



“Everyone of us ... has an obligation to take care of the larger natural habitat.”

To say that Brenda Shapiro is passionate about the environment is an understatement. Beyond her work as a Board of Trustee member for the Illinois Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and as Trustee for the Conservancy’s Great Rivers Partnership, Brenda has also served on several sub-committees and advisory boards for the Conservancy to help advance freshwater conservation efforts. She’s the perfect ambassador since she believes that, “every one of us, in the way that we take care of our immediate living space, has an obligation to take care of the larger natural habitat. It’s the most vital infrastructure we oversee.”

Brenda’s connection to the Emiquon Preserve began when she chaired a five-state (Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois,

Minnesota and Missouri) advisory board for the Upper Mississippi River, which recognized that freshwater conservation was a “team effort,” that is, not one state could own an initiative that crossed boundaries. According to Brenda, one of the more interesting outcomes of the board was that “TNC was not going to be able to be the ‘quiet’ Conservancy of the past; it would have to move to a far stronger focus on policy, partnerships and strategies that went beyond straight-out land purchases as the end-game.”

To this end, when the Conservancy in Illinois decided to purchase the Emiquon Preserve in 2000, Brenda and her late husband, Earl, were early supporters. They knew the Conservancy had to buy the land in order to achieve a managed connection of the floodplain preserve to the Illinois River. Today, the opportunity to advance this vision and allow the floodplain to become fully functional has inspired Brenda to “just get it done!” And to do so, she has given a transformative gift of \$5 million toward freshwater conservation efforts that support both the connection of Emiquon to the Illinois River and the Conservancy’s Great Rivers Partnership, which advances sustainable river basin management of the world’s most productive rivers.

The Conservancy began planning for long-term benefits to the Illinois River when Emiquon was purchased. A wetland restoration plan was launched in 2007, and by 2009, through the Conservancy’s dedicated efforts, almost 90 percent of Emiquon had returned to vegetation. “Emiquon is beautiful, a bit of paradise,” she says. “All the birds, the rich aquatic plants, the prairie and patches of woodland and those two big lakes full of water again, after over 80 years as cropland...it feels miraculous.”

“Emiquon is beautiful, a bit of paradise ... It feels miraculous.”

But Brenda understands to fulfill our restoration vision and sustain nature at Emiquon over the next century, a managed reconnection with the Illinois River is essential. Without it, the restoration will fail to thrive. Her gift will ensure the connection is achieved. When constructed, a gate in the levee, equipped with scientific monitoring devices, will create an artificial flood pulse and Emiquon will become a fully restored floodplain. According to Brenda, “the return on investment cannot yet be measured, but already we can say the multiple is huge. Giving to Emiquon gives the donor an opportunity for instant gratification, something environmental philanthropy rarely does.”

And because Emiquon is a model project for the Great Rivers Partnership, it becomes an example for other floodplain restoration efforts around the world. Brenda’s early observation about the Conservancy moving beyond land purchases to creating bold strategies in conservation practices was dead-on.

Today, the Conservancy is focused on creating innovative conservation strategies that can be tested in one place and replicated elsewhere. Emiquon is the perfect laboratory for such a technique. The vital importance of this shift in thinking is not lost on Brenda who says, “I do not understand the environment as a ‘special-interest’ philanthropy. Where else do people think they can live except Earth? It is not as if we can book a ride to someplace else when this place starts to fail.”