

At the May 23, 2007 Morris Green Table, Ms. Leslie Sauer made a presentation on the plant stewardship index (PSI). Ms. Sauer, author of "The Once and Future Forest, discussed this new tool used for assessment of ecological health that is based on the occurrence (not abundance) of plant species on a given parcel.

Working with local botanists, the Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve ([www.bhwp.org](http://www.bhwp.org)) has generated a list of ratings for numerous plant species, designed to rate them on their ability to thrive in regional ecosystems. The ratings are thus specific to various regions and/or states. Generalist species, able to survive in very disturbed conditions, receive a '0'. Conservatist species, which thrive in only limited ranges, receive ratings up to '10'. The PSI for a site is calculated by taking the average conservation rating (total ratings/number of species) and then multiplying by a factor based on number of species found. The advantages of the PSI method include its ease of data gathering and its close correlation to other environmental factors such as wildlife abundance and water resource quality. Constraints include the need for proper plant identifications and consistent sampling (time of year, locations), the lack of a measure of abundance, as well as restrictions of comparisons of PSI scores to properties within the same ecological zones. Still, nine eastern and midwestern states have begun to use the PSI for land management issues such as acreage equivalence for land exchanges. The state of Michigan offers owners an annual stipend to protect parcels with PSI scores of 35 and above.

Ms. Sauer spoke of the efforts at education and on-line data collection and sharing that Bowman's Hill is sponsoring. She was enthusiastic about the possible applications and implications of the PSI method, including the potential for outreach and community involvement. None of the various community inventories that she has helped organize cost more than \$600, so municipalities will receive a great return of public education and action for a minimal investment. The PSI method can be used to guide municipal land use in terms of open space by helping select parcels for either conservation or recreation. The PSI ratings highly favor native plants, so adopting a PSI perspective means focusing on native species improvements. She recommended that municipalities alter their land use ordinances to eliminate the use of exotics and to require native species. Preserving the highest valued parcels was her recommended first step, as the existence of even small patches of native and threatened/endangered species would serve as incubators for their resurgence in the future. In response to my question about comparing PSI ratings for different parcels, she noted that high-value PSI ratings could help gain funding for acquisition of parcels that would otherwise be denied due to small size or unfavorable location.

- Eugene Reynolds  
Passaic River Coalition