Remarks by John White when receiving the George and Barbara Fell Award from the Natural Land Institute on March 29, 2016 [*]

Thank you. I will put this award in my library, and it will remind me of this evening with you.

We have been 22 years without George Fell. This is the Natural Land Institute's first Annual Dinner without Barbara Fell.

I'm curious: did you know George personally? If you did, please raise your hand.

[Not many people raised a hand.]

It looks like even fewer of you knew George Fell than know me.

Did you know Barbara? A show of hands, please.

[Many people raised a hand.]

I knew Barbara as both *frugal* and *giving*. She *saved* things but was eager to *share*. At the Natural Land Institute, before buying anything for the office, it was smart to check with Barbara first: whatever you needed, she may have already bought a dozen of them for the price of one and stashed them away.

If Barbara got too carried away with a project or idea, George would gently and evenly say, "*Now Barbara*." They were *good* for each other. Together they *made* the Natural Land Institute.

George and I met about this time of day on April 25th, 1969. John Schwegman introduced us and explained to George that I was studying the flora around Heron Pond along the Cache River, an area that NLI was working to protect. George looked at me and *did not say a word*. I was as innocent and expectant as any 19-year-old. Then George turned back to John – and said: "Does he have a permit?"

Thus began my schooling in the ways of George Fell: Put the protection of nature above all else. Two and a half years later, I was working for George and the Natural Land Institute.

George was the personification of dedication and self-sacrifice. He wanted the same from his staff.

When he discussed my low pay with me, George explained his philosophy regarding employee compensation. He said that it is not possible to pay people exactly what they are worth: they are either paid too *much* or too *little*. Given that fact, George preferred to pay his people *less* than they are worth. He said that without a hint of malice or irony, as if it made perfect sense to him and it should make sense to me too.

One of his staff complained to George of being so overloaded with work, he didn't have time to do his laundry. George listened carefully – as he always did – and then he allowed that it would be okay to take off enough time to wash clothes.

I'll mention some of my colleagues who worked for George.

Gladys Campbell was George's secretary and NLI's bookkeeper when I worked there. Gladys was a strong *match* for George's *drive*, and she accomplished this with her own special graciousness, which she still has.

Sue Merchant joined the staff when Gladys retired. George really *liked* Sue; I know that because he liked to complain when Sue left temporarily – as George put it – "to go live on some Indian reservation." He also liked to complain to Sue about me – calling me "a maverick."

Jill Kennay joined the Institute soon after Sue. Jill is the only person who worked with George and is still at NLI. Every time I think of Jill, I think, "She's a saint." That's because of her unflagging devotion to the Institute's work, and the way she *cared* for Barbara Fell like nobody else possibly could.

After I joined NLI in 1971, George had five field staff: Jerry Paulson and Bill Shepherd in Rockford, and Max Hutchison, John Schwegman, and I – more than 300 miles to the south.

The Institute has contributed greatly to the mission of nature preservation by giving so many young people a good start – and then they go off and continue their work far and wide.

Jerry Paulson began his career at NLI, and he ended it there too – but he did a lot of good elsewhere in-between.

Bill Shepherd left NLI to go back home and work for the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission.

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Max Hutchison was one of George's most steadfast employees. He worked for NLI not only in Illinois but also in Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Indiana.

John Schwegman left NLI to establish the natural areas program in the Illinois Department of Conservation. He and his family made a huge sacrifice by forsaking their beloved southern Illinois and moving to Springfield so he could do that.

John laid the groundwork for the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, a statewide search for significant natural areas that should be protected. In 1974 the State issued a request for competitive bids to conduct the project.

I quit NLI to write a proposal. In the end, George Fell bought my proposal by giving me back pay for the months when I worked on it. Then George and I joined up with the University of Illinois to complete and submit a proposal, and we won the contract.

The Natural Areas Inventory enlisted Jerry Paulson and Max Hutchison from the Institute staff. I recruited new talent mostly fresh out of college to take charge of work in different parts of the state: Doug Wallace, Don Kurz, John Bacone, Randy Nyboer, and Fran Harty.

Every one of them went on to devote his entire career to nature.

Doug Wallace became the state forester for the Soil Conservation Service in Missouri.

Don Kurz had a highly productive career with the Missouri Department of Conservation. He supervised their statewide inventory of natural areas.

John Bacone brought natural area inventory methods to Indiana. He is still head of the Indiana Division of Nature Preserves.

Randy Nyboer and Fran Harty are still doing enormous work with monumental achievements in Illinois.

After the Natural Areas Inventory was finished in 1978, NLI carried out a Landowner Contact Program. With Jerry Paulson's leadership, this project began the long process of ensuring that newly identified natural areas are protected. Lydia Meyer, Judy Faulkner, Don McFall, Don Kurz, Max Hutchison, and others visited with landowners and negotiated protection of many thousands of acres.

All of these professionals have done heroic work. Northern Illinois has so many such *giants* in the field: Steve Byers, Bill Kleiman, June Keibler, Nancy Williamson, Marlin Bowles, Ron Panzer . . . I can't name them all, much less give you a sense of their accomplishments.

