The establishment of the SIUE Nature Preserve in 2010 was a landmark event for the university and represents a rare type of commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability. The exceptional nature of this initiative is due to its location on the main campus and the scale of the preserve, as well as its role in local and regional ecosystem quality.

Many universities in the United States own or manage off-campus field research stations, sometimes in combination with other government or private entities. A very few universities have formally designated on-campus environmental research areas or preserves, including Cornell University, Binghamton University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In comparison to these institutions, SIUE’s Nature Preserve is one of the largest on-campus preserves in absolute area and as a proportion of its campus (totally 380 acres, 14% of main campus). The location of the preserve was identified by ecologists in the Department of Biological Sciences at SIUE as having the greatest habitat quality and diversity on campus, encompassing an area of restored southern Illinois prairie habitat, lakeside habitat, and some of the largest remaining tracts of bluff-forest in Madison County, Illinois.

A primary purpose of the preserve is to provide a protected location for scholarship and teaching activities in natural landscapes. The creation of the preserve thus supports sustainability by encouraging appreciation for the intrinsic value of natural areas and natural resources, as SIUE students, faculty, and staff become involved in studying and working in the preserve. It promotes this same appreciation as well in the local community, as most of the preserve is open to passive recreation and outdoor activities (e.g., walking, bird-watching, wildlife photography, and bike riding along existing, designated trails). The preserve also provides critical habitat for many plant and animal species, particularly for migrating songbirds along the confluences of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois Rivers, and its importance in this respect will likely grow as development continues to lead to loss and degradation of natural habitats in the region. In the context of sustainability it is also relevant to note that the initiative to create this preserve came from the faculty, and included the participation of individuals from diverse disciplines (e.g., Biological Sciences, Philosophy, Sociology). This was a ‘ground-up’, collaborative project.

The university’s willingness to protect such a significant portion of its campus demonstrates a significant commitment to sustainability, in many respects. It is a landmark event for SIUE, and benefits the university and broader communities now and in the future.

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