



Remembering the Environment & Mom

The Hoosier National Forest puts up boot brush stations at trailheads to reduce the spread of non-native invasive plants.



One of the interpretive signs and boot brush stations at the Hemlock Cliffs trailhead. Photo by Nancy Myers.

Your mother used to warn, "Wipe your feet! Don't track it in!"

That was because she didn't want to have to go get the mop or vacuum cleaner to clean up the dirt tracked into the house on your shoes or boots when you were a child.

Now you may be 60 years old, but you can't get away from that reminder – even in the seclusion of the Hoosier National Forest Hemlock Cliffs and Two Lakes Loop in southern Indiana.

Along the trails there have suddenly appeared two of 22 new signs that gently request, "Please brush your boots before entering this natural area."

This time the plea does not come from your mother but from a combined initiative of The Nature Conservancy, The Central Indiana Land Trust, The Sycamore Land Trust, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and the United States Forest Service.

And these agencies aren't worried about mopping or vacuuming up the dirt you track in – they are interested in saving ecosystems.

The Eastern National Forest Interpretive Association (ENFIA) funded the two signs on the Hoosier to educate the public on saving native plants and wildlife habitat in our forests.

We don't even want to know what you tracked into the house as a kid. But these days your boots might be carrying two distinct threats to the ecological community – *Alliaria petiolata* and *Microstegim vinimeum*. (And no, neither antibacterial spray nor a dose of penicillin will help.)

The first – known as Garlic Mustard – was brought to America by settlers as a vitamin-rich herb. Its seeds are dispersed by people and vehicles accidentally, but once established garlic mustard displaces native forest wildflowers, provides little food for

wildlife, and can be lethal to the West Virginia White butterfly.

The second plant species is commonly called Japanese Stilt Grass. Native to Asia, the grass was dried and sent all over the world as packing material. Just one of these plants can produce up to 1,000 seeds which grow in dense patches and can crowd out native plants and destroy habitat for ground nesting birds.

A few years back, tracking in dirt may have made your mother yell. These days, tracking mud into the forest could lead to the eventual extinction of entire species of wild flowers and a butterfly. But the solution may be on the way.

And it's the same as it was back then – wipe your feet! Mom used to have a mat at the front door for that purpose. The Hoosier National Forest has followed suit with a pilot program of strategically placed interpretive signs above rotating brush cylinders that can eliminate the pesky mustard and grass seeds from the soles of your boots.

Nay-sayers believe, "Nobody's going to stop and do THAT!" But there is reason for hope.

The Forest tends to attract the more serious outdoors enthusiasts. Hemlock Falls, a remote site located west of Highway 37 South and a few miles north of Highway 62, has provided tranquility within its cool rock shelters and along its shady streams for appreciative visitors all the way back to the Native Americans who occupied the area 10,000 years ago.

And those who elect to tackle the moderately difficult 7.5 hour hike around Two Lakes Loop near Tell City must surely be as dedicated to the beautiful scenery they will witness as to the physical challenge they face. Such appreciative citizens will hopefully cherish the environment enough to take a minute to brush the "plant invaders" from their boots.

And if there's any question.....remember Mom.

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