

The art of walking softly on the land



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As a child, I taught myself to walk softly on the land. I often went barefoot so I could feel the textures of the earth.

Although I go barefoot less often, I still take pride in walking softly. When I walk my cat (yes, I said cat), he drags me along the winding, hidden, scent-laden trails made by rabbits, skunks, and raccoons. These tiny trails are the width of my foot and I take care to avoid crushing any additional plants. When I look back, there is little evidence of our passing.

We rejoice the new active transportation trail and I am struck by the contrast. This six-foot-wide, paved trail was built using conventional techniques.

First, a large vehicle flattened the vegetation (a restored prairie) in a swath three times the width of the future trail so that nothing would obstruct the surveyors. Heavy equipment churned up wet soil, crushed prairie plants, and left behind mud filled with weed seeds.

An enormous, healthy, cottonwood tree was cut down. This matriarch that had provided clean air, shade, and habitat for

wildlife for over 50 years was reduced to a patch of sawdust. Its roots were cut so the soil could be excavated for the trail. The foot-deep trench was filled with crushed limestone, then paved.

Was all this destruction necessary? Could the trail have been built without destroying nearby trees and prairie?

Dean Spearman, the landscape architect who designed the Bois-des-Esprits (BDE) trail, provided the answer. The trail in BDE was built in a way that minimized the removal and harm to forest trees.

Instead of digging a trench, the trail bed is perched above the forest soil. Tree roots were left intact. Drainage material allows water to flow under the trail bed. The raised trail can pass close to trees with less likelihood of affecting their survival. Some species succumb to soil compaction over time but this technique is better overall at protecting the forest integrity. A similar perched trail was installed in Marlene Park to prevent damage to the soil cap that covers the former dump site.

So why is this technique so rarely used?

Shouldn't it be the norm rather than the exception? This technique would have saved the cottonwood on my trail so that people could pause in its shade to marvel at its immensity and age. And we could all take pride in walking more softly.

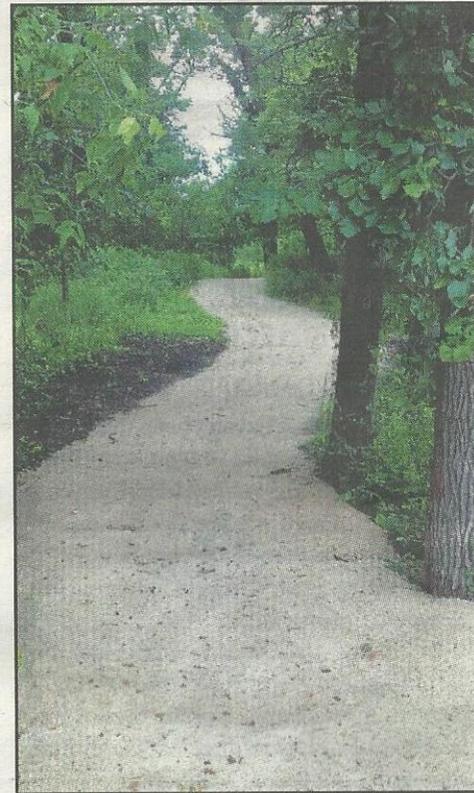


Photo by Michele Kading

Raising the trail bed above the forest floor in the Bois-des-Esprits minimizes tree loss and damage.

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