

LaSalle Fish & Wildlife Area's hardwood forests, fields and marshes were once part of Grand Kankakee Marsh.





EVERGLADES

— *MINUS* —

THE GATORS

Telling the Grand Kankakee Marsh
story helps restore it



(Top, bottom) Eastern prickly pear (*Opuntia humifusa*), a cactus found at Kankakee Sands, is attractive, useful and edible; it also serves as food and cover for wildlife. Black-eyed Susan and tall grasses flourish at Kankakee Sands, which was once part of Grand Kankakee Marsh; the area packs a vast array of plants and wildlife in its more than 7,000 acres.

By Nick Werner, OI staff
Photography by Frank Oliver

After the downpour ceased, four women in bonnets and long dresses sang frontier-era folk songs in French.

Do they know? John Hodson wondered. Probably not, he decided.

Wearing a poncho and ball cap, he stood under a canopy tent. The structure served as headquarters for the 2016 Aukiki River Festival. Hodson, age 66, organized the event. Back-to-back waves of thunderstorms had scattered most visitors. But the weather created time for Hodson's favorite activity—one-on-one storytelling about the history of the surrounding area.

The Kankakee River valley.

Since 2009, the summer festival in rural Kouts in northwest Indiana has beckoned historic re-enactors from across the Midwest. They gather for a weekend of camping, cooking and portraying traditional ways of life.

"Aukiki" is the Potawatomi name for the Kankakee River. Some say it meant "beautiful river."

The tribe's members were among many who revered the Kankakee and its surroundings.

For thousands of years, the wild and winding river wove together a half-million acres of wetlands. The Grand Kankakee Marsh was one of the largest freshwater wetland complexes in the United States, the "Everglades of the North." Animals embraced the charm of the sluggish river and its bottomlands. The marsh supported some of the densest concentrations of wildlife on the planet.

In pockets of upland habitat throughout the valley and on the marsh's edges, tallgrass prairie supported herds of bison, prairie chickens and hundreds of species of wildflowers.

The valley's bountiful resources were a magnet for activity.

Starting at least 11,000 years ago, prehistoric and historic native cultures camped along the banks. French explorer Robert de LaSalle and his voyageurs canoed the river in 1679, helping link the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins and develop trade routes.

A nearly endless supply of fur and fowl set in motion the births of the cities of South Bend and Chicago. Horse thieves and Civil War deserters escaped to the marsh. After that war, the Kankakee River became a sportsman's paradise for tweed-clad gentlemen from across the globe.

"Lew Wallace loved the Kankakee," Hodson said of the famed Indiana politician and author of *Ben-Hur*.

But as much as some revered the soggy landscape, others considered it an obstacle. They called it a "fever swamp" and "land that God forgot to finish." This interpretation, combined with the development of steam power, doomed the marsh.

About 5 percent of the original wetlands remain. Most of the rest was ditched and drained into farm ground. The original landscape perished fast. Few had time to contemplate what was lost, according to Hodson.

To this day, many do not know of the marsh, let alone its importance. Even some of the re-enactors who attend Aukiki are unaware, Hodson said.

But a century later, the Kankakee's story is rising from the ground like a ghost in a cemetery, searching for answers about its demise. The spirit of the marsh has benefited from cold-case conservationists like Hodson. Archaeologists, farmers, hunters and even filmmakers have also played a role. Together, they are re-examining the region's history, hoping to correct past mistakes. Their methods include creation of public awareness, as well as land preservation, wetland restoration and conservation agriculture.

Hodson knows that rebuilding an ecosystem is more difficult than destroying it.

Restoring the old glory starts with sharing the Kankakee's saga.

