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Gravel pit acquisition smart use of program Educational parcel preserved, accessible

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An old gravel pit that has helped teach thousands of local schoolkids about the Ice Age is becoming a more permanent part of the community, thanks to preservation programs and the land's former owners.

The 49 acres of land is located in Scio Township, and until recently was owned by Mel and Betty Fox. Over the years they've let an estimated 40,000 children and their teachers tromp through to study boulders, fossils and other remnants of our geological and botanical past.

"It portrays a really nice possibility of what the entire Ann Arbor area might have looked like 12,000 years ago," John Russell, a retired Ann Arbor Public Schools science teacher, told The News.

Russell, who has taken many classes on field trips to the site, is a member of the Natural Areas Technical Advisory Committee, a group that recommended buying the land. The Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission, which manages the county Natural Areas Preservation Program, paid half of the \$771,000 cost, with Scio Township and the Ann Arbor greenbelt program picking up the rest.

Now called the Fox Science Preserve, it will likely be open to the general public later this year, after a small parking lot is built for those coming to visit. There will also be signs installed to tell people about the land's natural features - including fungi, mosses, algae and lichens that are starting to grow in the former gravel pit. Those microscopic plants provide a valuable insight into what scientists call primary plant succession - the process of how plant life developed thousands of years ago, when rock was exposed by a retreating glacier, for example.

Preserving this land and making it accessible to local residents of all ages is smart. That combination is an important one, and one we like to see included as a priority as local land preservation programs evaluate which parcels they'd like to purchase.

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