



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 18
Issue 1 *Spring 2009*

Article 1

Spring 2009

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Recommended Citation

Arthur, Kate (2009) "Common Ground," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol18/iss1/1>

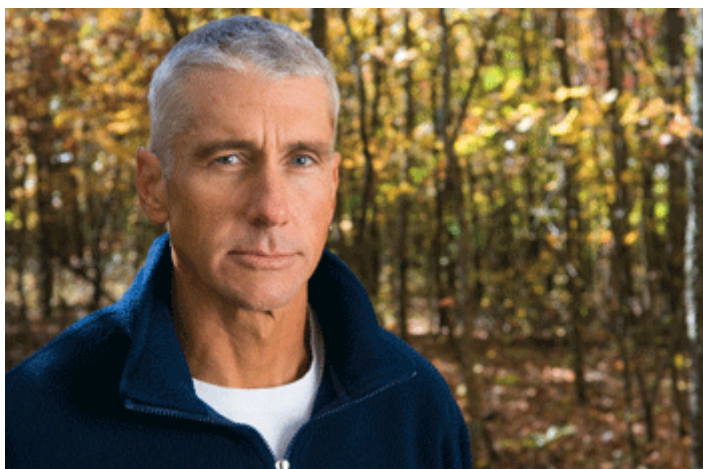
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Common Ground

To turn back decades of damage to Illinois' Cache River wetlands, conservationist Mike Baltz '87 strikes a balance between human concerns and the needs of nature.

Story by Kate Arthur
Photos by Lloyd DeGrane



Illinois' Cache River basin offers a mother lode of biological diversity. As a project director for the Nature Conservancy, Mike Baltz (above) is working to restore this area to the forested wetlands of yesteryear.

An electric-blue hatchback rumbles down a gravel road, stirring dust that settles into the surrounding forests of oaks and hickories. Inside, a pinecone and a can of Blue Diamond almonds rock on the dashboard.

Mike Baltz's 6-year-old son, James, plucked the cone from his school's playground and saved it for his dad.

Not that his dad really needed a pinecone, since he spends his days surrounded by thousands of acres of forest. But it works well as a symbol, to remind him every

day of his mission. If it hadn't been for his kids, he wouldn't be on this path. It was the birth of his first child, Sophia, that inspired him to leave academia to "make a difference on the ground" as a full-time conservationist.

Today Baltz's path leads to the entrance of a rocky, three-quarter-mile trail where the driving ends and walking begins. The destination is Heron Pond, a name that understates this spot's tranquil grandeur. Save for the floating boardwalk that zigzags through the watery forest, the setting seems almost primordial, as autumn sunlight filters through the branches of ancient cypress trees.

Baltz describes it as "like Louisiana without the alligators." The statement strikes a surreal chord considering this cypress swamp is surrounded by a typical Midwestern landscape of gentle hills, farm fields and towns represented by tiny dots on the map.

Heron Pond — part of the Cache River basin at the southern tip of Illinois — offers a glimpse of what much of this area once was. This is among the few remaining wetland areas in the Lower Mississippi River Valley not drastically altered by channelization and drainage over the past 100 years.

As the Southern Illinois projects director for The Nature Conservancy, Baltz works to turn back those hundred years. Designated in 1996 as a “wetland of international importance” (others include Florida’s Everglades and Okefenokee Swamp), the Cache River basin is a mother lode of biological diversity, from cypress and tupelo swamps to some of the most intact bottomland hardwood forests in the Mississippi Valley region.

Placing his hand on the trunk of a bald cypress tree that’s seen more than a thousand summers, Baltz stops and looks up at the gnarled fingers of branches poking the sky. There’s little else you can do when you come upon the massive trees with buttresses that resemble huge talons clawing the ground, grey bark shredding from the nails.



“Imagine the stories these trees could tell,” he says. “They were already 500 years old when Columbus hit the Bahamas and people still thought the Earth was flat.”

The stories would include efforts to drain the swamp that began as soon as settlers arrived in the region. Then the Post Creek Cutoff, an artificial ditch, was cut in the early 20th century to drain the Cache Valley for agriculture. The swamp quickly began to disappear as trees were cut, erosion choked the river and natural ponds began drying up.

In the 1980s, a grassroots association of area hunters, fishermen and nature lovers enlisted help from state and federal agencies, as well as non-profit groups such as The Nature Conservancy, to form the Cache River Wetlands Joint Venture Partnership. “The challenge,” Baltz says, “is to restore the river system in a way that’s ecologically significant, but that also addresses the needs and concerns of the people living in the valley.”

The venture’s goal — to protect a 60,000-acre wetland corridor along 50 miles of the Cache River — has been a stunning success, with nearly 40,000 acres restored so far. But the project has also stirred local concern. Some area farmers worry that bringing back the wetlands may also flood their fields. Other residents wonder whether having so much protected land in public ownership might hinder efforts to develop the area.

A big part of Baltz’s job is to take such concerns into careful consideration, balancing the interests of “local folks” with those of contractors, researchers, media, donors, legislators, local elected officials and landowners.

The strain of trying to satisfy all these interests can take its toll. As Baltz makes the daily commute from his Carbondale, Ill., home to his field office in Ullin, he sometimes can’t shake the feeling that conservationists like him are on the losing side of the battle to

preserve Earth's natural balance. Admitting this, he pauses to recall the Ernest Hemingway quote about the world being "a fine place and worth the fighting for." The pause grows longer and then a thin smile spreads across his face.

