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What Does a Tree Do For Me?

Growing up, the Laura Ingalls Wilder books were my favorite. My older sisters passed down their beloved set of books to me. Some of them, I read over and over again. When Laura and her family arrived in DeSmet, the family missed the woods of Wisconsin, so Pa saved seeds from a big cottonwood near the creek and planted five trees in honor of his wife, Caroline, and daughters, Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace. Now, 140 years later, Pa's cottonwoods still stand in tribute to their pioneering spirit. When visiting the homestead near DeSmet to attend the famous pageant, I have gazed up those stately cottonwoods and have been inspired by the story that they hold.

Yes , trees do touch and enhance our lives in so many ways. Along with the joy they bring, they also serve as protection and improve habitat, as well as playing an important role in conservation and caring for our environment.

Let's begin with the role that trees play in providing habitat.

Did you know that every tree is important to the life of some animal or insect? Let's look at just one tree as an example - the Eastern Red Cedar. This is an all around excellent tree for wildlife. Because it is an evergreen, it offers birds and other wildlife year-round cover from predators and bad weather, along with a place to rest, roost and nest. Cedars produce berry-like cones that provide food for birds from early summer through winter. And more than 30 native moths and butterflies lay their eggs on red cedar trees.

Trees in our city parks and other urban areas are especially important. Imagine how wildlife in the city would survive without trees for a haven, and a place for food and refuge.

As a farm girl, I know how important trees are for our livestock, providing them shelter from the sometimes extreme elements of winter here on the prairie. When a blizzard is in the forecast, we move cattle next to tree shelter belts to help them through the worst conditions.

Speaking of blizzards, in low visibility, trees can serve as landmarks to help us find our way home. That familiar row of trees has many times alerted me of my whereabouts, signaling an upcoming corner so that I don't miss it.

Now let's move on to how trees are crucial in protecting our environment. In my science studies this year, I learned about the greenhouse effect caused by rising levels of CO₂ in our atmosphere. Trees use the CO₂ and store that carbon, helping to minimize the problem of global warming. During the process of photosynthesis, oxygen is released back into the air, something all of us depend on. In one year, an acre of mature trees provides enough oxygen for 18 people.

Trees play an important role in soil and water conservation as well. Because of their large root system trees hold down the soil to keep it from washing away. The roots also help replenish the water table which many, depend on for drinking. Instead of rainwater rushing down hillsides, the roots actually funnel water down into the water table and help hold and store water.

Trees even help keep the air we breathe cleaner by trapping the dust during harvest and in our cattle feeding areas, improving the quality of life for man and beast.

One of my favorite things to do on warm summer days is to retreat to my hammock in my woodsy backyard with a good book, or just to relax and enjoy the songs of birds in the branches. It has been proven that trees reduce stress and even help people recover from health challenges. For this reason, you may have noticed how hospitals will often place trees in view of patient's windows. Trees really can help make us feel better.

As you can see, trees do so much to improve our quality of life. From providing food and protection for both people and wildlife, to contributing towards environmental and conservation efforts, trees are invaluable. Pa Ingalls understood too, the joy that would come from watching his cottonwood trees grow and on thrive his homestead. And, like Pa, I bet you have a favorite tree as well. I know that I sure do!

Thank you.