



HISTORY OF THE DELAWARE ADOPT-A-WETLAND PROGRAM

In the beginning ... During the 1980's when we were all starting to become more aware of our impacts on the environment, one retired chemist/small farmer in Sussex County walked her farm wondering how she might change things in her small corner of the world to improve and protect the land and water "downstream" of her land. The farm lay in the upper reaches of the Nanticoke River watershed and produced a variety of by-products that she knew were potentially detrimental to watershed health. Using her considerable analytical skills, Dot White began researching the problem, and determined that the best and most economical solution for neutralizing any adverse impacts from her farm could be found in wetlands.

She discovered that wetlands are wonderful natural areas that provide invaluable benefits to our existence. They maintain and improve water quality via removal of chemicals, filtering of sediments and absorption of organic pollutants. They also reduce flood and erosion damage, provide habitat for a rich variety of flora and fauna, produce economic and recreational opportunities, and offer numerous other benefits to humans and wildlife. Dot searched the country for ideas on how to implement this concept, not only on her land, but all across Delaware, and in the process observed the reality that wetlands, despite their many values, were disappearing. She decided to devise a plan that would attract people to the need for protecting these fragile resources, and came up with the idea of people 'adopting' wetlands - caring for them as if they were their own.

So Dot single-handedly contacted everyone who would listen and eventually convinced the state's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control to provide coordination and technical assistance to a group of volunteers who would then develop the program. Her first success was the 1989 adoption of a site at Records Pond near Laurel by the Youth Environmental Team at Laurel Middle School. Thanks to Dot's vision and initiative, and from those humble beginnings, the Delaware Adopt-a-Wetland project was launched!

The program, with the help of dedicated volunteers in all three counties, slowly grew and achieved success under the shepherding of DNREC. In 1993, coordination of the fledgling program was transferred from DNREC's Office of Information & Education to the state's newly-opened Aquatic Resource Education Center, along the marshlands east of Smyrna. Delaware AAW flourished, encompassing not only individuals, but groups - which ran the gamut from businesses, school groups, civic organizations, farms, youth groups, hospitals, malls and families - all visiting their wetlands for a combined 1500+ visits every year, doing everything from site clean-ups and water quality monitoring to installation of nesting boxes and, in a few cases, even the undertaking of extensive wetland restoration work.

From the seeds that Dot White sowed, the program has grown to include over 3000 people across the state, volunteering thousands of hours annually in stewarding precious pieces of Delaware's wetland wealth. Each year more and more Delawareans MAKE A DIFFERENCE in our state by learning to appreciate and care for our wetlands through involvement in this grass-roots program. Dot White passed away many years ago, but her vision and dedication to the goal of wetlands conservation will forever be a gift to all Delawareans.