"More honestly, my motto is from a Dr. Seuss book, *The Lorax*. 'I'm the Lorax and I speak for the trees.'"

Baltz says he could have never predicted his career path when he started at Illinois Wesleyan as a biology major. Back then he thought if you were interested in biology, you became a doctor. But he quickly found out he cared more about birds and trees and how the natural world worked. This interest was fired by Biology Professor Lou Verner, who taught ecology at the University from 1979 to 1992. Baltz can still quote his mentor, who liked to say, "In ecology you never do just one thing. Everything is connected."

When Baltz enrolled in an advanced seminar from Verner, "we used to meet at his home to discuss ecology papers," he recalls. "The house was full of aquaria and I could see myself living that life, in that kind of home."

While at Illinois Wesleyan, Baltz developed a competing passion for bodybuilding. Going for a state title in 1985, he took fifth place and said to himself, 'Since I'm not going to become the next Arnold Schwarzenegger, I'd better get serious about being a biologist.'

He did just that, getting his master's degree in environmental science from Miami University in Ohio after completing a project on Andros Island in the Bahamas, where he met his wife, Monique.

In 1990, they returned to the States and he took a job as an environmental scientist with a consulting firm. But he grew restless in his cubicle, disillusioned by the work and bored with his coworkers' talk of their SUVs, big homes and golf. So he returned to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in ecology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He spent his winters studying prairie warblers in Puerto Rico until 1996, when he and Monique became parents of Sophia. That changed everything.

"I was sitting in a rainforest in Costa Rica when I decided that studying birds wasn't how I wanted to help keep this planet habitable for my daughter," Baltz says.

Back at the University of Missouri, he created the Mizzou "Tigers for Tigers" conservation program with the hope of channeling university and alumni loyalty for the school mascot into conservation of real wild tigers. The experience taught him skills, such as marketing and public relations, which served him well when he joined the non-profit Nature Conservancy in 2001. Attracted to the challenge of working on a large-scale conservation project in his native state, Baltz also respected the Conservancy's non-confrontational, science-based approach and international perspective.

“All kinds of people tend to like us,” Baltz says, referring to the Conservancy. “Our approach is very pragmatic. Our goal is to maintain the viability of the area, not necessarily to put it back the way it was two hundred years ago.”

One of the places where this approach is working is Heron Pond, once owned by a timber company and now a national natural landmark. While larger mammals such as wolves, elk and bears vanished when sawmills came to the Cache watershed in the 1850s, the area is still home to more than 100 threatened or endangered species in Illinois.



Baltz (above left) leads Conservancy trustees through the Cache River wetlands. While he enjoys being out in the field, much of his time is spent listening to the concerns of contractors, researchers, donors, legislators and landowners. “My job,” Baltz says, “is to convince people to do the right thing.”

Standing on the pond’s floating boardwalk, Baltz cups his hands to call one of those residents: a barred owl.

“Hoo, hoo, too-HOO.”

Silence.

He tries again before moving on, surrounded by the stillness of the swamp covered in a green carpet of floating duckweed and feathery bronze needles. He rests a hand against the rail and listens to the silence.

“An old stand of woods like this helps put things in perspective,” he says. “That cypress tree has been here 1,000 years.

Think of how many horrible things have happened in that span of time. And yet, that tree is still here, doing its thing.”

He remembers looking outside his bedroom window on Sept. 11, 2001, and seeing a small songbird perched in a tulip tree.

“That American Redstart was heading south and it was going to the same place it went the year before and it didn’t matter to that bird that planes were flying into the World Trade Center. People told us our world had changed, that it would never be the same, and yet, the world hadn’t changed for that bird.” That’s the essence of his work: keeping the natural world unchanged. As unchanged as possible.

“This is a test we have to pass. Failure is not an option.”

While facing the challenges of helping humanity pass that test, he’s rediscovered an old passion that helps him let off steam and focus his energy. “I have been competing in natural (drug-tested) bodybuilding contests since I turned 40 and recently got certified as a personal trainer,” Baltz says. At a North American Natural Bodybuilding Federation

competition in St. Louis this past October, Baltz took fifth place. “So, in addition to my work with the Nature Conservancy, I lead a rather secret double life as a muscle-head.”

One thing he especially likes about bodybuilding, he adds, is that “you can work out and the results are very clear. The results of my conservation work are much less tangible. It can be hard to measure my success. I’m not the guy who rides a tractor and plants the trees or passes legislation. My job is most often to convince people to do the right thing, to speak for the trees, and often my success is hard to quantify. Even when we buy land and plant trees on it, the full impact may not be seen for a hundred years.”

Although the future of the land around him remains uncertain, Baltz takes hope in projects such as the Conservancy’s 2,800-acre Grassy Slough Preserve, located where the Lower Cache River begins. When the Conservancy bought the land in 2000, it was a vegetable farm. Now it’s a seven-year-old forest. Baltz walks over to a three-foot tall cypress with a dime-sized trunk.

“You know you’re not going to be around to see the results of this, but you sort of accept that,” he says, pulling a branch toward him and then letting it go.

“I know what I did today, but sometimes you have to step back to see it,” he says, as he does just that, lifting his arms as if to embrace the life that fills the burgeoning forests and evolving wetlands around him.

“This, this is what we did.”