victory and prevented local sprawl. The next step is education. It is the key to change because "in the end, we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught" (Dioum). There is also the urban versus non-urban tangible difference between the two studies. The market for education in Philadelphia is much higher than in suburban Michigan, and in such a case the Center seems to be doing a great job in the non-profit world. David O'Neil speaks eloquently about the Center when he says that it "...is such an oasis, such a

place of peace, and where you can connect with nature like the great American tradition of Thoreau and Emerson. You can really do that [there], it is big enough that you can feel you are lost in nature even though you are in the middle of the fourth largest city in the United States" (O'Neil). If that imagery and emotion is able to be evoked within urban city limits, then I believe that the job of educating and establishing a respect for nature has ample opportunity to grow in this country.

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