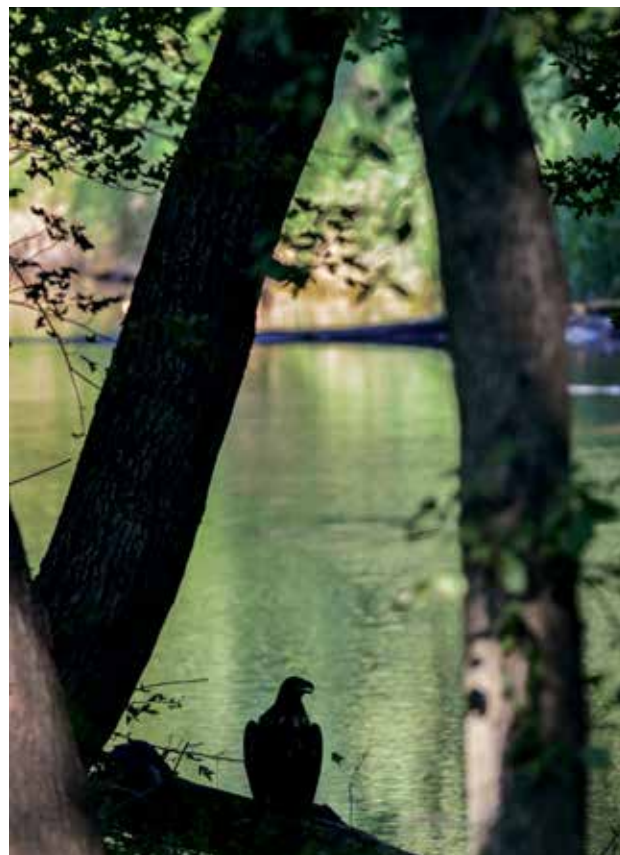
"We destroyed one of the greatest ecosystems in the world, and nobody knows about it," Hodson said.

PADDLE FOR A DAY, ADVANCE LITTLE

Relicts of the great ecosystem exist, though mostly in disjointed pockets.

One is the DNR's LaSalle Fish & Wildlife Area, near Lake Village, on the Indiana-Illinois state line.

There, one September morning, Bob Gasior launched an old aluminum johnboat in darkness on a steep, gravel boat ramp. Using a battery-powered headlamp and an outboard



A juvenile bald eagle sits by the Kankakee River at LaSalle Fish & Wildlife Area. The DNR area covers 3,797 acres near Lake Village.

motor, he navigated ditches to a spot about a mile away, to hunt teal.

After tossing two dozen plastic decoys in the water, Gasior settled into a floating blind, shotgun in hand, and waited for legal hunting hours to start at 6 a.m. Pastel colors erupted on the eastern horizon, a light show fueled by the still-hidden sun. A silhouetted tree line framed the marsh.

"It's neat the stuff you see out here," he said.

Gasior passed time watching flocks of wood ducks. Still out of season, they had departed their roosts to feed. Then, 15 smaller, faster birds strafed the decoys like fighter jets. They were his quarry. But they were flying by five minutes before legal shooting hours.

But when 6 a.m. arrived, so did four more teal.

Gasior swung his gun around and dropped one with a single shot.

"I'm not the best duck hunter," Gasior said. "I have just enough luck to keep me coming back."

Gasior lives in nearby Cedar Lake. He is a retired machinist from ArcelorMittal Steel. He and others who pursue birds at LaSalle are heirs to the region's rich sporting heritage.

"This whole area was world-renowned for waterfowl hunting," LaSalle property manager Zack DeYoung said. "It was pretty spectacular."

LaSalle is one of three DNR fish & wildlife areas in the valley. The others are Kankakee and Willow Slough. Combined, they encompass 18,000 acres. They represent some of the few remaining areas where the Kankakee Marsh still exists, although not entirely in original form.

At LaSalle, about 600 acres of remnant marsh survives on the north bank. The remaining wetlands are second-generation, restored from farm ground. With the river still walled in by levees, the marsh is managed as much by man as by nature. The DNR uses gates and stop-logs to manipulate water levels, mimicking seasonal rises and falls.

Acquisition of land at LaSalle began in 1952 for what was then Kankakee River State Park. In 1963, after acquiring additional acreage, state officials determined the land was better suited as a Fish & Wildlife Area and renamed it.

Behind Gasior, past a barrier of willow and cottonwood trees, the Kankakee River raced past with mathematical monotony.

Now it's a large ditch that flows through northwest Indiana like a line graph.

From the air, the river appears plotted against a grid pattern of county roads. It runs from point to point, changing direction with geometric precision through obtuse angles.

Levees keep the river on the straight-and-narrow. The structures serve as guardrails when heavy rains animate the stream.

The Kankakee rises near South Bend in St. Joseph County. It ends where it meets the Des Plaines River, near Joliet, Illinois, to become the Illinois River. Its watershed consists of about 3,000 square miles, including 13 Indiana counties. The Kankakee River divides the counties of LaPorte and Starke, Porter and Jasper, and Lake and Newton.

Legend says French explorers quipped that the Kankakee

was as wide as it was long. They said it meandered so much you could paddle for a day and still see your starting point behind you.

