

Skol: Education through preservation

Coulee Courier and Houston County News editor
Dec 1, 2017



Dave Skoloda

When Karen Oberhauser was a teacher of earth science classes, chemistry and biology at Onalaska High School in the early 1980s, she enjoyed biking, cross country skiing and exploring the backwaters of the Mississippi River, she said in a telephone interview. Now she's getting acquainted with new territory: She recently was named director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum.

After leaving Onalaska she went to graduate school for her doctorate in ecology and behavioral biology from the University of Minnesota. She became a recognized expert on monarch butterflies at the U of M where she became professor in the Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation of Biology.

In her new role, she is in charge of taking care of the Arboretum's 1,200 acres and 513 acres in outlying properties with its staff of land managers and scientists, students and volunteers who restore and protect biological diversity and ecosystem functions.

Her background is notable not just for her Onalaska connections, but for the viewpoint she brings to her new job. Her understanding of the tension between preservation and recreational use is important here and everywhere else in the state where people are working to conserve and protect land and restore habitat for monarchs and other wildlife.

A UW news release of her appointment noted the potential for tension between using Arboretum grounds and resources for scientific work, education and recreation—"tension that she says has been with the Arboretum since its dedication in 1934, when Aldo Leopold served as its first research director. But Oberhauser also sees opportunities for these competing uses to build on one another."

Oberhauser said: "One of the things that I bring is a recognition of the importance of all of those things. For example, when visitors walk on these trails, they're making connections to nature. And based on those connections, we hope that they become more invested in preserving land like the Arboretum... Hopefully, I can help ease some of those tensions that sometimes develop as a result of all of the different uses of the Arboretum."

The UW news release also noted that Oberhauser is set on furthering the Arboretum's dual missions of education and ecological restoration, while looking for ways to have these overlapping, if sometimes competing, missions complement one another.

"The Arboretum was a natural fit for me, because I think a lot about species conservation, and in order to conserve species we need habitat. The Arboretum is, for one, habitat," says Oberhauser. "And we need people to care about biodiversity and natural history and organisms. And we can only make them care through education."

In her work at the University of Minnesota, she was chair of the steering committee of the Monarch Joint Venture, a collaboration of some 60 organizations working to promote the sustainability of monarch populations. Her monarch work included leading a citizen science project that engages volunteers in tracking monarch populations. And she developed a science education program called Monarchs in the Classroom.

"I believe that the connections my research, outreach and teaching promote between monarchs, humans and the natural world encourage meaningful conservation action."

When we spoke recently about her connection to Onalaska, I mentioned the work being done by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy to conserve habitat in Western Wisconsin with partners including the cities of Onalaska and La Crosse. She responded that she was well aware of the contributions of land trusts, having served on the board of the Minnesota Land Trust.

She said she looked forward to learning more about the work on land conservation being done here, perhaps with a visit to where she got her start in teaching.