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**A love of the land**

**John Kelly’s volunteer work serves Driftless Region, enriches classroom learning**

Written by UW-La Crosse University Marketing & Communications

Volunteering is a powerful way to make a difference in the community, and the most fulfilling opportunities often align with a person’s passions and interests.

For [John Kelly](https://www.uwlax.edu/profile/jkelly/), an associate professor of [geography and environmental science](https://www.uwlax.edu/academics/department/geography-and-environmental-science/) at UW-La Crosse, the ideal opportunity came through the [Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC)](https://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/).

Kelly volunteers as a conservation easement monitor, a role that merges his academic expertise with his love for the Driftless Region. By law, MVC must inspect each of its roughly 130 conservation easements each year — a large undertaking that’s made possible thanks to committed volunteers like Kelly.

Each season, Kelly is assigned to visit between five and seven properties, helping ensure these protected lands are stewarded with care.

“Like many geographers and environmental scientists, my research and professional activities — and fun — have always involved fieldwork,” Kelly says.

Before joining MVC, Kelly worked with conservation nonprofits in Mexico, using land-use planning and mapping to promote sustainable practices.

“The GPS and GIS (geographic information software) technologies have evolved over my time in this work,” Kelly explains. “But the basic skills are the same: learning by talking to landowners, walking up and down challenging terrain and vegetation, and developing an eye for how each landscape is an evolving product of nature-human interactions.”

Each site visit begins days in advance, as Kelly coordinates with the landowner and reviews documents related to the easement — legal restrictions, past reports and notes about the land’s environmental significance. On the day of the visit, he packs water, puts on sturdy boots and prepares for ticks, mosquitoes and long hikes.

“During the hike, I’ll try to visit each corner of the property,” Kelly says. “For larger properties, I’ll concentrate on places that haven’t been visited for several years.”

Along the way, Kelly documents his observations using GPS-located photos, especially in areas where concerns may need to be addressed.

Over his four years of volunteering with MVC, the work has deepened Kelly’s appreciation not only for the region’s natural diversity, but for its people.

“I’ve learned how the varied residents of the Driftless Region often share a devotion to nature,” Kelly says. “And I’ve learned new examples of how nature needn’t be opposed to production for human needs.”

Kelly’s work benefits not only the Driftless Region, but also his students at UWL, who gain something far richer than a textbook can offer — firsthand stories and insights shaped by real experiences in the landscapes they study.

“Every semester, I bring these examples into my classes,” Kelly shares. “Students learn how this region is unique, and yet shares global challenges like habitat loss, clean water, and sustainable production.”

Despite the physical demands, Kelly finds the work continually rewarding.

“It’s great for both body and mind, and I love the adventure,” he says. “I feel like Frodo in ‘The Lord of the Rings,’ making my way up valleys, down cliff faces, over hilltops and through forests.

“I usually come home sweaty, dirty, and tired, with burrs and twigs clinging to my clothes — but after a nice bath, I can just savor the privilege of intimately getting to know someone else’s exquisite domain.”

To Kelly, conservation easements are a vital piece of the larger environmental puzzle. MVC and landowners currently protect 26,000 acres across nine counties — a great achievement, he says, though still just a small portion of the total land.

Still, the impact ripples outward. In the classroom, with each semester’s new group of students, Kelly helps cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards, rooted in real-world experience and a deep respect for the land.