The Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

In the fall of 2002, I had the opportunity to take part in the Our Land, Our Literature seminar at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry on the Ball State University Campus. As part of the seminar and for my Honors thesis/creative project, I developed a virtual nature trail that allows visitors both near and far to experience the Loblolly Marsh and larger Limberlost Swamp in northeastern Indiana. This thesis project serves as an integral part of the Our Land, Our Literature web site and will permanently be located at http://www.bsu.edu/ourlandourlit/special_projects/loblolly/ on the world wide web.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Barb Stedman for her encouragement and guidance in the creation of this web site. If it were not for her assistance, this site would never have been created.

Secondly, I would like to thank Ken Brunswick of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources for providing me with photographs of and information about the Loblolly Marsh that only a person as dedicated to the site as Ken could provide.

Thirdly, I would like to posthumously thank Virginia Ball for her support of the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry. If it were not for her generous gift to the university, I would have never had the opportunity to become acquainted with the Limberlost Swamp.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their constant support and encouragement throughout this project.
Rationale

The *Our Land, Our Literature* web site focuses on the effect that Indiana’s environment has had on Hoosier writers and their works. In addition to creating this one-of-a-kind web site, I and the other fourteen students in the seminar also traveled to the former site of the Limberlost Swamp in northeast Indiana near Geneva. While there, we learned about Gene Stratton-Porter, one of Indiana’s most famous environmental writers, and her studies of the Limberlost wetlands.

We also assisted the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and the Limberlost Swamp Remembered group with the restoration of a portion of the wetlands' former expanses in southern Adams County. The process of restoring the swamp was enjoyable and taxing at the same time. Although we worked two eight-hour days digging holes, planting grasses and trees, flagging drainage tiles, and collecting grass seed, we were not able to see the fruits of our labor at the completion of our seminar. Although the land “wanted” to return to a swamp, the restoration process is slow and will take many years to finish.

I decided to create the Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail partly due to my experiences at the Limberlost Swamp with the seminar. The Loblolly Marsh is a partially restored section of the larger Limberlost Swamp located on County Road 250 west, just north of State Highway 18 in northern Jay County. I wanted to create a tangible work that combined my interests in computers, the environment, and environmental interpretation.
The objective of this project was to allow people both young and old, from Indiana and beyond, to learn more about the Limberlost wetlands. These once thriving wetlands were drained to allow for logging and oil drilling in the early part of the twentieth century. The drained area was then cultivated and tilled for years until just recently when members of the local community, inspired by the works of Gene Stratton-Porter, began to restore the land to its original state. Now that the wetlands are being restored, it is possible, through the use of technology, to allow people from around the world to visit this unique place.

In preparation for this project, I met with stakeholders Ken Brunswick, Director of Limberlost Nature Preserves, and Randy Lehman, Curator of the Limberlost State Historic Site. Mr. Lehman provided me with suggestions on how to make a connection between the virtual nature trail and the Limberlost State Historic Site. As the curator of the state historic site in Geneva, Randy was hopeful that the virtual nature trail could increase the number of people who either contact, or more importantly, visit the Limberlost historic site.

Mr. Brunswick has a great respect for Gene Stratton-Porter and her writings; he wanted the web site to convey some of those feelings to its visitors. He also hoped that the virtual tour would include information about the flora and fauna of the Loblolly Marsh. As a testament to his support of this project, Ken hiked the trail around the Loblolly wetland with me more than once to point out landscape features that he felt were important to include in the web site. Mr. Brunswick’s support continued
throughout the project as he provided photographs, suggestions on how to improve the web site, and information about the Loblolly's natural history.

Figure 1: Loblolly Marsh Virtual Trail Map

The result of my work is the Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail web site which consists of 26 web pages that contain information about the marsh, pictures, and video. The website will be permanently available at http://www.bsu.edu/ourlandourlit/special_projects/loblolly/; it also may be found on the attached CD as it existed on January 23, 2003. The 13 trail stops listed below are based on the existing physical trail at the Loblolly Marsh Nature Preserve.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stop Number</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Trailhead</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Pothole Wetlands</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Tall-Grass Prairie</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Sedge Meadow</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>The Woodie Retreat</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>The Winter and Summer Trail Junction</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Birding</td>
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I chose the 13 trail stops listed above because they contribute to the uniqueness of the Loblolly Marsh—a trait that I wanted to convey to the virtual trail’s visitors. I included the trailhead as stop 1 because visitors expect to encounter a trailhead on trails that they hike in person. From stop 1, visitors can also visit Painter’s Overlook and Veronica’s Accessible Trail, to give visitors an idea of other trails they can experience at the Loblolly Marsh Wetland Preserve.

