

Quick, Timely Reads
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus
On the Waterfront

Cascade Creek Restoration

From Dead Birds and Nasty Droppings to BMWs and Fly Rods

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.

A few years ago, I was driving the Bayfront Parkway when I noticed several luxury automobiles parked along Cascade Creek. Curiosity inspired me to turn into the parking lot at the Cascade Docks to see what was happening. And there, to my amazement, were a dozen fishermen decked out in trendy fish vests, wearing specialty creek shoes, and holding carbon-fiber fishing poles. Several BMW, Mercedes, and Lexus car trunks were popped open, revealing stacks of backup angling gear, tackle boxes, extra poles, and more. These were not the bucket fishermen that used to inhabit the bayfront. They were high-end anglers enjoying "catch and release" angling. What had happened to Cascade Creek?



Fishing Cascade Creek at the wooden bridge

A confluence of forces has fundamentally altered the creek, transforming it from a filthy and polluted waterway, essentially devoid of life, to a pristine stream, teeming with sport fish. The agents of change were Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier Park, the Save Our Native Species of Lake Erie fishing club (S.O.N.S.), Pennsylvania Sea Grant, the Carrie T. Watson Garden Club and Strong Vincent High School.

The transition began with L.E.A.F. In 1997, Dan and Kathy Dahlkemper developed a vision for an arboretum in Erie and began a relentless drive to convert Frontier Park, a once-abandoned dairy farm (with Cascade Creek running through it), to a community showplace. Their idea, which seemed far too ambitious to many, eventually found allies in city of Erie Mayor Joyce Savocchio, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, and the Carrie T. Watson Garden Club. Savocchio volunteered the use of Frontier Park, Ridge provided a major funding grant, and the Carrie T. Watson Garden Club offered to donate a large labyrinth on the park's lower level.

Frontier Park was the Dahlkemper's first choice since it was close enough to Presque Isle Bay and Lake Erie to enjoy a relatively mild climate yet was protected from the harsh spring and fall storms that characterize Lake Erie's shoreline. Since 2001, when the plan was officially launched, L.E.A.F. has matured into one of Erie's most valuable treasures. With a sustainable central headquarters building, a large supportive membership, and year-round programming, the organization has added a thousand trees (many of which are identified), groomed old and new pathways, built beautiful bridges and gateways throughout the park, and completed a multi-year cleanup program.



The L.E.A.F. headquarters building

In 2017, as L.E.A.F. was maturing, the S.O.N.S. decided to help with the cleanup and restoration of Cascade Creek. S.O.N.S. is a 2,000-member local organization that has dedicated itself to the support of local fishing since 1981. Its work has included several environmental cleanups, the enhancement of sport-fishing access, the operation of a hatchery on the bayfront, supplying safety equipment, presenting workshops for kids, supporting work at Presque Isle State Park, and providing accessible areas for fishermen. Longtime S.O.N.S. President Jerry Skrypzak welcomed the opportunity to rehabilitate Cascade Creek after he and the S.O.N.S. had worked on Walnut Creek. Skrypzak credits S.O.N.S. Vice President Ed Kissell, as well as Dave Skellie from the Pennsylvania Sea Grant, with the remarkable success of the project.



S.O.N.S. Vice President Ed Kissell is ever-present on the bayfront.



The S.O.N.S.' best community work may be the numerous children's workshops it sponsors during the year. These kids are learning how to fish at the Presque Isle Rotary dock.

Kissell, who has been the keeper of both the east and west Bayfront Parkway entry portals for years (planting, decorating, and trimming the grass), served as the S.O.N.S.' Cascade Creek cleanup project director, while Dave Skellie of Pennsylvania Sea Grant led fundraising and project engineering. Using the former Strong Vincent High School students as volunteer workers, S.O.N.S. and the Sea Grant labored to clean up the creek and restore it to health. The use of Vincent students allowed park and creek cleanup efforts to become an educational initiative and a contribution to the community. Students and their teachers used the opportunity to make science labs come to life.



