Why Wetlands Matter

In the history of our country we have learned, usually by mistake, how important it is to protect our natural resources. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s is a great example of how changes to the environment by humans negatively impacted the land. Throughout the years, there has also been an epidemic misunderstanding of other ecosystems, namely wetlands. People have (and in some cases, still do) deem these “swamps” as useless, mosquito-breeding grounds that serve no purpose.

Prior to European settlement, there were more than 220 million acres of wetlands in the lower 48 states. Today, less than half of those original wetlands still exist. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there were exceptionally high rates of wetland drainage, mostly because cost share assistance through the government was provided to farmers for tile and drainage projects to maximize the amount of land in production. Conservationists fought hard to bring a realization to policymakers about the importance of wetlands and impacts of wetland destruction. Due to these efforts, the federal government implemented the Swampbuster Act of 1985 under the Farm Bill, eliminating cost share for drainage projects and possible removal from government programs and subsidies if wetlands were continued to be drained on farms. Also, regulations like the Clean Water Act set up regulatory authority of wetlands at both the state and federal levels.

One of the greatest environmental and economical functions of wetlands is flood control. Wetlands are able to survive during dry weather periods and hold significant amounts of storm water during wet periods. This storm water retention allows water to be held and slowly released back into streams and water bodies, which decreases the velocity of the water in the streams, also decreasing the erosion of the stream banks. The ability to retain water also allows the water to slowly percolate back into the soil, recharging groundwater sources. Sediment is able to settle out and nutrients, like phosphorus, can be absorbed by plants. Some wetlands serve as important fish nurseries, home to many species of reptiles, amphibians and birds, and a crucial migration rest stop for ducks and geese. Wetlands serve as educational, recreational and aesthetically pleasing areas for people. Wetlands like the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Horicon Marsh NWR in Wisconsin and the Everglades NWR in Florida attract enthusiasts throughout the year.