

The Battle for the Mighty Oaks

By: Elle Jones

Do you remember climbing Oak trees as a kid? Did you look forward to watching the beautiful colors emerge in the fall? Did you rest beneath their shade in the summer? Beyond just making life more beautiful, trees are essential to our very existence. Oak trees serve many purposes, for humans and animals alike. They are a staple to our daily lives, whether we realize it or not. However, they are on a downhill path. The National Wildlife Federation says, "Essential to the survival of scores of animal and plant species, oak forests are in steep decline." Thinking about these essential pillars to our lives being in danger is a concerning thought. Trees silently fight hard for animals and humans, providing clean air to breathe, homes and food for animals, and materials for our survival. But our mighty Oak warriors are in trouble, and we can help them.

Trees have been with us our whole lives, existing before we were born and will continue after we are gone. When you were born, there were trees. When you had your first birthday, there were trees. When you turned double digits, there were trees. Trees have been with us through every loss and major accomplishment. For example, Lydia Scott, director of the Chicago Region Trees Initiative stated that, "There are surviving oaks within the region's forest preserves that were saplings when the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. The trees are older than the country itself, and a piece of national heritage worth protecting." Thus, the oak has been with us since American began. We can even see the oak's history before our country was even formed. In one Native American culture, legend has it when a chief's wife became very sick, no medicine would work to heal her. The chief then went to the Sacred Oak and prayed that his wife would be save. When he came back, he found that she had been healed. After that, the Chinkapin Oak was a shrine for the Lenape Indians. It is not just this tribe who believe oaks are important, though. Many Native American tribes believe that oak trees help with strength and protection, and additionally, they use them for food and medicine. So the very foundations of our country were built on the Mighty Oak.

If any tree deserves to be called the "tree of life," it is the oak. For millennia, the world's oaks have provided food and shelter for a multitude of wildlife species. Bears, black-tailed deer, scrub jays, magpies, wood ducks, wild turkeys, quail, flickers, and acorn woodpeckers all depend on oaks for food. Insects feed on the leaves, twigs, acorns, bark and wood of oak trees. Oak trees have been proven to show that when their species is reduced it impacts numerous bird species and plants. Recognizing that the gradual loss of oak canopy may impact future wildlife populations and plant and animal diversity, wildlife managers and forest ecologists are encouraging the retention of oak forests or the establishment and development of oak tree regeneration. Not only do they provide food for an abundance of wildlife and diversify foliage, but trees also improve air quality by storing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen through the process of photosynthesis. The leaves of an oak tree absorb airborne pollutants and take them out of the air we breathe. Finally, Oaks are what's known as a "keystone species," which is an ecologists' term for a species that holds an ecosystem together. Keystone trees are the species that other organisms rely on for food and shelter, therefore, if we remove them, the ecosystem might not survive. We must protect these important Oak trees, or the ecosystem around them may begin to fall apart. In the end, the oak is a warrior for all kinds of life - human, animal, and plant. And, thus, if we don't work hard to protect it, it will no longer protect the beautiful world that it helps to sustain.

But not all hope is lost! There are many things we can do to protect and preserve Oak trees. For example, NWF suggests prescribed burning by a forest management professional, also canopy thinning will help get Oak trees the light they need. Also, to protect native trees like oaks, you can get a tree surveyor to come out and decide which invasive trees or plants you can get rid of. Lastly,

no matter the age, anyone can plant native oak trees to help the declining Oak population. These steps may seem small, but if everyone puts in the effort, it will result in a transformational change.

Therefore, one can easily see the continued influence Mighty Oak has had on the world around it - in particular on us as humans! We must protect this magnificent tree so that it can continue to support a beautiful world for our children, our children's children, and all of the generations to come. The Mighty Oak has been around in our memories and the memories of humanity for generations. Let's take strong steps to ensure that the Mighty Oak does not become just a memory.