Pennsylvania Sea Grant logo

The cooperative creek restoration included removal of creek-bed invasive plants and the addition of appropriate native trees, shrubbery, and foundation plantings. In addition, several areas of the waterway were restored. Pennsylvania Sea Grant, which developed the restoration design, has been a continual presence in Erie, helping maximize the environmental and economic potential of precious water resources. One of 33 national Sea Grant stations, it is headquartered at the Tom Ridge Educational Center, where it has been a powerful regional force for decades, helping monitor environmental threats and working tirelessly to repair troubled waterways as well as their connected lands. Among its many accomplishments, it has rescued, protected, and restored more than 200 acres of coastal habitat, removed and recycled plastics from the regional Lake Erie drainage area, built fish habitats, significantly reduced toxins and led programs dedicated to ridding the area of non-native species.



Dave Skellie, at right, and Tom Cermak from PA Sea Grant stand in Cascade Creek.



Working in Cascade Creek

Today's L.E.A.F. is filled with beautiful paths and trails. Some meander along the creek while others circle the park's upper borders, making it possible to hike along the edge and see down into the lower regions. Several paths are lined with newly planted crab apple trees, which boast a variety of buds in the spring. For the most athletic, the eight-mile Bayfront Parkway trail connects L.E.A.F. with Erie's original arboretum at Penn State Behrend.



A colorful spring display of budding trees

The most distinct feature of the lower level is the L.E.A.F. labyrinth, a contemplative walking puzzle created and donated by the Carrie T. Watson Garden Club. Established in 1925, Erie's premier garden club was organized to honor the life of its namesake, Carrie T. (Tracy) Watson, who was an accomplished horticulturist. Watson was instrumental in many community beautification projects when she lived at her West Sixth Street mansion, today's Watson-Curtze Mansion and home of the Hagen History Center. Watson's namesake club, established after her 1923 death by her daughter, Winnifred Griswold, continues to contribute to the region.

One of their first and most important projects was helping to replant missing trees at Presque Isle shortly after it had become a state park. They also used their influence to foster garden clubs in regional communities, including Fairview and North East. Erie's first arboretum was created on the fledgling Behrend campus after charter club member, Mary Behrend, widow of Hammermill Paper Company co-founder Ernst Behrend, donated her summer estate to Penn State. In addition to the arboretum at Penn State Behrend, the garden club has created gardens at Asbury Woods and the Erie Zoo. The L.E.A.F. labyrinth cost almost \$30,000 and is maintained in perpetuity thanks to a generous endowment. A truckload of 660 pre-cast pavers was delivered to the park and carefully placed in the puzzle pattern that continues to delight its walkers.



The labyrinth at L.E.A.F. has become a favorite contemplative destination.

As a result of the vision and hard work of the Dahlkempers as well as the cooperative efforts of the organizations that helped with restorations, Erie is blessed with a restored park and attraction. Grassy fields along the upper edges of Frontier Park were retained so they can continue to be used for a variety of athletic events, including seasonal cross country matches and soccer. Tennis courts on the park's eastern edge have invited players for decades and old-favorite sledding hills remain popular. Meanwhile, the park's playground and walking trails beckon visitors year-round. The park's tree-lined trails feature a remarkable variety of blooming trees during the spring as well as an amazing fall foliage display.



Strong Vincent students form a human chain to move creek rocks.

The single most stunning piece of the park transition, however, is the creek. The once-polluted stream has come alive. It courses through the park, shimmering with striking mid-blue hues as it tumbles over rocks. And it is filled with life.

Minnows, frogs, and turtles have become regular residents, not to mention fish that can be spotted from the wooden bridge at the Cascade Docks. This rebirth of the stream of my youth has seemingly returned it to the way it may have been centuries ago. Could this be an important environmental lesson?

Special thanks to Jerry Skrypzak for his input and to Anna McCartney for her beautiful photography.

Photos:

PA Grant Sea Logo: <http://paenvironmentdaily.blogspot.com/2019/12/pa-sea-grant-releases-new-aquatic.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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