

# Beyond the Call of Duty

Nature Conservancy has a champion.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**E**mily Earley joined the Nature Conservancy as a volunteer in 1964. She took minutes at chapter meetings for nine years until she complained that she couldn't take minutes and participate in the discussions at the same time. Since then, her participation has been heroic. She received the Conservancy's Oak Leaf Award in 1974 and its President's Award for Stewardship in 1985. Earley graduated from Bennington College with a major in social science and received a master's in economics from the UW-Madison. In addition to her Conservancy work, she has served on the boards of the Wisconsin Conservation Committee, the UW-Madison Arboretum Committee and the Madison Metropolitan E-Way Committee. She also served as secretary of the Sierra Club's John Muir Chapter.

"All of these environmental organizations



Earley: 'We're trying to undo the damage that man has done.'

BRENT NICASTRO

are needed, and I belong to almost all of them—Sierra Club, Audubon Society, National Resources Defense Council—but Nature Conservancy has been my favorite for over 30 years.

"That's because it's easier for a volunteer like me to get involved and feel that you're really doing something. You can actually get out on the land that you helped buy and work on it, cutting underbrush, burning the prairie.

"Nature Conservancy also differs from some of the other environmental organizations in that it tries to be nonconfrontational. It does a minimum of lobbying, although here in Wisconsin, it did lobby to help pass the Stewardship Bill and it does try to help get more money for the endangered resources and animals listed by the Department of Natural Resources.

"But otherwise, the Conservancy focus is strictly on trying to save the land that supports endangered resources and animals.

That means trying to buy the land or be given the land by its owners. Or if worse comes to worse, trying to get a conservation easement on the land.

"But it's better if we can get title to the land, and when we can, we transfer title to another agency like the DNR or to a county park if we think the county is able to take care of their land properly by our standards.

"Our 'standards' simply mean that we're trying to undo the damage that man has done. Biodiversity is a big word these days, and we're just trying to create the most biodiverse environment on the land we buy or are given. You could say that we try to restore the land to what it was at the time white men came here.

"As examples, in the Baraboo Hills we're trying to open up some of the forest, but in other places there we're trying to fill it in with trees because some birds need big areas of forest—otherwise cowbirds will come in and parasitize them.



"Out in Spring Green, the Conservancy is working winter and summer trying to get back to the prairie that once was there. They're cutting brush and burning there. Cutting and burning. Fires have always been natural in nature, and then Smokey the Bear came in with a very 'unnatural' message.

"In 1993, the Wisconsin Nature Conservancy had 130 projects going. We protected 48,287 acres and had 20,438 members. Nationally, last year, the Conservancy protected almost 8 million acres and had 834,500 members.

"Our local chapter has something like 800 active volunteers. Some of them come in and help with office work. Some give talks. A lot of them go out on weekend work parties—cutting brush, firing prairies. Of course, for safety reasons, volunteers have to take a course before they're allowed to participate in the prescribed prairie burns.

"We have about 15 professionals on our local staff. They work for minimal salaries but they all love nature. We also have work-project students and a whole lot of volunteers. Our office down at 333 West Mifflin is just bursting at the seams, but there's always room for one more.

"It costs \$25 a year to join the Conservancy. For that you get the right to volunteer and go cut brush and burn prairies. You also get the privilege of helping to buy some very valuable land, an interesting newsletter and occasional field trips to your land. What else would you want?" ■