

Little fish, big pond: R.A. Smith's Stautz in a select group of ecologists

By: Jessica Stephen, Special to The Daily Reporter August 13, 2015 10:20 am



Theran Stautz (Staff photo by Kevin Harnack)

If Theran Stautz was on a Venn diagram, he'd occupy a pretty small space.

"The construction industry and I kind of co-exist on the fringes of our projects," said Stautz, an ecologist and project manager with R.A. Smith National in Madison. "I get involved with development projects very, very early on, like when they're doing a site assessment. If I get pulled into a project that's already constructed or construction has started, it's usually because they haven't gotten their environmental Is dotted and Ts crossed."

Even within his company, Stautz isn't exactly a big fish.

"There are three ecologist at R.A. Smith. That's three out of 190-something employees, so we're a tiny little blip in the framework of R.A. Smith. I would say we're a pretty important blip, (since) it's such an important piece of the development process, even just for land acquisition.

"But it's kind of misunderstood piece of the puzzle," Stautz said. "Most of my time is spent explaining why this is important and why the (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources) is asking them for the work and why we need to submit these reports."

Not that the process is easy.

The DNR generally requires a delineation to define wetland boundaries for any development project. That means visiting a site to determine wetland vegetation, wetland hydrology and hydric soils, then creating a map and a report, both of which must be submitted to the DNR and the Army Corps of Engineers for concurrence.

"With permitting, it's a big process," Stautz said.

Fortunately, it's a little less involved for Stautz, who recently earned his professional wetland scientist certification (kind of like a P.E. for an engineer) and is one of only 10 wetland delineators in Wisconsin assured by the DNR, which means he doesn't have to submit his work for formal approval.

It's quite an accomplishment for a self-proclaimed "botany nerd," who focused on forestry and ecological research before working with the Department of Defense, an experience that led him to focus almost exclusively on wetland delineations in 2005.

"I still like to geek out on plants," Stautz laughed.

But wetland work is what brought him back to Wisconsin in 2007, a long-time goal for the Shawano native. It's also what led him to join R.A. Smith earlier this year and what has given him a virtual backstage pass to the wild places he loves.

"It's kind of interesting the places that we're allowed to get into, whether it's a large utility pipeline or transmission line projects, where we can get into little back corners of people's land, or into streams and lakeshores, just random beautiful areas of the state that most people don't get to explore."

The Daily Reporter: What surprises you most about your work?

Theran Stautz: I think that goes along with what I find the most interesting — getting into, I wouldn't say undiscovered areas, because every place in Wisconsin has been discovered by now, but places people don't normally get into, seeing plants that people don't often see.

TDR: What would you change about the construction industry?

Stautz: I think I would like to get more people to involve us in the beginning of the process. It's changing, and people are realizing it's a good first step to have us involved. The DNR is putting out more and more guidance saying that wetland delineations need to be included in the beginning of negotiations for development. But that would be the biggest change.

TDR: What do you consider your biggest achievement so far?

Stautz: I would say getting to be an assured delineator with the DNR because there are so few of us. It's kind of the top of the game in Wisconsin. Without tooting my own horn too much, there's only 10 of us, so we're kind of looked on by the DNR as the go-to people for wetland delineation.

TDR: What's your biggest extravagance?

Stautz: My wife and I just bought a house in Sun Prairie, so all my money is going to the house.

TDR: What device could you not live without?

Stautz: I think it would be a tie between my smartphone and the GPS I use for our wetland delineations. The two are absolutely necessary at this point in my career.

TDR: What song is in heavy rotation for you right now?

Stautz: That's such a hard question to answer because I have like a 10,000 song playlist on Spotify that is always on rotation. But, I guess, last month, before the Grateful Dead's 50th anniversary show, I was listening to a lot of Grateful Dead. And I've been listening to Florence and the Machine's new album.

TDR: What object in your office means the most to you?

Stautz: I have some really nice pictures of my wife and my daughter that I like. And I think if I said anything other than those things, I'd be in trouble. So I'm going to go with those. But I have a lot of Packers paraphernalia too, which is important.

TDR: Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

Stautz: I say 'nice' a lot and 'right' and 'take it easy.'



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