

Power of Words

Mike Havlik, Naturalist

This past fall, at our Prairie Awakening Prairie Awoke Celebration, I was participating in a ceremony with a diverse group of people including some First Nations People. Some I knew very well and some only as acquaintances. We were engaged in a tradition of acknowledgement where we move in a circle, shaking hands or hugging depending on your relationship or comfort level with that person. A woman who I recently met shook my hand and said, “Thank you for caring for this land.” Within a few seconds, I went through my emotional Rolodex: I was first confused, then surprised by a revelation, quickly followed by validation, and finally understanding. After a couple of days of reflection, I believe I comprehended the meaning of her words. It was a moment of profound enlightenment.

I was confused at first because I thought she had mistaken me for someone else on DCCB staff. I work as an educator, not as a natural resource manager. But as I thought about her words, I had the revelation that education is caring for this land. Then I thought of all the natural resource work we do with our students and the public and how it has changed the ecology of our parks. I’ll be darned, I do care for the land! Validation.

Clearing invasive species, liberating trees, collecting seed, pulling fence, and mounting bird boxes are real, boots-on-the-ground conservation, and I had been doing it all without acknowledging its importance. It was like someone thanking me for breathing. I didn’t think intentionally about conservation or breathing, but both are critical to survival. Understanding.

Days of reflection gave birth to a question: Why hadn’t I heard that phrase before? For First Nations People, caring for the land is a high priority, but also second nature. In their cultural fabric they understand the importance of reciprocity. Take care of the land and it will take care of your food systems, physical and mental health, and the future of your children. Land is shared property and it’s the responsibility of the community to care for it. This is not a message I have heard from my own culture, but it’s an important one to share regarding conservation.

Since receiving this lesson, I have vowed to carry these words forward. Every stewardship day with our students or volunteers I plan to share this story and these words because they carry power. In fact, after this past Voas Volunteer Day, I did just that. As the volunteers were preparing to depart, I looked each one in the eye, shook their hand and said, “Thank you for caring for this land.”



*Volunteers at November's
Voas Volunteer Day*