Successful Succession

Sarah Gainey

Walking through the towering maples and basswoods that dominate most of the Saint John’s Abbey Arboretum, one gets the sense that this forest community has been unchanged for a long time; that the woods are exactly the same as when the monks settled here. But the forest we experience today has undergone many changes in the last 150 years.

Natural spaces are constantly undergoing change. The process by which natural communities and ecosystems change over long periods of time is called succession. During this time, different communities of plants gradually replace each other. Who replaces who depends on a variety of biotic and abiotic factors. The course of succession can be altered by natural or human-made disturbances.

After a major disturbance in a Minnesota deciduous forest, such as a windstorm, the first plants to occupy an area are the pioneer species, such as grasses and herbaceous plants. Next come bushes such as raspberry, followed by plants that do well in full sun like aspen and oak trees. Because those trees’ young saplings don’t do well in the shade of their parent plant, other trees that do tolerate shade, such as maple and basswood, move in. Over time the sun loving trees die out and the shade loving trees become dominant.

But rarely is an entire deciduous forest such as the Abbey Arboretum in the same stage of succession. Often smaller disturbances, such as a single large tree falling, can create pockets of forest in earlier stages of succession, as the newly sunlit area becomes ideal for sun loving plants again. This mosaic of a deciduous forest in different stages of succession is a much more accurate description of a forest community.

Saint John’s Outdoor University and the Abbey Arboretum are also in stages of succession. It began with Father Paul Schwietz, our own version of a pioneer species. Building on the Benedictine principle of stewardship, Fr. Paul had the vision of a natural arboretum at Saint John’s. He laid the groundwork for the then-newly formed Saint John’s Arboretum in 1997, much like an early pioneer plant species who makes the soil more habitable for the plants to come.

With the groundwork laid by Fr. Paul, the next step for then-Saint John’s Arboretum was to build on its early work of providing environmental education opportunities and sustainable land use practices. While Fr. Paul’s death in 2000 took a passionate man away from his passion too soon, the Arboretum continued along its successional path with Tom Kroll at the helm. Tom’s passion for forestry and experience in succession, continued on page 2

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Voted Best in Show in the 2013 Outdoor U Photo Contest, SJU sophomore Nolan Bauer’s image of water in motion is a timely representation of the momentum of change—of a program, in a place, or at a crossroads.
in sustainable land practices strengthened our foundation with a Forest Stewardship Council certification for a "well-managed forest."

In conjunction with the succession toward more formalized land management practices, the educational efforts were growing, spearheaded by their own pioneer species, John Geissler. John started the environmental education program with early initiatives such as partnering with area school districts, getting more CSB and SJU professors out in the land, and community events such as the Timberdash and Maple Syrup Festivals. The early ‘roots’ John put down for the Arboretum’s educational efforts were invaluable for those of us who came after him.

The disturbance of John leaving in 2004 was like a towering maple coming down in the forest and I had to quickly learn how to fill the gap he left in the canopy. Continuing with John’s early educational efforts, I also began new initiatives such as Maple Syrup Biology Labs, Minnesota Master Naturalist Classes, Library Programs, and the Minnesota Natural History Lecture Series.

The year 2010 presented an opportunity to take the succession of our programs in an entirely new direction. The incorporation of the campus outdoor recreation and leadership development programs into the Arboretum both fit within and broadened the reach of our educational efforts. John O’Reilly is our pioneer species in this area and with the help and passion of dozens of college students, has built these programs up in a very short amount of time. These new ‘species’ of programs are different than anything that already existed in our programming, yet their presence brings new life and vigor into our organization.

When we step back and look at where Saint John’s Arboretum started and where Saint John’s Outdoor University and the Abbey Arboretum now stand, we see that the essence of who we were when we started still exists. Now in 2013, we have achieved a new level of succession—striving to recognize the place and the program that we have built together as two separate but interdependent communities working together toward a common vision.

We are still an organization with a mission to care for and connect people to the natural world. But looking back also gives us a view of a dynamic organization that is altogether different from what was started in 1997. And just like a forest community in differing successional stages, the new and old have united in our successional path to create both a place and a program with a mosaic of opportunities working to achieve that mission.

Some will always call us ‘The Arb.’ Some will only know us at ‘Outdoor U.’ But everyone who knows us will know our passion for our mission, no matter what we call ourselves.

Sarah Gainey is the environmental education coordinator for preK-12th grade programs and the volunteer coordinator for Outdoor U. Although she is happy with both results, she found it much easier to pick a name for her daughter than for her place of employment.

