



# Coordinator's Corner

## Shifting Perspectives

It was August 1994, I had been here at the newly created NAP for less than a year. I was trying to get us organized to do battle with all the nasty invasives that were taking over our city parks, and scrambling to learn as much as I could about the best way to kill each of these horrible plants. That's how I found myself in Lansing at the annual conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration. I had scoured the conference schedule for all the talks about controlling buckthorn, honeysuckle, garlic mustard, purple loosestrife, or other evil weeds. I was jotting down lots of notes about how to best apply the management tools of prescribed fire, mowing, herbicides, and hand-pulling to get rid of these pests.

Dashing between concurrent sessions, I had the good fortune to bump into Dr. Gerould (Jerry) Wilhelm, a pre-eminent botanist, then with the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois. Jerry had just finished coauthoring the monumental work, *Plants of the Chicago Region, 3rd edition*, which was the origin of the Floristic Quality Assessment System that NAP was employing to characterize the quality of our city's natural areas. So I certainly knew who Jerry was, although I'm not sure if I had met him before then. Perhaps I had, because Jerry and I had a brief but meaningful talk on this encounter, although Jerry is the kind of guy who will stop and have meaningful talks with anyone.

During this particular discussion, I was telling Jerry what I had just learned in a concurrent session about the best way to eradicate garlic mustard. After a few minutes, Jerry calmly put his hand on my shoulder and gently said, "You're missing the point, Dave. The point is not to kill the bad plants. The point is to restore the native ecosystems." He went on to explain more about why I needed a fundamental shift in my perspective. He wasn't talking as a scientist then, but as a spiritual leader. He patiently explained how focusing positive energy on restoring life to the native ecosystems of Ann Arbor is vitally different than focusing negative energy on killing "bad plants." Some of the steps along the way might be similar, but the entire process originates from a humble attitude of nurturing rather than an arrogant one of destroying.

I'm sure I stood there with my mouth open. Still reeling from the impact of Jerry's words, I think I tried to ask a few questions, pretending I had some grasp of what he was talking about. But my brain quickly filled up, and I think I shuffled off to a corner somewhere to ponder this revelation I had been given.

Of course, Jerry was dead-on in his message, and in his assessment of this greenhorn's misunderstanding of an important truth. I've since relayed this story to him, and thanked him for his wisdom. It was a fundamental shift for me personally, and for NAP's approach to ecological restoration.

- Dave Borneman, Manager



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*The mission of Natural Area  
Preservation is to protect and restore  
Ann Arbor's natural areas and to  
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**Address:** 1831 Traver Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48105  
**Phone:** 734.794.6627  
**Fax:** 734.997.1072  
**E-mail:** [nap@a2gov.org](mailto:nap@a2gov.org)  
**Web site:** [www.a2gov.org/nap](http://www.a2gov.org/nap)  
**Blog:** [www.a2nap.blogspot.com](http://www.a2nap.blogspot.com)

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