The river formed about 16,000 years ago during a torrent of glacial meltwater. Flat geography caused it to flow slowly, meander, and flood easily. The river's gradient drops an average of 5 inches per mile. A rise in the limestone bedrock in what's currently Momence, Illinois, discouraged drainage even more.

Originally, the river rambled for 240 stream miles in the roughly 75 land miles between St. Joseph County and the state line.

Beyond the levees, you can see traces of the past. Old bends snake through a green stripe of woods. Disconnected from the river and each other, these former streambeds create a trail of left-behind depressions, sloughs and bayous.

The marsh Gasior hunted on the south bank, called the Baker Unit, was the Kankakee's original channel, according to DeYoung.

After shooting four teal, Gasior left the blind and collected his decoys. When his boat motor wouldn't start, he called DeYoung by cellphone for a tow.

Hunters shot about 50 teal at LaSalle last year, 130 the year before. Numbers were down last year, likely because warm weather delayed migration. Many teal passed through Indiana after the season closed.

Gasior and DeYoung said they daydream of the time when waterfowl habitat stretched from horizon to horizon, when hunters could retire to numerous lodges and clubs to swap stories and visit.

The Aukiki festival site is a microcosm of the Kankakee's lost heritage. It takes place at an unincorporated village called Baum's Bridge. The name comes

from the spot once having been a bottleneck and natural crossing point in the marsh.

The dark, wooded bayou on the southern edge of the festival grounds is a remnant of the original river channel—and a steady supplier of mosquitos.

Hodson paused his storytelling occasionally, offering bug spray to volunteers and visitors.

Boarded-up Collier Lodge looms in the center of Baum's Bridge. Its lawn is a setting for festival activities.

Collier Lodge has become the epicenter of a Kankakee River renaissance that started about 18 years ago when Hodson and his wife, Mary, moved to the area. Hodson had lived in St. John, in Lake County, and wanted land where he could retire and deer hunt.

"A lot of people think I was on this noble crusade," Hodson said. "Nope. I was looking for a place to hunt, and one thing led to another."

Hodson and his wife bought 114 acres in 1999. At closing, the seller's real estate agent told the couple about an adjoining 14 acres. Hodson agreed to buy that land too, sight unseen. Remorse sunk in when he visited it for the first time. He realized he had inherited a rickety building.

"All I saw was liability," Hodson said.

But, the more he and Mary learned about the lodge, the more they appreciated its value.

"This whole area was world-renowned for waterfowl hunting."

—Zack DeYoung,
manager LaSalle FWA property



(Top) Hunters deploy decoys before a September teal hunt at LaSalle Fish & Wildlife area. (Bottom) Bob Gasior shoots from a floating blind deep in the marsh while hunting at LaSalle FWA; LaSalle is one of three DNR FWAs that comprise 18,000 acres of what used to be the great marsh—the other two FWAs are Kankakee and Willow Slough.



(Top) Collier Lodge lies in the unincorporated village of Baum's Bridge; Jim Collier built the lodge in the late 1800s, and it became a destination for hunters from all over the world. (Bottom) A great blue heron glides over the marsh at LaSalle FWA, which is located on what once was one of the largest freshwater wetland complexes in the United States.

LODGES AND CLUBHOUSES SPROUT

Jim Collier built the lodge in the 1890s to cash in on the marsh's lucrative tourism. In the late 1800s, railroads opened the Kankakee Marsh to the world. Wealthy sportsmen flocked like Canada geese.

Hodson says many were Civil War veterans seeking wilderness adventure and camaraderie. Visitors included not only Wallace, but also presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, and European royalty.

"Benjamin Harrison came here and got lost between his election and inauguration," Hodson said.

Lodges and clubhouses materialized. Many represented the hometowns of their members. Hunters and anglers from Kentucky built the Louisville Hunt Club in 1878. The Pittsburgh Gun Club, Rockville-Terre Haute-and-Indianapolis Gun Club and Valley Gun Club followed.

Collier Lodge catered to visitors who didn't belong to a club.

The only lodge or clubhouse still standing, it's one of the few representations of Victorian-era outdoor leisure in the country. A generation before, the Industrial Revolution had mechanized many labor-intensive tasks, resulting in an explosion of wealth for the business class and an increase in leisure time for many Americans.

