

# **Inspiring Community Driven Ecosystem Restoration: A History of Community Involvement and An Assessment of the Future of Community Action in the Restoration of the Cache River Wetlands, U.S.A**

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The Cache River Wetlands (CRW) complex in southern Illinois, U.S.A. was first protected through the grassroots efforts of local residents concerned about the loss of wildlife habitat to timber and agricultural production interests. In 1979 a local advocacy group called Citizens to Save the Cache River was organized, and by way of intense lobbying and national media attention, a State Natural Area, National Wildlife Refuge and two National Natural Landmarks were established. Cooperation between federal and state agencies and private organizations was formalized in the Joint Venture Partnership (JVP) established between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, and Ducks Unlimited. With an ambitious mission of restoring nearly 60,000 acres, the JVP quickly recognized the need to reenergize community-based conservation partnerships and inspire a community-driven approach to restoration. However, the community benefits of restoration are questioned locally and past attempts to provide citizens a voice in restoration have been criticized.

This paper traces historical community involvement in restoration and presents findings from a community partnership assessment in the CRW. One component of the assessment included in-depth interviews with 25 local stakeholder representatives about the meanings they ascribe to the CRW, their attitudes toward restoration, and perspectives on barriers to community-based conservation partnerships. Qualitative data analysis revealed a stakeholder typology comprised of three distinct groups, those who are: 1) actively involved and supportive of restoration, 2) minimally involved but generally supportive of restoration, and 3) actively opposed to restoration and critical of the JVP. Significant qualitative differences exist between the meanings and benefits/costs these groups associate with CRW and its restoration. Several barriers to community-based partnerships were identified including a lack of awareness of restoration programs and regional economic depression. Recommendations for outreach and education programs tailored to these groups will be provided.