

Landscape Scale Restoration in Michigan: Every School in the Forest

Mike Smalligan, Michigan Department of Natural Resources Forest Stewardship Coordinator

Hundreds of schools in States throughout the Midwest own forests, yet many of these school forests are neglected and underutilized. Superintendents, teachers, and parents have many important issues in their school – academic, economic, and athletic – so forest management is understandably low on their long list of priorities. A project in Michigan, funded by a grant from the USDA Forest Service, is providing new resources to help schools fulfill the amazing potential of their school forest.

Every School in the Forest is a \$306,000 Landscape Scale Restoration grant awarded to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) from the Forest Service Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry in FY 2017. The project's goal is to connect the forestry community with the education community by providing three major resources to schools: forest management plans, outdoor curricula, and field trips.

Forest Stewardship Plans are a great tool that helps landowners learn about their woods, connect with a forester, and identify ways to improve their woods. The Michigan DNR provides a generous grant to schools to hire a private-sector forester to develop a Forest Stewardship Plan for their school forest. If the Forest Service funds are not enough, the Michigan Forest Foundation provides matching funds to help cover the school's costs to obtain professional advice about their forest. Five schools developed plans in 2018, and 13 schools have signed up so far in 2019, including both small, urban school forests and large, rural school forests. The project plans to help 45 schools in the next 3 years to develop a Forest Stewardship Plan for their school forest.



Martell Forestry developed a Forest Stewardship Plan for Frost Middle School in Livonia, which is the first Forest Stewardship Plan in urban Wayne County. (Courtesy photo by Ashley Harlock, 8th grade student at Frost Middle School)

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The second component of the project is to provide training in Project Learning Tree (PLT) outdoor curricula to 1,200 teachers. Michigan DNR employee Ada Takacs is the PLT coordinator in Michigan and serves on the national PLT Education Operations Committee. Project Learning Tree, now administered by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, is the premier outdoor curricula focused on forest ecosystems and forest management. Michigan PLT is using Forest Service funds to help expand the curricula for visual and hearing-impaired students.



Visually impaired students participate in PLT activities in the forest at a camp near Grand Rapids, MI. (Courtesy photo by Maureen Stine, Natureology)

The third component of *Every School in the Forest* is the Wheels to Woods grant that pays for transportation costs for an educational field trip to a nearby forest. The Michigan Tree Farm Committee started Wheels to Woods in 2016. About 300 schools have used Wheels to Woods funds from the Forest Service in the last 3 years to visit national forests, national parks, wildlife refuges, State forests, private forests, Tree Farms, and even forest products companies. In 2018, Wheels to Woods had an impact on 14,598 people, including 12,309 students, 521 teachers, 97 outdoor educators, and 1,671 parents. These 127 field trips cost about \$45,000 – less than \$4 per student – with 90 percent of the funds coming from the Forest Service.



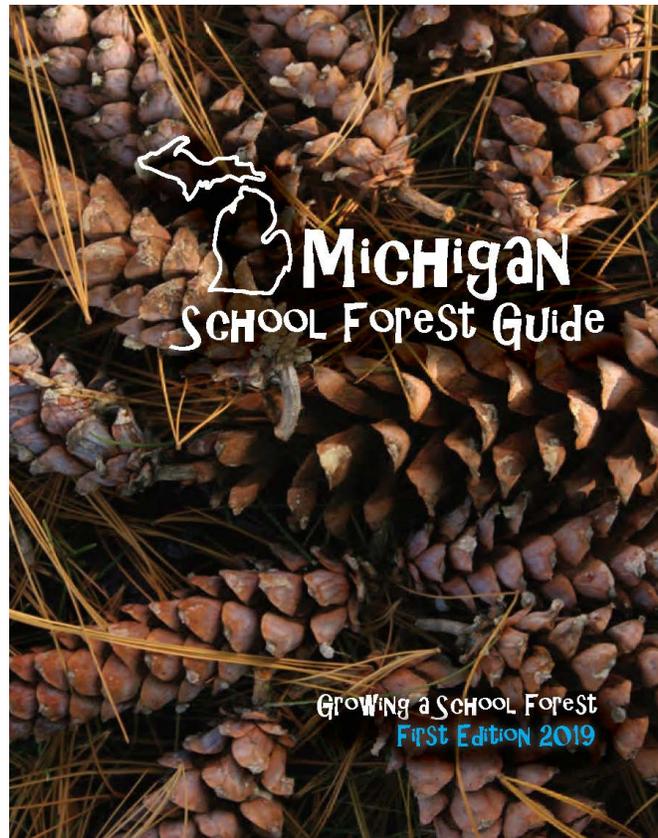
Lakeview Public Schools used Wheels to Woods funding from the Forest Service to visit their school forest and plant 5,000 red pine seedlings, donated by the Michigan DNR, after a recent timber harvest. (Courtesy photo by Mike Smalligan, Michigan DNR)

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Many teachers and administrators don't know what to do with a Forest Stewardship Plan, how to plan a field trip, or where to find help for their school forest, so the *Every School in the Forest* team developed a "Michigan School Forest Guide" to help educators find resources related to school forests. The guide was inspired by a 1954 Michigan State University Extension bulletin for school forests and similar publications from Wisconsin and Minnesota. It is intended to serve as a bridge between the forestry and education communities to help schools explore the educational, economic, and recreational use of school forests. The Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration grant supported the development and printing of 1,000 copies to share with foresters, loggers, teachers, and outdoor educators throughout Michigan. View a PDF of the guide at www.WheelsToWoods.org or www.MichiganPLT.org.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and its partners would like to express their gratitude to the Forest Service Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry for the *Every School in the Forest* grant that is positively impacting schools and school forests all over Michigan.



The new "Michigan School Forest Guide" was funded by a grant from the Forest Service Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry. (Cover courtesy of Maureen Stine, Natureology)