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**THE PROGRAM**

**Saint John’s Outdoor University** provides environmental and outdoor education through classes, events and initiatives with the Abbey Arboretum, Saint John’s University, and the College of Saint Benedict.

**THE PLACE**

**Saint John’s Abbey Arboretum** is more than 2,500 acres of lakes, prairie, oak savannah, and forest owned by Saint John’s Abbey and surrounding Saint John’s University.

**Saint John’s Abbey Arboretum**

(new logo coming soon)
Empowered to Do ANYTHING

We’re not on the map! Sure we are… the trail we are looking for will be right past this pond. Looking at the map together, the three of us realized that indeed we have gone the wrong way—miles in fact, downhill, with snowshoes on, and in six feet of snow.

We had been in the backcountry of the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire for six days; cold, wet, tired and hungry. We made a brash decision to press on. It seemed likely (though far from certain) that we would hit the road, or at least hear it within a few more miles.

I remember watching the chickadees flitting around us playfully as the snow was continuing to fall and appreciating the scene as beautiful and serene, yet keenly aware of how cold and hungry I would be if we had to make shelter for another night.

Then we heard the unmistakable sound of vehicles driving on wet road. We began to run, no easy task in snowshoes. Moments later we stood at the door to an Appalachian Mountain Club hut. The sign on the door said “Welcome Hikers!” We found friendly signs everywhere telling us to help ourselves to build a fire, have soup and hot cocoa, take a shower, and even make a bed. We warmed up and ate; rekindling our appreciation for the mundane.

On the drive back to school, we had a hard time putting our experience into words. We talked about the week’s events: the views, the bear encounter, glissading down Tuckerman’s Ravine, how much we really don’t like freeze-dried meals, how we all felt a bit down about returning to “the real world.” More than anything what I remember feeling was exhilarated and empowered. Like I could do anything… like we could do anything.

For years Saint John’s Arboretum has had the goal to provide experiences that “give guests improved environmental literacy and emotional connections to the natural world, which will motivate responsible environmental decisions.” Environmental literacy, connectedness and responsible decision making requires going beyond academic understanding of the world; it requires that people have firsthand experiences with nature.

As part of Saint John’s Outdoor U, our student-run Outdoor Leadership Center and Peer Resource Program increase the means by which we do this in a very meaningful way. The Outdoor Leadership Center promotes outdoor recreation through experiential learning, offering equipment for rent, skills workshops, and outdoor events such as the adventure challenge. It is the mission of the students that work there to help create fun and meaningful experiences for people in the outdoors.

The PRP seek to enhance the personal development of the community by sponsoring wilderness trips, challenge courses, and many on-campus events. Their focus is not only helping to facilitate experiences that bring people to the wilderness, but also to be reflective of what that experience means both for them personally as well as how it relates to those around them (read more about PRP on page 6).

OLC and PRP both work to help people feel comfortable outdoors, to appreciate nature and its diversity, as well as the nature and diversity of the group. The means by which they do this not only helps to promote environmentally responsible decisions, but helps to form effective leaders who will put the decisions into practice.

If we want people to make the world a better place, we first and foremost need them to care, and that is most likely to come from positive and empowering experiences in nature. We need people to love the earth before we ask them to save it.

John O’Reilly is the environmental education coordinator for CSB/SJU and community education. He admits to a certain amount of dumb luck in his college travels, but still finds the sense of adventure and taking a calculated risk are what make such magnificent ends.
A Journey Through Time

May 9, 1997
Saint John’s Abbey lands are formally dedicated as a natural arboretum.

Autumn 1998
The prairie kiosk and garden were dedicated. Memberships first began.

May 4, 2000

Spring 2001
The unveiling and dedication of more than 1,350 feet of boardwalk through the wetlands, led by interim director and education coord. John Geissler.

Summer 2001
Tom Kroll becomes Director and Land Manager of the Arboretum.

The Early Years

Autumn 2002
A formal partnership with St. Cloud School District provides more opportunities for field visits to Saint John’s Arboretum.

March 23, 2002
Saint John’s Arboretum hosts a few hundred people at the first Maple Syrup Festival.

2001-02 by the Numbers
2463 preK-12 students
727 community members
80 CSB/SJU students

June 2002
Saint John’s Abbey achieves FSC certification as a “well-managed” forest.

Winter 2002
Teaching trunks, were provided to St. Cloud School District for environmental education.

2002-03 by the Numbers
4415 preK-12 students
1013 community members
196 CSB/SJU students

Winter 2003
Groomed cross-country ski trails are created and expanded for the benefit of CSB/SJU, Prep students, local skiers, and Arboretum members.

