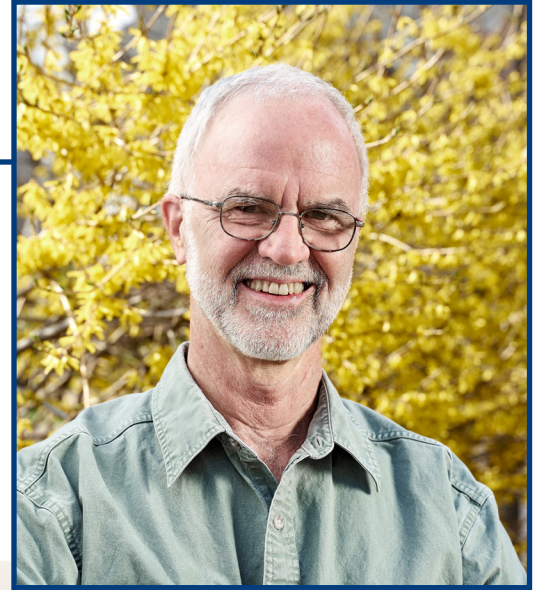


An Interview

with

Dave Peters

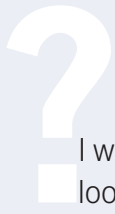


SAND AND FIRE

EXPLORING A RARE
PINE BARRENS LANDSCAPE



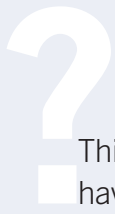
WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



WHS Press Why and how did you decide to write *Sand & Fire*?

I was captivated by a landscape that looked so different from the north woods around it and from what I'd come to expect after spending many decades exploring

northwestern Wisconsin. The trees were different; the brush was different; flowers and birds were plentiful. Then when I learned how many different people had used and lived on the Namekagon Barrens and how few people today understood what the barrens are, it felt like a worthy project to take on.



WHS Press How can this book help illuminate Wisconsin or even US history?

This is not pristine wilderness. People have been using and shaping the barrens for 10,000 years. What happened there reflects the travels and lives of indigenous peoples, the fur trade, tensions over land cession, the logging boom of the 1800s, land

promotion, a struggle to farm unproductive land, and ultimately debate over how best to preserve wildlife habitat. One facet of the history that is particularly fascinating is the several-decades-long effort by immigrants and others to farm the barrens and to build a community. Ultimately it failed in the face of the Great Depression, but evidence remains on the land.



WHS Press What do you hope readers learn about our region's natural history from reading this book?

The Namekagon Barrens are an unusual ecosystem, a tiny percentage of the land that once looked like this in Wisconsin.

The network of scrub oaks and jack pines, blueberry bushes and sweet fern, bog plants, wood lilies and pasqueflowers is a rare one, the result of prodigious amounts of sand that poured from glaciers and then regular fires that burned back the growth. It's a land worth preserving.





WHS Press As anyone can imagine, writing a book is a deeply personal experience. How has writing *Sand & Fire* been a personal experience for you?

I reacted to the barrens with my gut when I first saw them. It was like the prairie I grew up on but not quite. Writing a book about it let me seek out the people who knew it best,

from its trees, flowers, and birds to its geology and its modern management. Perhaps most poignant was the opportunity to talk to people with the most tangible connections to the land—Ojibwe whose people have used the land for generations and descendants of barrens settlers who tried and left. Mostly they told me things I didn't know; sometimes it was the reverse.



WHS Press What is the most surprising thing you learned while writing this book?

Today, you can stand in the middle of the barrens and turn in a circle and not see

or hear another human being for miles. A hundred years ago, hundreds of people would have been living around you, cultivating crops, sending their kids to school, holding parties into the night, gathering blueberries.



WHS Press What has been your favorite moment at the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area?

Before dawn on a clear May day, I was standing by the foundation of the old Forest Home school house on St. Croix Trail. In the dark I could hear, but not see, sharp-tailed grouse a few hundred feet away, doing their energetic mating dance. Everything

else was still. Then across the open terrain stretching to the east, a slim waning crescent of a moon rose standing on its end, followed shortly by the sun emerging over the horizon. I lay on my belly, watching the sun sneak up over some tiny pasqueflowers in front of my face and gradually cause the moon to fade in the brightness. It was a magic moment, alone in a silent wonderful world.





WHS Press In what ways have your experiences at the pine barrens influenced who you are as a person?

The barrens are one of those places that instill in you an understanding of how completely interwoven the world is. The sand encourages

fire, the fire encourages blueberries, the blueberries have fed Ojibwe gatherers and European settlers and sharp-tailed grouse. The land imprints on humans and, because this is managed land, not wilderness, humans leave their imprint on the land. This is a life lesson we could all benefit from.



WHS Press Are there any current issues you would like people to be aware of regarding the Namekagon Barrens?

Prescribed burning can be a touchy subject for some people. There are other ways to

keep the barrens terrain open but fire is pretty much a necessity at some point to keep the land in the early stages of forest succession. The more people know this the more likely it is that the barrens will be preserved and even expanded.

