PEOPLE, PLACES & POWER LINES: HABITAT RESTORATION & EDUCATION IN UTILITY RIGHTS-OF-WAY

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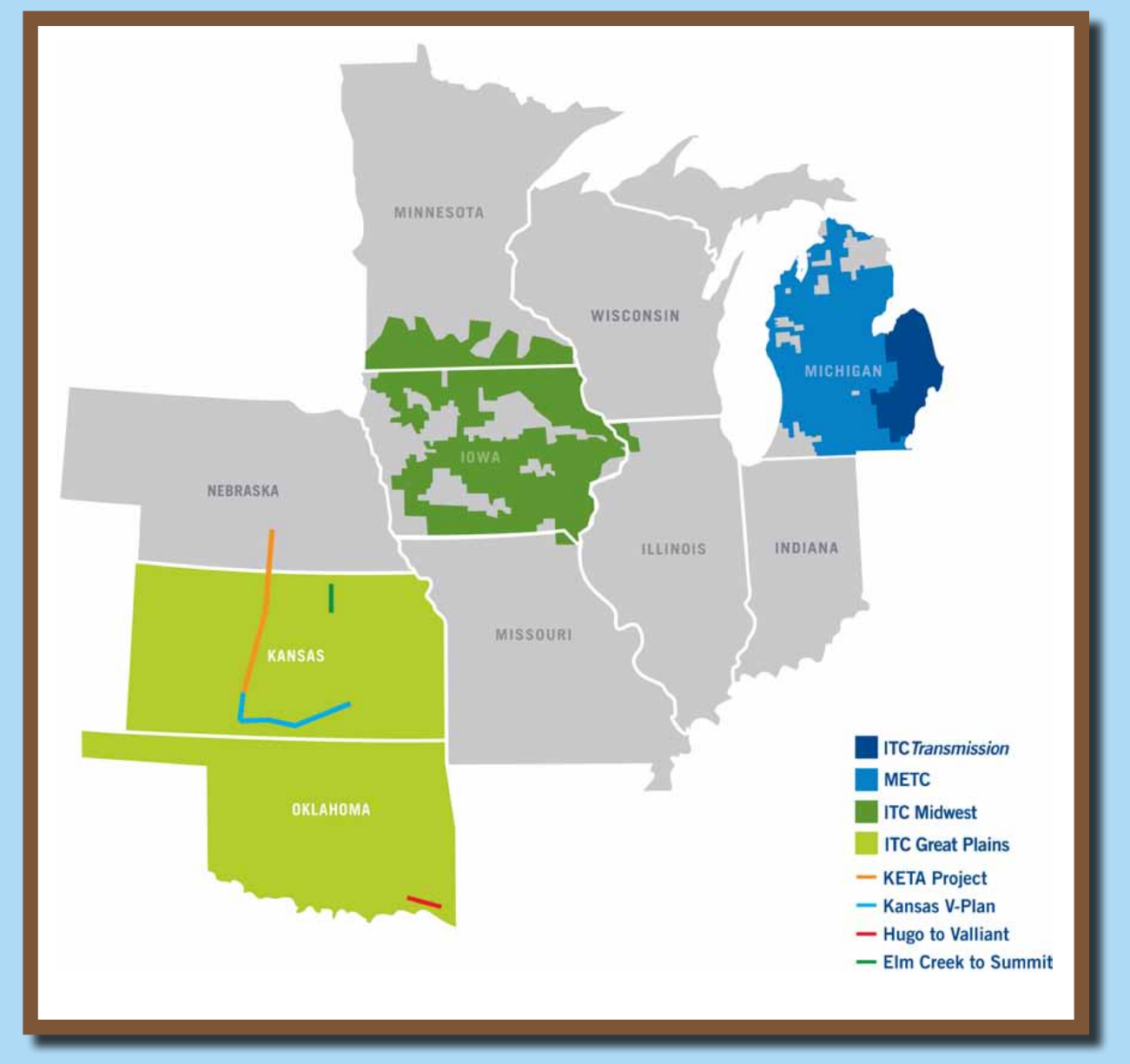
ITC

TRANSMISSION LINE RIGHTS-OF-WAY ARE DIVERSE IN TWO ASPECTS: ECOLOGICALLY AS WILDLIFE HABITAT CORRIDORS AND FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE PROVIDING MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND RESTORATION

Project Background



ITC Holdings Corp (ITC) is the largest fully independent electric transmission company in the nation and is a relatively young company, founded in 2003. ITC includes 4 operating subsidiaries in 7 states, with the focus of owning, operating, and maintaining high-voltage electric transmission lines.

Utility corridors are often stereotyped as sterile environments devoid of biodiversity and infested with invasive species. Overhead transmission lines are often believed to serve a single, anthropocentric purpose: to provide the safe and efficient delivery of electricity from place to place. Many believe this can only be accomplished by heavy-handed vegetation management in a way that is incompatible with restoring and maintaining wildlife habitat. Because they span such long distances, power line corridors are inherently diverse from an ecosystem perspective—they cross uplands and wetlands, river floodplains and streams, through varying physiographic systems with different macro- and micro-climates, soil types, vegetation, and wildlife.

