

2007

A YEAR IN SUMMARY



NATURAL
BIODIVERSITY
A Conservation Strategy

**NATURAL BIODIVERSITY'S
MISSION:**

To conserve the native diversity of plants and animals within the ecosystem of south-central and southwestern Pennsylvania by nurturing harmonious interactions between the natural populations and communities.

Japanese knotweed along the Kiskiminetas River near Roaring Run. Photo taken by John Kocon.

Letter from the Director

KRISTIN SEWAK

Dear Conservation Partners,

Since its inception, Natural Biodiversity has paid equal attention to the volunteer whacking weeds, the child learning about “good” and “bad” plants, and the government partner funding programmatic activities. Such inclusiveness has been Natural Biodiversity’s strong suit, enabling the program’s leaders to develop the working partnerships needed to successfully manage invasive plant problems and restore native habitats in southwestern and south-central Pennsylvania.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 2007, Natural Biodiversity achieved its guiding goal to strengthen landscape conservation, accomplishing many “firsts” along the way. We:

- Co-sponsored Outdoor Heritage, providing a week’s worth of activities for the public and an educational event for 1,000 grade school students.
- Consulted and performed management planning.
- Conducted educational workshops.
- Partnered with private landowners.
- Dealt with funding difficulties in part by mounting a first-ever donation drive.
- Used AmeriCorps members provided by a national organization.

The invasive plant problem and loss of native habitats are interconnected challenges that require the kind of collaborations that Natural Biodiversity and partners have begun to establish. Invasive plants are so woven into our landscapes that they affect ecology, agriculture, industry, property values, and our quality of life. The problems are too complex, affect too many facets of life, and are too extensive to be dealt with by any one agency or organization.

Strong, community-based leadership is necessary, and this is where Natural Biodiversity comes in. Our nonprofit program has the flexibility to attack the problem on all fronts. We have the freedom to work with government, private and public landowners, industry, citizen volunteers, schools, youth and agriculture. Our flexibility and freedom of operation are starting to pay dividends.

MAJOR PROJECTS

In 2007, Natural Biodiversity was chosen by the Southern Alleghenies RC&D Council to lead an important project, funded by the USDA Farm Service Agency and NRCS. Statewide, the Weed Control and Wildlife Habitat Project’s aim is to control an exploding noxious-weed and invasive-plant problem on lands owned by private citizens under contract with the Conservation Reserve and Enhancement Program (CREP). Locally last year, our project provided every involved landowner with the opportunity to develop the tools necessary to gain control of their weed problems.

Because the Southern Alleghenies RC&D Council and Natural Biodiversity have been in partnership since 2004, we were able to quickly form partnerships, develop a resource guide, conduct hands-on workshops involving more than 100 participants, and create a long-term plan of action to reach beyond 2007 – all for a total project cost of only \$50,000.

This same partnership with the RC&D and its accompanying nonprofit, the Southern Alleghenies Conservancy, produced a comprehensive invasive-plant management plan for the 1,000 square-mile watershed of the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River. The NRCS Cooperative Conservation



Kristin with a helper

Partnership Initiative's selection of Natural Biodiversity's competitively submitted proposal resulted in funding of \$98,000 for this project.

Natural Biodiversity garnered involvement from many new partners, input from 60 concerned citizens, and data from almost 3,000 acres of CREP and public lands. Each participating landowner was given a personalized action plan for attacking the invasive plants present on his property.

Another new initiative for Natural Biodiversity in 2007 was the revival of Outdoor Heritage, an annual educational event for grade school children that had been sponsored by other organizations under various names for years but was not held in 2006. Together with the Kiski-Conemaugh Stream Team, Natural Biodiversity hosted the two-day educational event at Summer's Best Two Weeks Camp grounds at Quemahoning Lake in Somerset County. We also expanded the Outdoor Heritage concept to coordinate more than a week of environmental events and activities for the general public that we and other regional organizations sponsored.



Students at Outdoor Heritage

Outdoor Heritage Week captured the attention of the regional news media, providing Natural Biodiversity with a voice it has not had before – and a potential audience of tens of thousands of area residents. Partners also secured a resolution from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and a Governor's Greeting, proclaiming April 21-27 of 2007 to be Outdoor Heritage Week in Cambria and Somerset counties. Plans were made to expand Outdoor Heritage to embrace the entire month of April in 2008.

