

Reflections on a Vision For the Brandwein Nature Learning Preserve

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Keith Wheeler has invited me to articulate my vision for the potential of the Brandwein Nature Learning Preserve. I feel genuinely honored at the opportunity to do so, although I prefer to think of myself more as an interpreter of the vision of those legendary individuals who have been steeped in the history of this marvelous site and through whom its destiny has been entrusted.

I would like to give due recognition to these legends, but first, let me address the site itself, which can certainly stand on its own merits: a 30-acre wedge of gently rolling hills and swales, wistfully reminiscent of its agrarian past, but equally eager to succeed into a spontaneous profusion of bio-diverse and productive natural habitats.

More simply stated, this place has a bit of it all:

- some nine natural communities, as defined by floral, faunal, and geophysical attributes;
- subtle variations in soils and ground cover that reveal a wealth of seasonal surprises;
- marvelous old stone walls, containing telltale remnants of both human and glacial history;
- wondrous miniature wetlands and seeps that each compete for ‘amphibian-idol’ chorister recognition in the Spring;
- slopes, prevailing winds, and convention currents that make it a prime spot to witness hawk migrations;
- and, last, but certainly not least, the singing, dancing, animated waters of Rutgers Creek whose fickle, ever-changing currents epitomize the wonderfully spontaneous and dynamic nature of this Preserve.

Is there anyone with even the slightest hint of nature wanderlust who cannot see the potential of this eco-slice of land for human education, inspiration, and edification? Can anyone whose senses have ever been quickened by the sights, sounds, and smells of this laudable link-to-the-land not clearly sense the value of the site as a premier outdoor learning lab? Certainly, no one I’ve met whose eyes and ambitions are focused squarely on the mission of the Brandwein Institute.

Indeed, if you’re seeking to conceive a vision for the potential of the Brandwein Nature Learning Preserve, you need only to appreciate the life pursuits, passions, and professions of several of its board members, some of whom are with us today. At least three or four of these Brandwein stalwarts have attained national recognition for lifetime achievements and accomplishments in advancing environmental education in both formal and non-

formal settings. An equal number of them have long championed the interests and ideals of the National Science Teachers Association, particularly those that deal with critical thinking and the sorts of inquiry and investigative skills that are sure to evolve through learner exposure to outdoor natural environments like this one. And perhaps, most significantly, one Brandwein board member is currently directing national and international pursuits to get kids back into the outdoors through an organization called the “Children and Nature Network.”

My point is this: with this sort of critical mass of Brandwein leadership already invested in championing the merits of quality science and environmental education, the vision for the Brandwein Outdoor Learning Preserve is already here, in latent form, like a butterfly chrysalis waiting to emerge and assume some final, distinguished, but predictable form. I think the Brandwein Preserve concept has only needed a sort of catalytic “nudge” to move it forward and make it the reality that it has aspired to be all along.

Certainly, Paul Brandwein would have been the first to encourage such a nudge. I never had the privilege of meeting Paul, but his achievements in the interfaced realms of science, conservation, and environmental education are truly legendary. In the background information that I researched for this project, I developed a new sense of appreciation for his ability to articulate the connecting link between conservation and quality science education. I sense that Paul Brandwein’s ultimate dream was to see the day when gifted secondary students from local schools were engaged in independent science research projects on land that he trusted to some future public good, particularly if the results of such pursuits led to conservation stewardship and the evolution of new scientists. Perhaps Paul’s dream will now have an opportunity to express itself in multifaceted ways that even he could not foresee.

To be sure, Paul Brandwein would have insisted on firsthand engagement of local school educators and administrators in whatever direction the Preserve plans were to take. We have tried to honor that concept by inviting educators from the Port Jervis school district to visit the site during numerous stages of its formative development. And last summer, a number of science educators who are Brandwein Fellows visited the Preserve for the express purpose of creating field-oriented lessons that might help to jump-start local school use of the site. Yesterday, several of us accompanied nine middle and high school science teachers around the newly developed trails of the site with recommendations for correlating those lessons with specific site features. In the process, we also encouraged these teachers to add their own creative input and ideas to the pool of lesson possibilities.

Paul Brandwein would be doubly encouraged to see the involvement of local educators who are really the key to sustaining programs such as this. And, indeed, as the need for prioritizing future development of the site arises, my recommendation is to invest all potential stakeholders in the planning process.

Of course there is much yet to be done: more trails; some bridges; a boardwalk through a stunningly beautiful wetland area; field equipment storage lockers; and, ultimately, a

pavilion and rustic, group gathering circles of log-style benches that will provide visiting groups with seating areas to introduce and summarize their field experiences.

But the process has begun, and the precedent firmly established for quality workmanship by the team who has worked long and hard to establish the trail network thus far. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to witness firsthand the genius of their work as revealed in the gracefully winding trails and the beautifully hand-crafted benches that have been created from native hemlock. We can only speculate that future work will lead to new and wondrous surprises.

My involvement in this project has reaped its rewards, both personally and professionally. I have enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to a project that really embraces all aspects of my 40+-year career in the field of conservation and environmental science education. And to have the privilege of carrying it out in the company of such gifted and competent professionals, who also are great fun to be around, has been a real plus!

Last week, I was asked by a teaching peer of mine to be a guest presenter in several seventh-grade civics classes in a middle school in Caldwell, New Jersey. The program themes dealt with prominent environmentalists in American history; the contributions and sacrifices they made to achieve their ideals; and the templates for environmental citizenship they left as legacies for the benefit of future generations. As these young students researched and shared life histories of such legendary figures as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, Margaret Murie, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Stewart Udall, I could not help thinking how the pursuits and passions of each of these historic individuals were shaped by their early and youthful, firsthand experiences in outdoor environments. It got me thinking that perhaps the Brandwein Nature Learning Preserve may become the formative, developmental, proving grounds for some emerging conservationist or environmental scientist that a middle school civics class of the next century will be extolling as an American icon. That's a vision that I'm sure Paul Brandwein would embrace to its fullest!

Thank you for the privilege of allowing me to share these thoughts with you, and my deepest gratitude to the Brandwein Institute for bestowing this honor upon me. It's a wonderful culminating complement to my lifetime career.