

The changing role of DNR and the nature of Illinois

I am often reminded of the vastly expanded and changing role of the Department of Natural Resources when I am asked the question: “What does the Department of Natural Resources do?”

I take no offense. The innocent question might come from anyone, a constituent I’ve just met—and they’re usually slightly embarrassed to ask. People everywhere seem to sense they really should know the functions of their own government and all of its agencies. Unfortunately, the Department of Natural Resources happens to be one of those state departments whose function isn’t always obvious to everybody I meet.

“I should know this,” people apologize, “but...” They cringe. It’s as if they’ve heard the name of a profession—an actuary, for instance—and realize they have no idea what that person does, but should.

It’s a sign of the times for us. Millions of people enjoy the outdoors today. But our specific interest in the outdoors is as varied and diverse as the people themselves. There are mountain bikers and kayakers who are nature fanatics. Dedicated nature photographers snap millions of photos. People hike trails and rappel off cliffs. Some fish. Some hunt. Many visitors to nature simply open up a lawn chair and read a book under some shady tree in a state park.

It’s easy to imagine that no single state department could be responsible for managing and protecting the natural resources currently being utilized by all of these millions of varied outdoor recreationists in Illinois. Yet that is precisely our job at DNR—and much more.

Yet this wasn’t always the case. Years ago, everybody assumed that everyone who headed into the great outdoors was either a hunter or a fisherman. Usually, they were right. And all of those hunting and fishing outdoor recreationists instantly recognized the services provided by



the old Illinois Department of Conservation—the predecessor to DNR—because the Department of Conservation issued each sportsman their hunting and fishing licenses. What’s more, those sportsmen who bought their licenses literally helped pay for the lands and waters managed by the Department of Conservation because revenues from license sales, along with dedicated taxes on hunting, boating and

fishing equipment, all paid for the management and development of the public lands and waters where hunters and fishermen spent their time.

It was a smart choice in its day: The Pittman-Robertson Act (1937) and the Dingell-Johnson Act (1950) were created to provide funds for the management of the wild lands and waters utilized by hunters and fishermen in America. As the primary users of our lakes, rivers and forests, it only made sense sportsmen would help pay for the resource they shared.

Yet times have changed. Today DNR still is responsible for issuing licenses to sportsmen. But the lands and waters utilized by millions of other outdoor recreationists now suffer from a lack of funding for even basic management programs. At the same time, services and responsibilities of DNR have grown to include mine inspections, drug enforce-

ment, roadway maintenance and scores of other seemingly unrelated obligations. It’s understandable the public would not instantly recognize the services provided by the Department of Natural Resources.

There are, however, ways in which all of us who enjoy the outdoors can support the stewardship and management of our natural resources, regardless of our specific interest. Recently, the Illinois Secretary of State unveiled a newly designed E plate, a great way for motorists to show their support for our natural resources. With the sale of each plate, \$25 will be donated to the State Park Trust Fund—a direct investment anyone can make to help support these natural resources we all share.

Also, consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Illinois Conservation Foundation, the non-profit, charitable affiliate of DNR. All proceeds help support ICF programs, including educational materials for schools, habitat improvement and other conservation projects and more. Although the millions of outdoor recreationists in Illinois might not realize the Department of Natural Resources manages and protects the nature they enjoy in so many ways, here’s something everybody should know: We all share the responsibility to support what we love.

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Marc Miller". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a dark red color.

Marc Miller, Director

