



GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING A WETLAND SITE FOR ADOPTION

Selecting a wetland site is a critical first step in the process of joining Adopt-a-Wetland. Although some groups who contact us do so because they have a particular site in mind near them that suits their interests in joining the program, more and more groups do not, and look to us for ideas on where to adopt. This section is our attempt to offer some general guidelines on how to go about this. We think the best way to do this is by asking a series of questions such as those that follow, and discussing them as a group, thus building a profile that takes into account your group's location, type, capacities and interests.

Where do you hail from? How far afield are you willing to go?

Most groups prefer adopting a site as near as possible to where they live, work, meet, etc. For most school groups, the site should be easily accessible and within walking distance, preferably on or adjacent to the school grounds. For most other groups, relatively easy, near, and safe road access are a similarly high priority. Such factors can narrow the range of potential sites substantially, but need to be taken into account. Also thrown in here, is the question of how visible you want the site - and the sign that proclaims your groups adoption of it - to be to people driving/walking/passing by in your community.

How large/ambitious is your group? How large (or needy) a site are you willing to take on?

Some sites, particularly those along roadsides that receive a lot of litter, command more ongoing attention than others. Though oftentimes a thorough initial clean-up, along with installation of the AAW sign, can prove to be a deterrent to future trashing, there are some places that just seem to attract this sort of activity, and thus can become more challenging. If you are an individual, family or small group, such sites can be trying and lead to burn-out. Fortunately, wetlands come in all shapes, sizes and states of care, so finding a site that suits your capacity for stewarding it should not be a problem. In any case, it is important that you be realistic from the outset, in considering such factors as your group numbers, age level, time availability and activity capacity, in determining how large and challenging a site you take on. It is better to start small and expand later, than bite off more than you can chew at the outset. In cases, where a wetland type occupies a large area, such as the marshes of the Woodland Beach Wildlife Area, or riparian swamps along the Nanticoke River, consider adopting a selected, manageable piece of that wetland first, and expanding out as time and circumstances show you can handle it. We like to say that some of Delaware's smallest and most inconspicuous wetlands, such as our woodland vernal pools, are our most precious gems, and are as worthy of watching over as the much larger, and more visibly prominent, ponds, marshes and swamps. Consider such issues carefully with your group before jumping in!

What are the group's interests? What kinds of activities would we like to undertake?

Adopt-a-Wetland groups have proven to be as varied in their interests as they are in their composition. Some of those tendencies are predictable, such as school groups' interest in educational opportunities and nature-oriented groups' involvement with wildlife watching, but in other cases they are not. One of the big reasons we did the Adopter's Guidebook and monitoring trunks is to provide adopting groups with a better sense of the stewardship opportunities available to them, so that they can discuss and select areas of activity that best suit their group's composition, talents and proclivities. If clean-ups are a key focus (e.g. for youth groups trying to build a sense of environmental responsibility in that way) then consider an area that is heavily used or traveled by. If watching birds and other wildlife is a passion, look to a place that supports that interest and could perhaps benefit from installation of nesting boxes, replanting work or other habitat enhancements. If water quality monitoring is a concern, consider adopting a site that may be prone to pollution inputs, and merits watching over for maintaining its integrity. If bio-monitoring is an interest, look to adopt one of the many swamps, vernal pools and other freshwater wetland sites that support so much of our state's plant and animal diversity. As time goes on, one of AAW aims is to get a better handle on particular wetland areas around the state that deserve such special attention, so that we can better match those needs to the interests of adopting groups, and so the data gathered through our adopters efforts can in turn assist biologists and environmental scientists in various statewide monitoring initiatives.

Having assessed such priorities, where do we go from here?

Given what you've learned and prioritized about your group's capacities and interests, ask them to think about, and look for, wet places around your area that might meet those preferences. If possible, set up a time to field check the sites for accessibility, safety and other of the above-mentioned qualities. If the site is on private land that does not belong to any member of your group, be sure to respectfully request the landowner's permission to explore it, and if it proves to be a site preferred for adoption, set up a time to meet with the landowner, and explain your group's interest in adopting the site. Be sure to bring a copy of the Letter of Understanding for the Landowner, along with the pages describing the Delaware code for releasing landowner liability for activities (as provided in your application packet and the 'Adopting a Wetland' section of the Adopters Guidebook) to that meeting. If at any step in this process, you need AAW assistance or support, feel free to contact our office or the Volunteer Coordinator listed for your county.

If the site is on public land, identify on your application form if possible, which agency oversees the area (e.g. County or State Parks, Fish & Wildlife, Forestry, etc.), so that they can be notified of your interest in adopting, and included in the process. Regardless of who's land the proposed adoption site is on, be sure to attach to your adoption application a map, featuring clear and explicit directions, boundaries and landmarks, so that AAW offices have a fixed location for your site on record. AAW hopes in the near future to secure funding for a few hand-held GPS units so that they can be used by adopters to even more precisely identify, by latitude/longitude coordinates, all adopted site locations.