Hunting and fishing was a way for wealthy urban socialites to assert their standing. But the marsh was also a place where the upper crusters mingled with rural folks who served as guides.

Locals were outsiders in the seasonal elite culture, but the chance to connect helped some move up in the world.

Like a Hollywood romance, the Hodsons' feelings toward the lodge evolved from frustration to passion.

The couple launched the non-profit Kankakee Valley Historical Society in 2001. Then they transferred ownership of the building to the organization so they could seek grant funding for restoration.

Hodson invited Notre Dame archaeology professor Mark Schurr to the property in 2003.

"He wanted to make it a historical showcase, but before they made plans, they wanted to evaluate it and figure out what was there," Schurr said.

Schurr's expectations were low. He had read an archaeological survey of the site conducted in the 1930s, and didn't find it exciting.

Nonetheless, he said he thought a new survey would offer real-world experience for his students.

Surprisingly, the survey uncovered what Schurr said he believes is one of the most significant sites in the Midwest. The crew found evidence of about 20 different cultures representing 10 time periods over 11,000 years.

They discovered a knife or spear point from the Early Archaic Period, prehistoric pottery from roughly 1,000 B.C., hide scrapers, cracked rocks from cooking fires, the cellar of a pioneer log cabin, and ammunition, gun parts and fishing gear from the 1800s.

"It's unusual to have artifacts from so many time periods," he said. "Another thing is that site has not been plowed, everything is so concentrated in one spot."

The scope of artifacts wasn't the only factor that made the Collier Lodge site unique, according to Schurr. Regardless of time periods and technologies, nearly every group of people represented in the survey was there for the same reason—hunting, fishing and trapping from part-time encampments.

Schurr helped Hodson secure a spot for the property on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009, the same year the festival started.

Hodson sees potential for the lodge site and surrounding land for recreation, wildlife habitat and historic interpretation. He has problems understanding why his predecessors wanted to change it.

"The term used 100 years ago was 'reclaiming' land," he said. "Many people saw the Kankakee as useless, smelly land. Hardly any thought was made for the usefulness of a swamp and where it fits in to the ecology."

"DANGEROUS, CRAZY PEOPLE"

The idea of repurposing the marsh dates back to LaSalle, the explorer. At least. In 1683 he wrote: "The land is excellent. It seems only to be waiting cultivation."

Surrounding prairies held rich soils, and some people theorized that treasured ground lay under water, too.

Early efforts to tame the land failed for various reasons. First, the valley already was occupied. Potawatomi lived there in relatively large numbers. It was one of the last holdouts of native culture in Indiana.

The Treaty of Tippecanoe in 1832 led to the forced removal of the Potawatomi tribe to Kansas six years later, an action also called the Trail of Death because so many died along the way.

Then, under the Swamp Land Act of 1850, the federal government transferred ownership of

wetlands to states for conversion to farm ground. In turn, Indiana sold Kankakee Marsh to settlers and land speculators. Early owners dug ditches with shovels and slip scrapers pulled by livestock. But the wetlands withstood their uncoordinated efforts.

"There was no comprehensive plan," Hodson said. "Nothing was done as a whole. So nothing was successful."

The Trail of Death and Swamp Land Act fell short of a goal to bring so-called civilization to the area. Instead, the opposite happened. The marsh became a Wild West hideout for bandits, livestock thieves, counterfeiters and Civil War deserters. Murder and vigilante justice were common.

"You had a lot of dangerous, crazy people out here," Hodson said.

Railroads and the influx of moneyed sportsmen helped restore order, even if the marsh remained wild.

But by the late 1800s the advent of enormous steam-powered dredging machines revived the assault on the marsh. Some of the dredgers weighed 50 tons. A dredger could finish in minutes what once took a crew of men an entire day.

Nature was no match.

"Technology drained the marsh," Hodson said.

Even with steam power, drainage efforts ran into obstacles. At first, land developers cut ditches to the Kankakee and left the main stream alone. But the river in its original form didn't

"Many people saw the Kankakee as useless, smelly land."

—John Hodson,
Aukiki River Festival organizer

flow fast enough to evacuate the new ditches, and flooding continued.

In 1893, the state of Indiana—influenced by land speculators—won a legal battle to have the natural limestone dam in Momence, Illinois, removed. Engineers dynamited a channel 300-feet wide and 8,600-feet long into the rock. Hoosier taxpayers footed the \$65,000 bill. Then developers targeted the river upstream, transforming it into a straight, fast-moving drainage ditch and sealing the marsh's fate.