Stops 2 (Pothole Wetlands), 3 (Tall-Grass Prairie), and 4 (Sedge Meadow) discuss the natural history of the site and provide a knowledge base that the later stops develop. While stops 2, 3, and 4 cover natural history features found not just on the Loblolly site, stops 5 (The Woodie Retreat) and 6 (Winter and Summer Trail Junction) are unique features found on the site. Woodie Retreat was one of Mrs. Porter’s living laboratories, and both Ken and I felt that it was necessary to include in the trail. The winter and summer trail junction page briefly talks about a portion of the physical trail that traverses through a forested area of the wetland, something that many people do not expect to find in a swamp. Stop 7 (Birding) focuses on one of the more popular recreational opportunities available to visitors at the Loblolly. The next stop (stop 9) introduces some of the many different types of wildlife, including birds, mammals,
amphibians, and insects, that inhabit the area—especially the transition zone between the Loblolly Ditch and the swamp itself. Stop 9 (Transforming the Landscape) introduces the process of draining a wetland like the Limberlost and brings to light the effects of farming on the ecosystem. At the other end of the spectrum, Stop 10 (Restoring the Marsh) briefly discusses the efforts made by local groups to restore the site to its previous state. The trail concludes at stop 11 (The Future of the Marsh), where I comment on the future of the Loblolly Marsh and then encourage the Loblolly's visitors to protect natural areas near them.

The site’s design went through a handful of revisions before I decided on its final look. I chose this final design because it incorporated a photo of the site in the title banner as well as rounded, organic corners. The site colors are based upon the different elements of the marsh—orange-red for sunsets, golden yellow for dried cattails, and tan-yellow for dried grasses. In my mind, these colors helped to convey the beauty of the marsh to the web site’s visitors in a subtle way. The text and layout on each page is based upon education that I have received from Ball State University, the National Association for Interpretation, and the National Park Service.

As previously stated, each page contains a variety of multimedia content. All photographs, except where noted, were taken by me when I was conducting research for this project on seven trips to the Loblolly Marsh. These trips were in addition to the three that I took with the Our Land, Our Literature seminar. I decided to include four short video/audio
clips to help visitors who are unable to visit the site to experience its sounds and movements more than what photographs can provide.

One key factor that guided my decisions about content and tone was audience. By publishing this project on the world wide web, I wanted to make it possible for people from around the world to experience the Loblolly Marsh. I hoped that they would take advantage of the site for their own personal enjoyment or to learn about the marsh. In particular, I envisioned an audience comprised of individuals who are interested in Gene Stratton-Porter, Indiana literature in general, and the Limberlost. I was especially aware of future visitors to two web sites: Our Land, Our Literature (http://www.bsu.edu/ourlandourlit/) and Gene Stratton-Porter and Her Limberlost Swamp (http://www.genestrattonporter.net/), which will provide a link to my site.
Further fine-tuning of my decisions about audience occurred in December 2002. While in the midst of creating this site, I presented a draft version of it to the public at the Minnetrista Cultural Center in Muncie, Indiana, as part of the Our Land, Our Literature presentation. Approximately 30 people attended my presentation and gave an enthusiastic response to the ideas that I presented. A few of the audience members provided suggestions, and I subsequently incorporated them into the site. One such suggestion came from a teacher who recommended that I keep the text simple, rather than including many scientific terms that are not easily understood. Because of her suggestion, I have purposefully written the text at the level of a fifth-grade student, to allow teachers to use this website in their classroom if they so choose. Additionally, I have adopted a tone that is intended to be both welcoming and playful to help a young audience remain focused on the content. I truly hope that students and others who visit this site will be inspired by wetlands' rare features and become motivated to protect places like the Limberlost Swamp and other unique natural areas near their home.

Knowledge Gained

Looking back to when I first started my senior honors thesis project in September 2002, I realized that I learned a great deal from completing the Loblolly Marsh Virtual Nature Trail. I feel that I have improved my knowledge of the flora and fauna of the area as well as the cultural history of the site.
I was also able to improve my web design and graphic editing skills in Macromedia Dreamweaver and Fireworks. As my work progressed, I saw the need to include new features, such as streaming video. To use streaming video, I had to teach myself how to use a video editing program called Microsoft Video Maker and the basics of digital media, including bit rate, frames per second, and ideal file sizes. Once I created the video file, I had to search for an HTML tag that would embed the video and associate a plug-in with the file on a web page, rather than have Windows Media Player open up in a separate window to play the video. I am glad that I decided to incorporate videos into the site because I feel that they add to the site's appeal and have allowed me to improve my knowledge of computers.

An unintended effect of this project was that my photography skills improved. Although I did not take a formal class nor actively try to improve my skills, I can honestly say that I am a much better photographer now than I was when I first started taking photographs of the marsh.

As a major in Natural Resources and Environmental Management, I have been exposed to many different ecosystems during the past four years of classes. However, simply reading about an area like a prairie or a wetland does not create a strong connection between the student and the resource, but actively researching, visiting, and restoring the land like I have for this project does. I feel that I have a formed deeper appreciation for wetlands in general and look to further aid in the protection of these precious resources in the future.
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Appendixes

Appendix A - Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail Home Page
Appendix B - The Trailhead
Appendix C - Pothole Wetlands
Appendix D - Tall-Grass Prairie
Appendix E - Sedge Meadow
Appendix F - The Woodie Retreat
Appendix G - The Winter and Summer Trail Junction
Appendix H - Birding
Appendix I - Wildlife
Appendix J - Transforming the Landscape
Appendix K - Restoring the Marsh
Appendix L - The Future of the Marsh
Appendix M - Loblolly Marsh Painter's Overlook
Appendix N - Veronica's Accessible Trail