Reaching beyond the Allegheny Mountains, Natural Biodiversity made significant enhancements and additions to its year-old website, www.naturalbiodiversity.org, in 2007. Now there is a Kids' Patch, providing year-round activities and resources for kids, parents and educators. Extensive invasive-plant species information can now be found online through 31 BioBullies fact sheets and web pages dedicated to the Alleghenies' 12 worst offenders. A discussion forum was incorporated with the goal of spurring conversation and information sharing among partners and citizens. Be sure to visit the website to see what's new, and check back often, as information and features are added frequently.

What is NATURAL BIODIVERSITY?

Natural Biodiversity is a nonprofit program created to control invasive, non-native plants such as Japanese knotweed and to restore native plants within the Kiskiminetas, Conemaugh and upper Juniata rivers' watersheds. Holistic habitat-management techniques are being used to restore riparian buffers on sites throughout these drainages within Armstrong, Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Huntingdon, Indiana, Somerset and Westmoreland counties.

Natural Biodiversity emerged from an action item (Section VII, Article D, Item 3) in the Kiski-Conemaugh River Basin Conservation Plan, published in 1999 by the Kiski-Conemaugh River Basin Alliance and funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. That action item called for "further information on and subsequent control of invasive knotweed species in riparian areas."

In the spring of 2000, the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy and The Western Pennsylvania Watershed Program partnered on a demonstration Japanese knotweed control project along the West Penn Trail in Saltsburg, PA. This demonstration project gave birth to Natural Biodiversity and was the prototype for on-the-ground projects that remain the central focus of the program today.

Natural Biodiversity's primary goals within south-central and southwestern Pennsylvania are to:

- Reduce the presence of invasive, non-native plants through preventative and responsible use of natural and chemical controls.
- Enhance the natural diversity of native plants and animals.
- Educate people about the damage caused by invasive-plant pests and the importance of restoring biological diversity to our landscape.
- Enlist volunteers willing to tackle these challenges.

For more information on Natural Biodiversity's program and approach to its mission, visit www.naturalbiodiversity.org.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 2007

- ▶ There were multiple weed whackings and two native habitat plantings, for which service learning was provided to Forest Hills students and a local Boy Scout troop.
- ▶ We conducted an almost countless number of educational programs.
- ▶ More than 100 people volunteered for Natural Biodiversity and endeavors such as Outdoor Heritage, plantings, and website assistance.
- ▶ For the first time, Natural Biodiversity secured two AmeriCorps positions from the National Wildlife Federation, creating a total staff of three full-time and three part-time members. One AmeriCorps staffer, Douglas Beri, Jr., dedicated many more hours than required, which earned him Natural Biodiversity's Volunteer of the Year Award.
- ▶ We identified another population of kudzu in Apollo, Armstrong County, which is being incorporated into the 2008 state noxious weed control program.



Whacking Japanese knotweed at the Canal Basin Park in Hollidaysburg

While much was accomplished throughout the year, we were able to sustain only minimal operations during the Fourth Quarter of 2007 due to funding problems. This is a challenge faced by many community-based nonprofit programs: to maintain a consistency of activity, focus and financial base of support.

However, during another first-time effort, Natural Biodiversity raised more than \$2,500 through a private and corporate donor drive, which helped us to bridge the gap between funding streams. A special thanks to all who gave!

THE FUTURE

Natural Biodiversity has proven that its partnering approach is effective and that its program leads Pennsylvania in community-based invasive plant and native habitat management. Still, we need to identify new and innovative methods to fulfill our mission. New partner outreach, volunteer involvement, strategic planning, and continued foresight will be necessary components to our program in 2008.

If Natural Biodiversity is to mature into a stable, long-term institution, we will need the help and guidance of informed and involved citizens. By our 10th anniversary in early 2010, we hope that Natural Biodiversity will have rid itself of the initial growing pains recently experienced while maintaining its focus – to conserve nature's diversity in Pennsylvania's Alleghenies.

Consider how you can help Natural Biodiversity secure its role in Pennsylvania's conservation. What do you have to offer? Time? Expertise? Funding? After all, Natural Biodiversity belongs to you. Please join us in conserving and restoring the values from which our program draws its name.


I look forward to our continued partnerships! Together, we can make the Allegheny Mountains and the rest of Penn's Woods a naturally diverse place that all can enjoy.

Kristin Sewak
Director


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naturalbiodiversity.org

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 Printed on 30% post-consumer recycled paper.

Acknowledgements

Natural Biodiversity wishes to thank its primary program supporters:

AmeriCorps
Foundation for Pennsylvania Watersheds
U.S. Representative John P. Murtha, PA-12th District
National Wildlife Federation
Pennsylvania Mountain Service Corps
U. S. Department of Agriculture / Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture / Natural Resources Conservation Service