Biologists estimate the loss of Kankakee Marsh reduced North American waterfowl populations by 20 percent.

But the resulting farm land wasn't the Garden of Eden many had hoped for. Some areas were productive. Others were fragile.

By 1921, parts of the marsh had become desert, and land restoration efforts had already begun, Hodson said. Even today, farming in the Kankakee valley is challenging, according to state conservationist Jane Hardisty of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"The soils are often either high and dry or low and wet," Hardisty said.

Sandy soils have little organic matter and dry out without irrigation. They also are vulnerable to wind erosion. Wet soils can be drained with tiles and ditches, but those tools require intensive maintenance.

"A single crop field can have a combination of high-and-dry sands, poorly drained, or depressions and muck soils, which make for challenging planting and harvesting crops," Hardisty said.

"MAKE THIS FILM"

Pat Wisniewski shares something in common with John Hodson.

The founder of For Goodness Sakes Productions in Valparaiso, she is a longtime resident of northwestern Indiana. But she hadn't heard of the marsh until adulthood. Once that happened, she needed to share its story.

Wisniewski studied filmmaking at Indiana University Northwest. Upon graduation in 2009, she set out to document the Kankakee as her first film. The hour-long documentary she produced, "Everglades of the North" premiered in 2012 on Lakeshore Public TV in northwest Indiana and has since been broadcast on PBS stations across the country.

"It's been pretty amazing," Wisniewski said.

A friend, Jeff Manes, clued her in on the region's unusual history. Manes, a former steelworker and current human-interest columnist for the Post-Tribune newspaper, lives by the river in Newton County. He grew up along the marsh in Sumava Resorts, a community founded by Czech immigrants in the 1920s that started as a summer cottage development.

"'Swamp-mava' is what some people jokingly called it," Manes said. "I'm a wild child from the woods."

Manes and Wisniewski began spending their days researching, writing and filming the remaining wetlands. Its wildlife seemed to offer encouragement.

"I always wanted to see an otter," Wisniewski said. "I was filming a beaver hut and all the sudden two heads popped out of the water. They looked like little bears. They were baby otters.

"It was just like nature was speaking to me saying, 'Make this film.'"

Wisniewski and Manes brought on veteran documentary

filmmakers Brian Kallies and Tom Desch to help. The four created a film that weaves together original videography with vintage photographs and graphics. Interviewees include locals and experts in history, geology and biology.

"The history was scattered all over the place, and we consolidated it" said Kallies, who directed. "I loved being able to put it all together in a form that people could understand."

Hodson and Manes himself are among those interviewed. With his raspy voice and walrus mustache, Manes breathes life into local lore, sharing stories about the colorful characters of the Kankakee valley.

Manes said the film has promoted a sense of pride among residents of the Kankakee region. Before the production, Manes said his home county was known mostly for featureless farm ground and as the location of a nudist resort.

"The film was so well received," he said.

"Everglades of the North" received a nomination for a Chicago/Midwest Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement for Documentary Programs and a positive review from the Chicago Sun-Times. It was screened before an audience of 500 at the Chicago Field Museum.

Despite the accolades, the crew is most proud that the film inspired awareness about the marsh and encouraged conservation in the region.



"EVERGLADES OF THE NORTH"

Information on this production is at kankakeemarsh.com. Copies and supporting educational materials were made available to schools throughout northwest Indiana. The public can buy a DVD of the film or try to catch it again on TV after checking local listings.



(Top) Summer storm clouds build over the prairie at Kankakee Sands in Newton County. The 7,000-acre site, once part of the Grand Kankakee Marsh, is a bird watcher's paradise, regardless of season. (Bottom) A raccoon pauses in the marsh on a hot, humid summer day at LaSalle Fish & Wildlife Area.



(Top, bottom) Bison have recently been reintroduced to Kankakee Sands in Newton County. The herd has produced several offspring this year, and they are thriving on the prairie of northwest Indiana. The regal fritillary butterfly appears each summer at Kankakee Sands. The butterfly's lifespan is short—males live for about a month, and females live about twice that long.

“So much of our landscape has changed over time,” Wisniewski said. “The film speaks about man’s influence on nature and finding that sweet spot where we can coexist.”

