

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Saving More Than Seeds

Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist, November 2010

Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) in Decorah is best known for collecting and sharing heirloom seeds for future generations. But the non-profit group is also focused on the needs of future generations in its work to restore and enhance their 890-acre northeast Iowa farm. This work includes reintroducing Iowa's only native trout – the brook trout – to its local coldwater stream, and providing sustainable habitat to an extremely rare breed of cattle.

SSE, a member-supported organization, was founded in 1975 after co-founder Diane Ott Whealy's terminally-ill grandfather gave her the seeds of two garden plants: Grandpa Ott's morning glory and German Pink tomato. Today, SSE serves as a repository for many thousands of heirloom garden varieties. The diverse collection of seeds is used by seed companies, small farmers, chefs, and even home gardeners.



Brook trout are the only trout species native to Iowa. Seed Savers Exchange reintroduced them to South Canoe Creek in 2003. (Photo provided by the Iowa DNR)

SSE's Heritage Farm, located six miles north of Decorah, includes the certified organic Preservation Gardens, grapes and apples in the Historic Orchard, and pasture grazed by Ancient White Park Cattle. Before



Todd Duncan (left) with NRCS and Jim Edrington with Seed Savers Exchange have worked together since 2006 to implement the non-profit organization's conservation plan and goals.

SSE purchased the farm, the land was row cropped, pastures were overgrazed, and a coldwater trout stream, South Canoe Creek, was accessible to livestock that heavily damaged its stream banks.

A long-term commitment to conservation took place in 2002 when SSE placed 640 acres into a conservation easement through the USDA's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP). The program, managed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), helps farmers keep their land in agriculture. FRPP provided matching funds with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) to purchase the conservation easement.

Much of the conservation work on Heritage Farm was aimed at protecting South Canoe Creek and reintroducing brook trout.

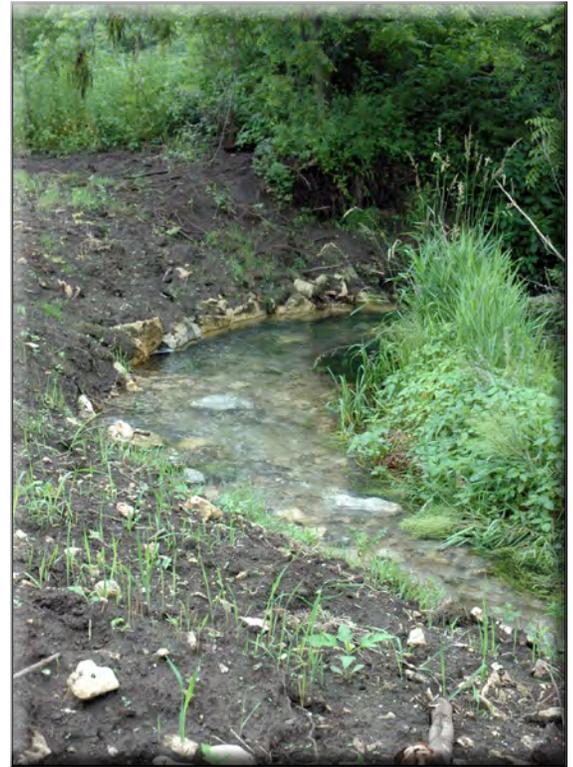
Winneshiek County District Conservationist Todd Duncan of NRCS says improving the quality of the creek and reintroducing brook trout took a multi-layered conservation plan. “With a farm of this size and diversity, changes don’t happen overnight,” said Duncan. “But over time we knew this farm would evolve into a conservation showcase.”

Introducing Brook Trout

In preparation for brook trout reintroduction, SSE installed riparian buffers along portions of South Canoe Creek, particularly in places where stream banks were damaged from cattle use. A riparian buffer is an area between the farmland and stream planted to trees, and sometimes shrubs, that helps improve water quality by intercepting sediment, nutrients, pesticides, and any other surface runoff.

Bill Kalishek, fisheries biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), says the result was much improved conditions for brook trout. “The stream is narrower, it runs deeper, and there is more gravel and less silt on the bottom,” he said. “All those good things we wanted to happen in the stream immediately took hold.”

In 2003 and 2004, SSE worked with the Iowa DNR to reintroduce brook trout fertilized from South Pine Creek – the only Iowa trout stream at the time to have natural brook trout reproduction. Brook trout eggs were collected from this population and taken to the Manchester Hatchery where they were hatched and raised to a fingerling size.



More than 1,900 feet of stream bank along South Canoe Creek was stabilized in 2010 to help improve stream conditions.

“Any time you have the chance to use wild fish they will survive better in the stream and also have a much better chance at spawning,” says Kalishek. In 2005, Kalishek saw success with natural brook trout spawning in South Canoe Creek.

“It was important to maintain the genetic integrity of the brook trout,” said Duncan, “since that is exactly what Seed Savers is all about.”

Continuing the Plan – Rotational Grazing
Keeping livestock out of the stream was another important part of the conservation plan. Allowing cattle to access streams not only degrades stream banks, and causes erosion, but it can also negatively impact livestock health. So, Seed Savers implemented a rotational grazing system, with funding assistance through the USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), where livestock are moved from paddock to paddock according to forage use. Benefits of rotational grazing include increased forage production, more efficiently grazed pasture, better weed and brush control and reduced erosion from overgrazing and trails.



Seed Savers Exchange installed permanent livestock fence to implement a rotational grazing system for their unique herd of Ancient White Park cattle.

An additional benefit was visitor access. The paddocks were designed to be located outside the walking trail system, which allowed the trails to remain open. SSE hosts thousands of visitors annually who take advantage of trails throughout the farm.

More Improvements

To provide better access to water for livestock, a nose pump watering system will be added to the grazing system in 2011 through a USDA-funded partnership with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation called the Co-operative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI).

Through the same initiative, 1,915 feet of stream bank were stabilized along South Canoe Creek in the summer of 2010, including fish hides for cover, through the USDA partnership with Trout Unlimited. Stream bank stabilization included removing trees and other brush from the area and reducing the slope of the bank to provide a suitable condition for vegetation and rip rap.

Meshing Conservation Goals with Programs

Duncan says the key to the success of SSE's conservation plan was keeping focus on the conservation plan, and not allowing conservation programs to dictate implementation. "Over the years we have applied the conservation plan and practices, and utilized

conservation programs as we see fit within Seed Saver's goals, objectives and mission," he said.

SSE's Farm Operations Coordinator Jim Edrington says he doesn't want conservation programs to drive the conservation plan. "Whenever I work with NRCS I tell them my resource protection needs instead of looking at programs," he said. "I let NRCS figure out the best way to help fund projects."

The conservation plan is not complete yet. Edrington says they have a woodland area they want to enhance. "We're considering now what we want that area to look like in 25 years," he said.

Ancient White Park Cattle Unique to Seed Savers

Seed Savers Exchange is home to one of the most unique cattle breeds in the United States – Ancient White Park. Seed Saver's Jim Edrington says the breed was shipped to Canada from Great Britain during World War II. Only about 800 of the rare cattle exist worldwide. Seed Savers owns about 80 of the 200 Ancient White Park's in the U.S.

The distinctive cattle have white coats with black ears, noses, eyes and hooves. They are aggressive grazers that favor brush.



A small herd of Seed Saver's unique Ancient White Park cattle graze in a small paddock near the entrance to the group's 890-acre farm.

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