

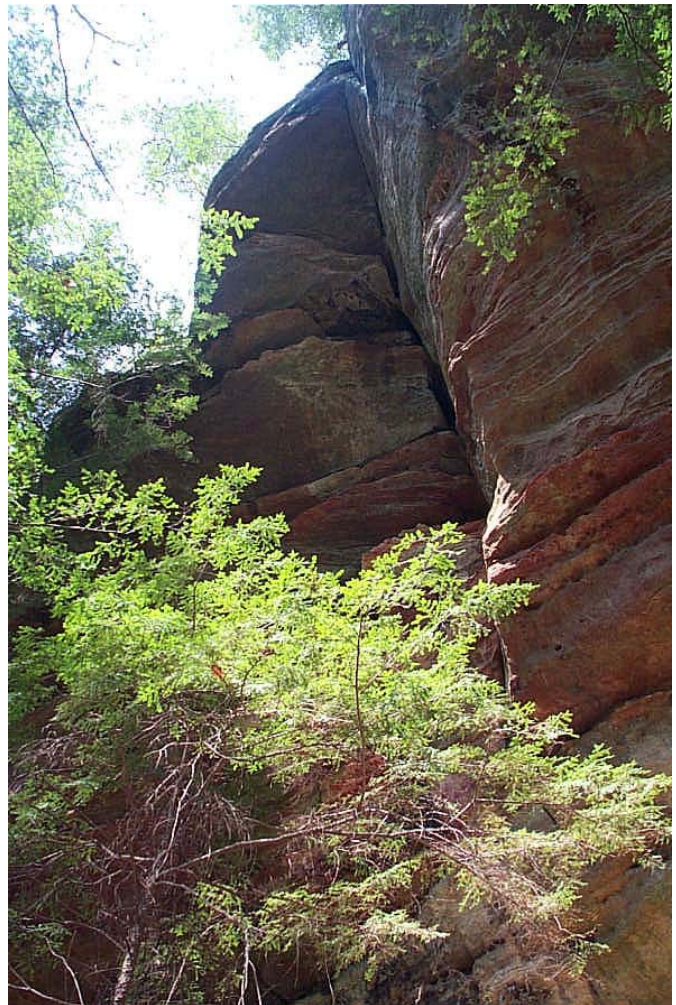
NATURAL FEATURES INVENTORY

Ohio is blessed with a rich and varied landscape. From the rolling foothills of the Alleghany Mountain range in Southern Ohio to the fertile, flat farmland of Northwest Ohio. From Lake Erie to the Ohio River, and everywhere in between, we live in a state teeming with scenic beauty and wondrous natural features. Ohio's natural beauty and rich deposits of natural resources have made our great state the envy of many.

But Ohio's natural bounty is not endless, and its natural legacy is not timeless. Pioneers significantly altered the original Ohio that they came upon several hundred years ago. Virgin forests were felled. The Great Black Swamp was drained. Tall-grass prairies were tamed and tilled. Many lakes and rivers were over-fished and open spaces over-hunted. This modern development helped to build a new nation and enrich the lives of many. It also took a mighty toll on the natural Ohio.

Today, only a few tiny pockets of the original virgin forest remain. Acre-sized pioneer cemeteries are all that remain of the original tall grass prairie that stretched from the Great Plains into parts of Ohio. The sturgeon and lake trout were all but fished out, as the snowshoe hare and bald eagle also nearly disappeared. Despite these vast changes, unique natural areas and biologically rich areas remain, including bogs and fens, glacial grooves and natural rock formations, and even remnants of the prairie land and virgin forests. Some of the most well known remaining natural areas are now protected as parks and nature preserves. Prominent examples include Cedar Bog in Champaign County, a remnant of the Ice Age and one of the most biologically diverse areas in America; the twisting Glacial Grooves, carved by the last glacier into the exposed limestone bedrock on Kelleys Island in Lake Erie; Conkle's Hollow and a series of breathtaking rock formations in Hocking County's Hocking Hills; and Dysart Woods, Ohio's largest contiguous virgin forest, located in Belmont County, to name just a few.

Many ecologically and geologically unique areas have yet to be catalogued. Should such an area be drained, filled, bulldozed, mined, or otherwise destroyed, its unique features and biological diversity will forever be altered. Ohio must find a way to grow our economy while at the same time identifying and protecting these, our most irreplaceable natural assets.



A comprehensive inventory of Ohio's remaining wetlands, forests, prairie remnants, and unique geologic features can help guide more thoughtful growth priorities that will enable development projects to co-exist in harmony with nature's most precious and irreplaceable natural features.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ohio needs a comprehensive Natural Features Inventory—a complete, county-by-county biological and geological survey of the flora, fauna, and landscape of Ohio—to:

- Identify the most critical and irreplaceable natural features and most valuable and vulnerable flora and fauna, including wetlands, forests, and prairies; unique geologic formations; and rare, threatened, and endangered species
- Establish protection priorities for these irreplaceable natural assets
- Guide smart growth priorities that will enable development projects to co-exist in harmony with Ohio’s natural heritage

A natural features inventory includes an initial review of existing satellite imagery, aerial photos, land surveys, and relevant reports and literature to identify potential areas of interest. After this initial review of information, on-the-ground field surveys are conducted to collect samples and better identify special features. Indiana, Minnesota, and Missouri have conducted initial inventories. Illinois has conducted the most comprehensive survey, including field surveys of priority areas, completing a comprehensive inventory of the whole state in a continuous project. Other states are going piece by piece as funding and personnel allow, but this may take decades to complete. DNR officials in other states concur that the best option is a comprehensive, county-by-county evaluation with consistent funding and personnel.

A natural features inventory offers many benefits. It can:

- Help to identify the flora, fauna, and land features unknown to exist in an area
- Enable Ohio to complete the Natural Heritage Database, the state’s official record of flora and fauna
- Guide the protection or the de-listing of rare, threatened, and endangered species
- Help identify land suitable for development alongside of lands meritorious of preservation

This comprehensive inventory can be a benefit to all. It would help assure that ecologically significant features and rare, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species are given proper management; help landowners and preservationists to make informed decisions about whether to sell or act as stewards of identified lands; and even assist developers choose sites for development that will pose the least impact on the environment.

Without a comprehensive inventory, less thoughtful development may well bulldoze, drain, fill, or pave many unique and significant natural features out of existence. Once these finite features are lost, they can never be replaced.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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