TELLING A GREAT STORY

The Hodsons built a house in 2002 and began retiring farm ground into government conservation programs through the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

They started with 56 acres of crops and are down to 7 acres. Most of the retired ground is enrolled in one of the NRCS reserve programs. The programs provide landowners with financial and technical assistance to restore marginal cropland to wildlife habitat, such as grasslands.

“We wrecked this system, now we have to stabilize it,” Hodson said. “There was a lot of good agricultural land reclaimed. But there was also a lot of marginal land that is ideal for restoration.”

Offering incentives to take marginal land out of production isn’t the only goal of NRCS. Other stewardship initiatives help prevent erosion and runoff on working lands.

In the Kankakee watershed, more than 250,000 acres are being managed, enhanced or protected using NRCS conservation programs. Of those, 13,119 acres are enrolled in conservation easements like Hodson’s. The vast majority is in wetlands, according to Hardisty.

The USDA is one of many organizations working toward a more balanced Kankakee ecosystem. Others include the DNR, The Nature Conservancy, the Izaak Walton League, soil and water conservation districts, the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, the Kankakee River Basin Commission, local parks and recreation departments, and the non-profit Indiana Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project (IGKMRP).

Restoration of native upland habitat in the Kankakee River Valley also has blossomed, starting in 1996 when The Nature Conservancy of Indiana began buying agricultural land for a large-scale prairie restoration project called Kankakee Sands. Grasslands with more than 600 plant species now encompass 6,500 acres in Newton County.

In 2016, TNC introduced 23 bison from South Dakota to Kankakee Sands in a nearly 1,100-acre fenced pasture. The organization hopes the herd will grow to between 40 and 70 animals. Bison help manage grassland habitat through grazing and other behaviors, and their presence should help maintain a diverse array of wildflowers on the property.

Visitors can see the bison from a new viewing area at one of the highest points in the pasture.

Kankakee Sands currently comprises the largest single conservation effort in the area. In 1999, the federal government developed plans for a wetlands-based national wildlife refuge along the Kankakee River in Indiana and Illinois but the project stalled.

But in 2012, the state of Illinois asked the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to resuscitate the plan. In May 2016, the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was officially established in Illinois with the acceptance of a 66-acre donation from the Friends of the Kankakee non-profit group.

The USFWS is acquiring land from willing sellers only. Landowners can also participate voluntarily through leases and conservation easements. The organization is not using eminent domain or condemnation to expand the refuge.

Plans for an extension into Indiana are on hold, according to the USFWS.

DNR deputy director John Davis said Indiana is taking a grassroots approach to restoration in the Kankakee, working with local agencies to generate support for conservation among landowners.

Moving too fast or too aggressively on government conservation projects can create anxiety and backlash, especially among farmers with long ties to the land.

“Our role has been one of listening,” Davis said. “We’ve not tried to push anything forward.”

In Indiana, the Kankakee River Basin Commission is repairing eroded banks on the Yellow River, one of the largest tributaries of the Kankakee. The confluence of the two rivers is inside Kankakee Fish & Wildlife Area.

Whether the Yellow River project is successful and earns public support could influence how the state proceeds with future conservation projects, Davis said.

Such projects, he said, could include government land acquisition from willing landowners, but would also include promoting conservation easements that allow property owners to retain their land.

This patchwork approach of public and private land conservation is already happening in places like Austin Bottoms Conservation Area, which is managed by the DNR Division of Fish & Wildlife, along the Muscatatuck River in southern Indiana. The conservation area spans more than 26,000 acres

along the Muscatatuck. About 2,400 acres are currently open for public use.

“Same principle, although the specifics for any project would be dictated by the land,” Davis said.

Hodson said he supports the idea of composite conservation, developing public lands and connecting them to privately owned conservation easements and even working farms that use conservation methods.

A top-down, all-public-lands approach is unlikely to receive support in Indiana, Hodson said. Draining the marsh required cooperation, as will restoration, he said.

“The dream can be achieved, but we are realistic,” Hodson said. “Instead of a long continuous wildlife refuge, we connect public and privately owned land that has been restored.”

The Hodsons have signed a memorandum that, upon their deaths, leaves their property to Porter County for the development of a park for recreation and education.

Hodson hopes that in the near future, more people will sing the marsh’s praises, including the re-enactors at the Aukiki Festival, regardless of whether they voice their devotion in English or French.

“The marsh is a great story,” he said. “It needs to be told.” □

“We wrecked this system, now we have to stabilize it.”

—John Hodson,
Aukiki River Festival organizer

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