Autumn 2004
Sarah Gainey is the new environmental education coordinator.

Summer 2005
First Arboretum office coordinator fellowship is filled by Emily Franklin, CSB ’04.

Winter 2006
Winter classes are offered for preK-12 students—winter survival or animal signs & tracking.

Summer 2006
First environmental education fellowship is filled by Steve Devereaux, SJU ’05.

Winter 2007
First Minnesota Master Naturalist Volunteer class graduates 20 new Volunteers, studying the big woods.
2006-07 BY THE NUMBERS
5205 preK-12 students
2900 community members
1270 CSB/SJU students

MAY 9, 2007
Saint John’s Arboretum celebrates 10th Anniversary!

AUTUMN 2007
First Arboretum Photo Contest!

SUMMER 2008
Completed expansion of sugar shack to go with the growing maple syrup education opportunities.

SUMMER 2008
Expanded staffing with Jenny Kutter, joint coordinator for Arboretum and environmental studies and addition of 2nd EE fellowship.

SUMMER 2008
2nd MN Master Naturalist class, this time in the prairie!

2010-11 BY THE NUMBERS
8232 preK-12 students
5137 community members
5261 CSB/SJU students

16 YEARS AND COUNTING

WINTER 2009
Grant funding helps support expansion of middle school curriculum to encourage more grade 6-8 student participation.

SUMMER 2009
Summer Initiative brought a record 20 college students on staff for the summer, working on a variety of land and education projects.

SUMMER 2009
“Buy a Seat on the Bus” Campaign kicks off to raise at least $7000 for preK-12 bussing.

2009-10 BY THE NUMBERS
6769 preK-12 students
4733 community members
3767 CSB/SJU students

SPRING 2010
A record-breaking 1,639 people attend the two Maple Syrup Festivals!

SUMMER 2010
Welcome John O’Reilly as 2nd environmental education coordinator.

SUMMER 2010
Welcome CSB/SJU Adventure Programs—Outdoor Leadership Center & Peer Resource Program—to the Arboretum.

2012-13 BY THE NUMBERS
8428 preK-12 students
5528 community members
5152 CSB/SJU students

December 2013
Introducing...

Saint John’s OUTDOOR UNIVERSITY

AND

Saint John’s Abbey Arboretum
We are adventurers.

Dinner, after paddling all day in the Boundary Waters, is a time for relaxation and communion. A fellow Peer Resource Program (PRP) facilitator and I sit back and watch as our four greenhorn participants take over preparations. Just three days in the wilderness and they have already transformed into more rugged surviv- alists than they ever thought themselves capable of.

We start to hear classic trail-talk: “Do you think salsa and tuna is a good combo for a tortilla sandwich?” or “Anyone figure out that darn riddle yet? 52 bicycles…” or our personal favorite, “Will you two please help us cook tonight so we can finally have some good food?”

The meal is made. Growling stomachs turn silent. The conversation rekindles around the fire. At one point someone remarks, “Wow, I have never been on a trip as profound as this one. There is a deep connection made here. It will be hard to go back to civilization after this!” These are the moments that PRP facilitators live for.

Adventure is the lifeblood of the Peer Resource Program. It fosters internal development and an outward appreciation of the world’s majesty. Nature is the true facilitator; we are just along for the ride, helping others realize how much of a blessing adventuring truly is.

We are lovers of the outdoors.

Nature, in a primal way, is the most fundamental teacher for humans. We tap into this energy every time PRP takes a group to the Challenge Course that is nestled, fittingly, in the Abbey Arboretum.

A group of sixth graders stands energetically before us. As the students barrage us with questions, “Is this like an obstacle course? I’m the best at those!” and “Hey! Will there be pirates out there?!” we begin handing out the blindfolds. It is time for a PRP classic: the trust walk.

The students guide each other in pairs from the prairie, along the Boardwalk, and through the forest to the Challenge Course. The adventurers strike forth, learning to trust their companions more with each step. They also learn to listen and feel nature in new ways.

Without sight they begin to feel the subtle changes of the land to know where they are: the brush of wind against skin to signal an opening of the path, or the sound of a classmate crunching leaves with each footfall. Nature is being unwittingly revealed to these students.

Arriving at the Challenge Course, we begin some reflection. The students pick-up on the simple concepts first: trust, companionship, and leadership. We facilitate the discussion to a deeper level and help the students apply these concepts to their everyday lives—always questioning, never lecturing.

Our natural classroom holds many more challenges for these students. They maneuver through the unforgiving spider web, conquer the whale-watching ship, and perform a daring trust fall off of a four-foot stump. All of this activity is complemented by the unique facilitation that is the cornerstone of the PRP.