As a member of the ITC Environmental Team, Environmental Consulting & Technology (ECT) has been working to dispel this misconception through habitat restoration and environmental education within high voltage transmission line corridors. ITC's corridors have proven to be effective places for reconnecting people to natural areas in urban, suburban, and agricultural landscapes. ITC partners with government agencies, local communities, conservation groups, universities, and landowners to establish and restore native vegetation and wildlife habitat, control invasive species, and restore and protect rare species and ecosystems within their corridors.

Several of ITC's utility corridors have been recognized by the Wildlife Habitat Council's *Wildlife at Work* program. This program is an internationally recognized program which encourages companies to improve the wildlife habitat on their property . Restoration, creation, protection, and enhancement of habitat and individual species management are among the types of *Wildlife at Work* programs that qualify for accreditation. ITC currently has four certified wildlife at work sites and has plans to expand its habitat enhancement efforts.

Habitat Restoration

The Wildlife Habitat Council's *Wildlife at Work* program recognizes conservation efforts by corporations that collaborate with management, employees and the community to conserve and restore wildlife habitats on corporate lands. ITC has participated in the program since 2008 and has four successful certified *Wildlife at Work* sites – the Novi Headquarters, and transmission line corridors that run through Stony Creek Metropark, Wolcott Mill Metropark and the Chippewa Nature Center. Maintenance, monitoring and the addition of new projects are part of the continuing efforts to maintain current certifications and gain additional certification sites. Typically, certifications are only valid for a two year period, and ITC has successfully maintained recertification of all of its certified *Wildlife at Work* sites. Historically, these sites contained tall-growing, woody species and invasives, but through integrated vegetation management, these sites have been converted to grasslands and prairies.

HURON-CLINTON METROPARK AUTHORITY STONY CREEK METROPARK RIGHT-OF-WAY - SHELBY TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

The ITC transmission corridor at Stony Creek Metropark was the first of ITC's wildlife projects to become certified which occurred in 2009.

Stony Creek Metropark occupies more than 4,000 acres and serves as a multi-use recreation park with a nature center and more than 30 miles of trails. ITC's high-voltage electric transmission line corridor occupies 25 acres across the northern portion of the park, of which 20 acres are actively managed for wildlife.

The project area is located in a highly visible area near the nature center providing many education opportunities such as the "Right Tree, Right Place" demonstration garden of appropriate vegetation to plant in proximity to overhead wires. Annual monitoring and species surveys are also done.

HURON-CLINTON METROPARK AUTHORITY WOLCOTT MILL METROPARK RIGHT-OF-WAY - RAY, MICHIGAN

The Wolcott Mill Metropark right-of-way was certified in 2010. ITC works closely with the Huron-Clinton Metropark Authority to control invasive species within the transmission corridors within the Metroparks. At both Stony Creek and Wolcott Mill, the corridors and adjacent areas were treated for phragmities and buckthorn. The "Right Tree, Right Place" is also demonstrated at this site and annual species surveys are conducted to monitor the success of the treatments.