One more hero: Brian Anderson never worked for NLI, but he was director of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and worked closely with George Fell, which could be difficult. Brian is my longtime mentor even though he's years younger than I am. Several times over the decades, Brian slipped up and called me George, maybe when I was being difficult. I take that as the highest compliment.

Everyone I've mentioned was paid to protect natural areas. Most of you are not so fortunate. How can I even begin to tell you about the marvelous volunteers I've worked with? I'll name *one* who epitomizes the best.

George Johnson has given his prodigious labor, his keen intellect, his innovative skills, his money, and even his land to the cause. And, with his passion and example, he inspires others to do the same. George is called a "one-man Natural Land Institute," and I like that. George Johnson accomplished all of that with his wife of 65 years, Marilyn. This is our first Annual Dinner without Marilyn Johnson.

George Fell so appreciated – and relied on – the contributions of supporters such as George and Marilyn Johnson, and he emphasized that professionals such as me are doubly blessed: we get to work with outstanding volunteers – including NLI's membership – and we are paid for it too.

I'll read what George Fell wrote in 1983:

> I think we who work in the natural area preservation movement are blessed – we are truly chosen people.
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> . . . We are doing what we want to do, in relative comfort, without privation or great self-sacrifice.
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> We have a great group of people to work and associate with.
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> We have many supporters and a multitude of well-wishers.
>
> We have a cause. How many people have a cause – of any kind – a purpose in life?

> We have a noble cause. What nobler cause can there possibly be? Certainly, in our minds, what we do is as important and selfless as feeding the hungry, healing the sick, teaching, and helping people in other ways. In a way it should be more long lasting. To us, our work is among the most basic of charities.
>
> We fight a difficult and frustrating battle, with tragic losses, but we are making great accomplishments. What other cause can claim more?
>
> Almost nobody before us had seen the need or been able to set aside natural areas. And those that follow will no longer have the chance. They will only be able to care for what we leave them.
>
> As dedicated workers in this totally unique situation, we have an obligation to pursue our goals with all the strength and fervor we can.

Now 33 years after George penned those words, a new generation has taken up the cause. Few of them ever met Barbara or George Fell, but they have the spirit. Many work far more than a 40-hour week. George would be pleased.

I'm proud, too, of the new natural area workers – paid and unpaid. We need the help. We've made tremendous strides in my five decades, but the challenges are enormous and ever-expanding. We must continually redouble our efforts and resources.

One message George Fell made most clear to me: When it comes to protecting natural areas, don't give up. That's the take-home message: Just *don't give up*.

If you go to the Natural Land Institute's Web site, at the bottom of the Home Page, click on "Readings Recommended by Jack White" and you'll find the article by George Fell that I just quoted. There's also an article by me about Pine Ridge Cemetery Prairie with the theme of "don't give up," plus an essay about Pecatonica Ridge Prairie.

I intended to end on that note, but it turns out that I need to say more. I'll explain.

It was suggested that I speak to you about the future of restoration, but I decided not to. You see, I make a distinction between nature *preservation* (– or saving natural areas –) on one hand versus *restoration* of disturbed areas to more natural conditions on the other hand.

I realize that there is not a clear distinction between the two because restoration is often an integral part of protecting and managing nature preserves. I also recognize the crucial role of outright restoration projects such as NLI's Nygren Preserve.

However, *restoration* has eclipsed *preservation* as the focus of the natural areas movement, and I regret that. While we devote enormous amounts of labor and money to revegetating farmland, irreplaceable natural areas continue to be destroyed, and some of our preserves have deteriorated beyond any hope of restoration because of inadequate care or outright neglect.

We need to do more of both preservation and restoration, but I especially want us to care more for the *natural land*.

Moving on, I need to address two points in the announcement for this dinner. First, it says that I have been credited as the foremost authority on the natural history of Illinois. But "natural history" is such a broad topic, no one person can possibly be the authority.

The second point: the announcement says that I often speak about "the presence and effects of grazers like the American Bison in the prairies of Illinois." You may take this to mean that I am speaking to educate the public about the importance of bison in the original Illinois prairie, and you may think that I am an advocate for some beneficial ecological effects of grazing.

No. Not at all. To the contrary, I am speaking up to explain that bison had very little presence in Illinois. And I am speaking up to explain that pasturing with bison or any livestock can permanently damage prairie vegetation.

To be clear: I am not criticizing the livestock industry. I do recognize the potential to use grazing to achieve certain ecological goals under some circumstances, particularly in degraded prairie. I am, however, objecting to the assertion that grazing is generally good for the health of our prairie. That conclusion stems from research on overgrazed prairies farther west.

Our prairie is exceedingly fragile, and pasturing can irreversibly damage it. You know that our tallgrass

prairie is nearly obliterated. But do you realize how little of what remains is actually in good condition? Prairie remnants that have escaped permanent damage from pasturage are so desperately rare – we need to take care of what precious little is left.

But in Missouri, high quality prairies, which escaped early destruction despite great odds, and were preserved with great effort and expense: now because of so-called "conservation grazing," their high quality vegetation – the very *reason* for their preservation – is being *erased*. This travesty is unfolding on our watch. I cannot express to you how I feel about the ruin of those Missouri preserves. That's all I have to say about that for now.

When you applaud, I will be thinking of all the dedicated preservationists I have worked with in my career, including *my* Barbara, Barbara White. Thank you.