

Letter from the EditorMy Four Decades with the Natural Areas Journal

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My Four Decades with the *Natural Areas Journal*

Eric Menges, Editor

My, how time flies. I'm thinking back on my time with the *Natural Areas Journal* and the Natural Areas Association, as I am shortly retiring from my Lead Editor role.

Way back in the last millenium, in 1983, I finished my PhD from the University of Wisconsin and began a research position with the Holcomb Research Institute in Indianapolis. While my thesis was basic academic science, I was very interested in more applied work. I'd started projects on rare plants in Maine and was fascinated by midwestern prairies. I'd started reading the *Natural Areas Journal*. At the time, the journal had slim issues printed on newspaper-like paper. It had started using beautiful line-drawings of ecological communities on the cover.

I decided to attend my first Natural Areas Conference, this time in Ohio. At the time, lodging was in dorm-like rooms, with two attendees (assigned alphabetically) in each room. My roommate was an older gentleman who could snore up a storm! I ended up sleeping in my car! Nonetheless, the conference was wonderful for me, as I soaked up information and made many new friends. It was the first of 18 consecutive Natural Areas Conferences that I attended.

Compared to other scientific conferences, the NAC was more grounded and more practical in its approach to conservation. And the members were friendly, lively partygoers. Discussions on prescribed fire, managing visitors, dealing with rare species (and other topics not suitable for this respectable publication) lasted well into the evening.

In 1990, I had the opportunity to be the second editor of the *Natural Areas Journal*, succeeding Greg Iffrig, the original editor. My three years as editor were formative for me, as it helped me see the publication process from every angle and provided me great insights. The journal evolved during this time and subsequently. Slick covers eventually included beautiful photographs related to individual articles. The scientific quality of the articles increased, but the focus on on-the-ground natural areas identification, management, and policy continued.

The conferences were always informative and fun. The auction of the Prairie Fire, a bottle of tequila with "the fixins" became a fund-raising staple. I remember the time in Arkansas where I helped organize a national coalition that managed to outbid the midwestern states that had formed the early core of the NAA. Of course, we all shared the tequila afterwards! Randy Nyboer was the auctioneer, then as now, doing a fantastic job of raising the excitement level. The national coalition was a metaphor for the expansion of the NAJ and the NAA to a truly national organization.

The conferences were important for me professionally. Most notably, while on a field trip associated with the Asheville conference, I met Chris Ulrey, a biologist with the National Park Service. He mentioned on a field trip that he hoped someone

would study the population biology of a rare plant found along the Blue Ridge Parkway. That was me; I felt like a kid raising my hand during second grade! Chris and I remain long-time collaborators and good friends. The field trips were always fantastic both for gaining knowledge and for creating new colleagues. I'm sure many of you have similar stories.

Meanwhile, I made so many friends along the way going to conference after conference. You know who you are Fran, Bill, John, Marlin, Bill, Kathryn, Tim, Kim, Reed, Vickie, and so many others. I met the current Executive Director, Lisa Smith, on the dance floor at a NAC! Thank you Lisa for being a great boss to me during my latest (nearly 10 year) run as the Lead Editor of the NAJ. While I'm thanking people, kudos to all the Associate Editors who have worked on the journal all these years. There are so many but let me single out Noel Pavlovic, who has been on the Editorial Board for many many decades, always doing a stellar job improving the articles that made it into print. Thanks also to Amy, Scott, Deb, and the other NAA staff who always worked so hard and came up with such good ideas.

So, it is now time for me to retire from the editor position for the *Natural Areas Journal*. Thanks to everyone for their support of the journal, the association, and especially for the inspiring and crucial work protecting our natural areas. Hope to see you at a conference or in a natural area soon.

Best to all of you,
Eric