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World-traveling conservationist has sights set on Kickapoo River Valley

By JOE ORSO | La Crosse Tribune

GAYS MILLS, Wis. — The pronoun that threads together Robert Horwich's stories is "we."

"We were raising cranes behind doors with puppets," he says regarding his work with the International Crane Foundation in 1985 and 1986.



Rob Horwich of rural Crawford County calls himself a community conservationist. He's done work in India, Madagascar and Costa Rica but now he's focusing his attention much closer to home.

PETER THOMSON photo

"We also did a translocation of monkeys," he says regarding his work in Belize from 1992 to 1994.

"We go and talk with local people and I ask them for their help and I help them at the same time and we become partners, me and the village organizations and the people," he says regarding his work to protect forests in India.

Horwich, who lives outside Gays Mills, Wis., is a biologist, artist, world traveler and conservationist, who over the past 25 years has worked to empower local people to protect local habitats.

Community Conservation, the Gays Mills-based nonprofit organization he started in 1989, has been involved with projects in 11 countries. Those include Russia, where it helped groups preserve the wetlands that are home to Eurasian cranes, and El Salvador, where it helped preserve spider monkey habitats.

Now, Horwich's work is focused on the Kickapoo River Valley, where he has lived for more than 30 years. Along with the board of Community Conservation and local volunteers, he is working on a proposal that would bring landowners and local organizations together to preserve the Kickapoo River Valley from Wilton at the top to Wauzeka at the bottom.

Part of that mission lies in getting people to understand where they live as a natural ecosystem, almost like one big park.

"If you feel ownership of even public lands, you're going to protect those lands just like they're yours," said Horwich, born in New Jersey on the last day of 1940.

At the start of his career, Horwich never thought he'd be working with people. He said

he's not that social, and his background, which includes a doctorate in zoology from the University of Maryland, is in animal behavior.

In the mid-1980s, Horwich helped the International Crane Foundation develop a way to raise cranes in captivity and release them into the wild without them thinking that humans were their mates. That involved Horwich dressing in a gray sack with a crane puppet on his arm as they went to release the cranes in the wild.

"His awareness of animals is different than other people's," said Jennifer Nelson, 58, who has been on the Community Conservation board for four years. "He just notices things that other people don't."

But the more Horwich worked to preserve animal habitats, the more he found himself asking communities for help.

On Saturday, Nelson sat with eight others in a classroom at Western Technical College in Viroqua, Wis., as Horwich guided a conversation about community conservation.

At one point, Horwich criticized state governments when they take away control from local people. On the screen was a map of Assam, India, where he and community organizations have enlisted almost 400 people — some paid, some not — to keep loggers from destroying forests where the rare golden langur monkey lives.

"We are more similar to these villagers in Assam in terms of the problems we face than we are to the people in Madison," Horwich told the students.

After the class, the group went to the Driftless Cafe, where some discussed organizing Natural Step study circles and others sat with Horwich, talking about marketing his book about cranes.

Juliee Wendland, a Viterbo student doing an internship with Horwich, called him "humble."

"For a man who's really intelligent and really talented and has been all over the world, he's really approachable," Wendland said. "He doesn't feel like his credentials have to precede him."

Horwich, who lives simply and says poor people worry less about money than rich people, thinks of himself as a catalyst.

"I've been all over these forests," he said, pointing to a map of Assam, India. "I'm mostly a catalyst to these people. It wouldn't have happened without me, but they're doing the work. I'm doing very little now. That's the magic of being a catalyst. You're very important, but you're also nothing."

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