



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

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Saving Illinois' Forests by Cutting Down Trees

ALTO PASS, IL — Conservationists normally plant trees – not cut them down. But, in an innovative project at Trail of Tears State Forest, that is precisely what the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is doing to restore a more open, sunny forest that can support a diversity of life.

“We intend to restore a healthier, more resilient forest. Wildlife should find this a better forest to call home,” said IDNR forester David Allen, who co-led a collaborative work group of natural resource professionals, members of the community and conservation leaders through a two-year process to study the forest and determine what actions, if any, should be taken.

What group members found is that dramatic changes are sweeping Southern Illinois forests. Recent inventories of Trail of Tears State Forest reveal oak trees and native plants are on the decline. Oaks, the keystone tree species at the forest, saw numbers in the canopy drop by 50 percent between 1980 and 2014. At the same time, there was a steady increase in American beech and maple. Unfortunately, neither of those trees provides food for wildlife comparable to the oaks that are being lost.

“Oaks provide food to birds and mammals. Take away the oaks, and you have less wildlife,” said Charles Ruffner, who teaches forestry at Southern Illinois University and leads the Fire Dawgs, a group that has helped with restoration efforts at Trail of Tears State Forest. “Much of the life in this forest has adapted, over thousands upon thousands of years, to having oaks here. If we lose these oak trees, then it could have a ripple effect to all the life that lives here. Better management, on the other hand, should translate into more wildlife, such as turkeys.”

Native plants are winking out, and oak saplings are disappearing at Trail of Tears. That’s because American beech and maple are making the forest shadier. Trees at Trail of Tears State Forest block about 95 percent of the sunlight, meaning only about 5 percent reaches the forest floor. Oaks, for example, need a lot more light than that. They prefer a forest where 30 to 70 percent of sunlight is able to reach the forest floor.

“The changes we’re seeing in Southern Illinois forests represent an unprecedented shift in the natural communities that make up our forests,” said Ben Snyder, a forest ecologist with the IDNR. “By selectively removing trees, we can let more light into the forest for oaks – the dominant tree in our forests and food for about 100 different animals.”

Selectively removing trees should have a ripple effect in the forest. It will restore the forest’s wildflowers, grasses and shrubs. Bees, butterflies and other pollinators feast on these flowers. It will improve habitat for wildlife, such as birds that prefer grassy openings for nesting and foraging.

Restoration crews at Trail of Tears State Forest today began selectively removing trees on 142 acres as part of an effort to restore a more open, sunny forest that can support a diversity of life. The restoration effort is located at the forest’s 925-acre demonstration project, which is designed to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, charting the best path forward for restoring the site’s diverse forest communities.

At the demonstration project, management actions will be monitored so that effectiveness can be evaluated objectively. Often called “adaptive management,” this approach allows land managers the opportunity to learn how best to restore natural communities and improve its management. Southern Illinois University and the Illinois Natural History Survey will support initial monitoring efforts.

“It may seem like an oxymoron, but we are cutting down some trees to save the forest,” said Tracy Fidler, who co-led the collaborative work with David Allen while directing conservation and outreach for Shawnee Resource Conservation & Development. Fidler now works for Shawnee National Forest.

Trail of Tears State Forest, located in western Union County, spans more than 5,000 acres. Its oak forests, woodlands and barrens are home to the state-threatened timber rattlesnake and rice rat, and, possibly the federally-endangered Indiana bat. In all, the forest is home to 23 species of conservation concern, a designation that indicates their populations are small and/or declining.

The mission of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources is to manage, conserve and protect Illinois' natural, recreational and cultural resources, further the public's understanding and appreciation of those resources, and promote the education, science and public safety of Illinois' natural resources for present and future generations.

The Saluki Fire Dawgs is a student organization at Southern Illinois University. Its purpose is to conduct ecological research and maintain wildlands across federal, state and private ownerships. The Fire Dawgs participate in prescribed burns and other forest management and maintenance activities at Trail of Tears State Forest.

The Shawnee RC&D Area, Inc. serves the southern 16 counties of Illinois. Its mission is to provide local leadership and the framework required to develop and carry out a plan of action for the conservation, development, and wise use of the resources within the RC&D area.

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