

A Strand in the Web

Why do we offer history programs at Chippewa Nature Center? I'm sure many of you remember history class as a child, memorizing endless details of nineteenth century battles and being bored to death. "Famous dead people" seem pretty far removed from enjoying a CNC nature hike or watching birds from the wildlife viewing area. If you consider the story of humans on Earth in a different way, however, it becomes clear why history and nature are both important parts of the mission and message of CNC.

I was recently inspired by a program entitled "The Great Story" by Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd, in which they use a string of beads to represent the thirteen billion-year history of the universe. Each bead symbolizes a certain length of time and significant events in the evolution of the galaxies, stars, planets, and life on Earth over the millennia.

Always searching for new perspectives, I wondered if I could adapt this idea for programs at CNC, focusing especially on the history of North America and the place we now call Michigan. I happened to have a large bag of colored "seed beads" (small glass beads the size of seeds) I could use for my experiment. But with materials in hand, where should I start? If I went back far enough, I could visualize a time when dinosaurs roamed the land, pausing to munch on vegetation (or each other)? But due to the Ice Age, Michigan has a famous lack of fossils from this period.

Then it struck me. The Ice Age—a veritable "clean slate"—would be a great place to begin visualizing the history of the land around us. With that in mind, I decided my strand would start 35,000 years ago, when the last "glacial advance" began. I had enough beads for each one to represent 50 years, a period that fits nicely into an average lifetime.



I chose blue beads for ice; red ones for Paleo-Indians, who arrived in North America about 13,000 years ago, hunting mammoths and mastodons; orange for Archaic Indians, developing trade and agriculture; green for Woodland Indians, using pottery and archery for the first time; a metal bead for 1492 A.D., when Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World; and scarlet ones for the Historical Era since that fateful day.

When finished, my strand of 700 beads was 5 feet long. About 3 feet is nothing but ice. After that, Native Americans lived here for over 2½ feet of the strand prior to the arrival of Europeans. From the metal bead to 2005 consists of only 8 beads. The age of industry and technology are (at most) the last 2½ beads—out of 700. One-fourth of one inch out of 5 feet!

It's easy for all of us to get wrapped up in our world of computers, cars and satellites, never pausing to consider what a small slice of time our modern way of life has existed. Yet in the space of about three beads, North Americans eliminated about four-fifths of our continent's wildlife, decimated the Native cultures who once thrived here and spoiled much of the air, water and soil on which life depends.

I hope each of you pause this coming year to reflect on our place in the Earth's web life, of which we are all a part. I invite each of you to attend a CNC program where we'll celebrate living things around us, reflect on where we've been and where we're headed in the future. What will future generations say about the next bead in the strand? And how does each of us fit into this Great Story?

To learn more about Connie and Michael's "Great Story" beads and programs, visit www.TheGreatStory.org.

—Kyle Bagnall
Manager of Historical Programs