We are stewards and leaders.

PRP is a catalyst for personal formation. We are a group of roughly thirty students who have completed an in-depth application process to become facilitators. This selectiveness helps us more effectively foster some of the campus’ most capable leaders and innovators.

We are not just “the wilderness trip people” or “the Challenge Course folks.” Facilitators have taken lessons from PRP to a variety of other projects: spearheading the construction of a student-run greenhouse; creating and leading the first-year mentor program to provide a solid foundation for incoming freshman; organizing a trip to Pittsburgh, PA for students to help progress the campaign for global sustainable living at the annual Powershift Convention. Facilitators are captains, club leaders, and passionate students.

I am honored to be a PRP. I am able to learn more about myself—my weaknesses, strengths, and areas of expertise. I am able to grow amidst inspiring individuals who have become some of my closest mentors and friends. Life is an adventure and I am proud to explore it as a PRP.

TANNER RAYMAN is a sophomore nursing major and is a student office assistant for Saint John’s Outdoor U.
Get Involved

SAINT JOHN’S OUTDOOR UNIVERSITY

WINTER LIBRARY PROGRAMS
Free and open to the public.

Do you know what the moon is really made of? Ever wonder why it seems to change shape? Do you think someday we could live there? Join us on a cosmic mission to explore our moon with stories, games, and hands-on activities! Mysteries of the Moon is a one-hour program geared towards children ages 3-12.

LIVING IN THE AVON HILLS CONFERENCE

$30—Adults (16 & up)
$10—Kids (Ages 5-15)
$40—Adults registered after January 28

Help us welcome the Wildlife Science Center and a few of their animals as our keynote presenters. The Wildlife Science Center is an interactive educational and research center focused on teaching about wild animals, their biology, and conservation. They will also offer smaller sessions—for kids and adults—to let you get a little closer to the animals. After the keynote’s address, enjoy a day of art, natural history, gardening, and more. Bring kids for sessions designed just for them! The conference price includes the keynote presentation, your choice of a variety of sessions, lunch, refreshments, and access to the Exhibit Hall.

SATURDAY, FEB. 1
9:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.
Registration starts in January

2ND ANNUAL SKI WITH THE STARS

$10—Adult Outdoor U Members, ages 17 & under FREE
$15—Nonmembers, ages 17 & under $5
FREE—CSB/SJU student members, $5 nonmembers

Join Saint John’s Outdoor U for an an illuminated evening cross-country ski in the Abbey Arboretum. Be prepared for fun activities and surprises along the way! Hot chocolate and treats will be served; ski rental is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Watch for more information on the Outdoor U website.

THURSDAY, FEB. 13
6:00—9:00 p.m.

15TH ANNUAL OWL HOOT

FREE—Outdoor U members/Students
$5—Nonmembers

Owls may dazzle us with their calls, but they are also full of other amazing adaptations for survival. Learn about the twelve owl species that can be found in Minnesota and how they survive year round. An outdoor hike under the moon to call for owls living in the Abbey Arboretum is also an option.

MONDAY, FEB. 17
6:30—8:00 p.m. Indoor Lecture
8:00—9:00 p.m. Optional Hike

MINNESOTA NATURAL HISTORY LECTURE SERIES
Free—Students (any age) & Outdoor U members
$5—Nonmembers, non-students
Feb. 17 Owl Hoot, Marco Restani
Mar. 17 Swanning Around St. John’s, Marcus Webster
Apr. 21 TBD

Interested in learning more about Minnesota’s natural world? Join us each month during the school year for a lecture and discussion on a variety of natural history topics. Lectures take place indoors. Check our website to see some of last year’s topics and to see updates to the 2013-14 lecture schedule.

MAPLE SYRUP FESTIVAL

$5—Adult Outdoor U members, ages 17 & under FREE
$10—Adult nonmembers/scouts
$5—Child nonmembers/scouts

Join us for what has become our most popular event of the year! Sap collecting, syrup cooking, horse-drawn rides, demonstrations, and hot maple syrup sundaes await the whole family during this fun-filled event! Preregistration for families is preferred but not required. Preregistration for scouts is required.

Saturdays, March 29 & April 5
1:00—4:00 p.m.

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Collegeville, MN 56321-3000

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104 New Science Center

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A conference for the whole family.

Living in the Avon Hills Conference

Saturday, February 1, 2014

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- A Journey Through Time: Empowered to Do Anything by Saint John’s Abbey
- Successful Succession: Posters of Science by Saint John’s Abbey
- Kids’ Sessions: Natural History, Arts, and Gardening

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