Habitat Restoration

METC TRANSMISSION LINE RIGHT-OF-WAY AT THE CHIPPEWA NATURE CENTER - MIDLAND, MICHIGAN

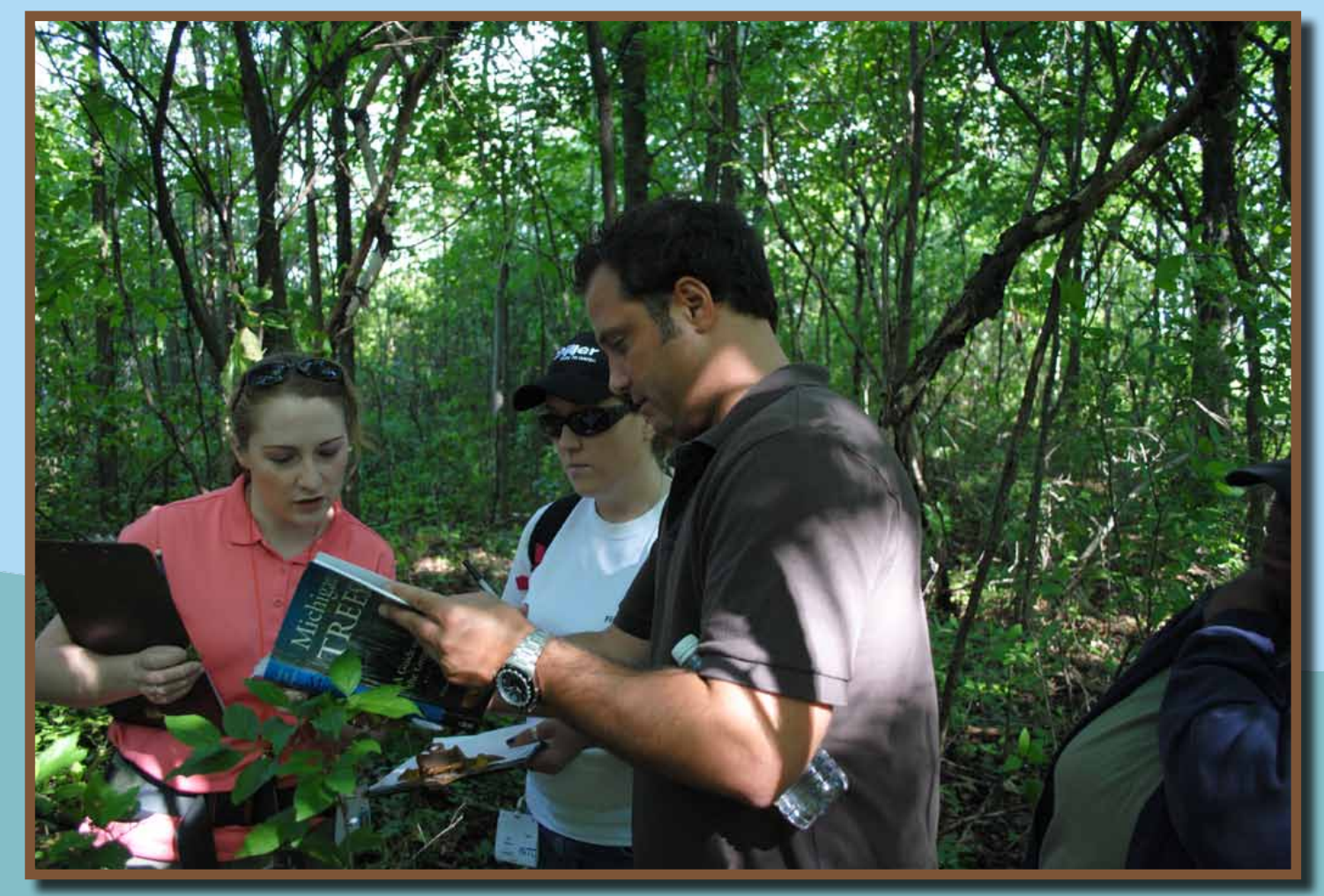
The transmission right-of-way at the Chippewa Nature Center received the most recent certification in 2012. ITC worked with the nature center to increase diversity within the corridor by mowing and treating invasives and seeding with a native seed mix and there are plans to involve local elementary schools in educational opportunities at the site.

ITC CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS – NOVI, MICHIGAN

The ITC Headquarters was certified in 2010. Employees are able to actively participate in several projects located right outside their offices on the 84-acre property. Projects at the ITC headquarters included installing pollinator gardens and Monarch Butterfly gardens, Invasive species control, building bluebird trails, providing environmental education and installing native and right-of-way demonstration plantings.

Some of the benefits of the *Wildlife at Work* certification include:

- Enhancement of wildlife habitat
- Encouragement of employee teamwork
- Stronger community relations through volunteer involvement
- Increased public recognition
- Opportunities for environmental education



Education and Outreach

With any volunteer based project, the goal is to not only get people to show up but also to keep them coming back. ITC's Certified wildlife projects create a sense of pride and ownership by encouraging active participation, creating education and outreach opportunities and providing recognition for work well done.

The below habitat projects provide the perfect opportunity to reach out to the community and local school curricula:

- A bluebird trail (essentially a series of bluebird boxes installed in the appropriate habitat) was installed as a collaborative effort between ITC and local Girl Scout Troops at the ITC headquarters.
- Species inventories are conducted annually at all of the certified wildlife sites. These inventories are not only important in tracking the success of a project but are also wonderful opportunities to involve local students.
- A pair of Turkey Vultures took up residence at the ITC headquarters building. This created an educational opportunity and the Leslie Science Center was invited to give their Birds of Prey presentation during Bring Your Kids to Work day.
- A nature photo contest or species list competition persuades people to venture out and discover.
- A pollinator garden was created with local master gardeners at the ITC headquarters. ITC employees were involved with conceptual design, planting of over 1,000 plants and performing maintenance throughout the growing season.

Lessons Learned

Repeat monitoring not only improves knowledge of the site but also provide valuable information for adaptive management.

To avoid overwhelming volunteers, break a project into areas of interest. Take advantage of a volunteer's interest in bird's by asking them to lead the bluebird trail monitoring.

Depending on your goals, high visibility may be more important than the size of the project. Large projects may have a larger overall ecological impact, but smaller, higher visibility projects have a better ability to establish your volunteer base.

Portions of a project deemed negative by some are the perfect educational opportunity to improve understanding.