

Partnerships for Place-based Conservation Education in the USDA Forest Service

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Abstract: Partnerships play a key role in USDA Forest Service conservation education programs. Without partnerships we could not reach the millions of individuals we now reach annually with educational programs that connect people to the land and promote the sustainability of our nation's natural resources.

This paper highlights two such partnerships, the Clear Lake Education Center, a residential natural resource education camp for grades 5-12 on Michigan's Hiawatha National Forest, and *A Forest For Every Classroom*, a Vermont-based professional development program for educators focusing on place-based education.

These partnerships exemplify the goals the agency seeks to achieve in fostering environmental literacy. The Clear Lake Education Center's outdoor classroom provides students an understanding of the natural and cultural aspects of the Upper Midwest, environmental sciences, and natural resource careers. *A Forest For Every Classroom* helps teacher develop standards-based curriculum that integrates hands-on natural and cultural explorations addressing ecology, sense of place, stewardship, and civics.

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Partnerships play a key role in USDA Forest Service conservation education programs. In fact, without partnerships, we could not reach the millions of individuals we now reach annually with educational programs and materials that connect people to the land and promote the sustainability of our nation's natural resources. In fiscal year 2005, for example, we participated in over 600 partnerships Forest Service-wide that supported conservation education. These partnerships involved other federal, state, and local agencies and numerous not-for-profit education and natural resource organizations.

This presentation will highlight two such partnerships, the Clear Lake Education Center (CLEC), a residential natural resource education camp for grades 5-12 on Michigan's Hiawatha National Forest, and *A Forest For Every Classroom* (FFEC), a Vermont-based professional development program for educators focusing on place-based education.

Before we discuss these partnerships I'd like to briefly discuss three background concepts.

The first is the Forest Service's conservation education mission.

The Forest Service has provided education programs since its infancy. An early version of the Forest Service manual noted the importance of education "to promote the best use of all forest resources in the country, public and private." This early manual direction promoted cooperation with schools and publications for children. Today, this tradition plays a key role in meeting the challenges of sustainable forest management.

Recently the Forest Service, with the assistance of numerous partners, revisited this mission with a goal of strengthening the focus and delivery of our conservation education program to enhance environmental literacy.

This strategy guides the agency's efforts to help foster environmental literacy in America. An individual is environmentally literate when they have knowledge of environmental processes and issues necessary to make informed decisions and participate in civic affairs.

To foster environmental literacy the agency provides education through partnerships to pre-kindergarten through 12th grade students and their educators, both formal and non-formal, so they can build awareness, knowledge and skills to sustain a healthy natural environment. What we as a nation, need -- regardless of who we are, or where we live, or how old we are, or what we do for a living -- are people connected to the land.

We need:

- Well-informed leaders who engage people in supporting needed actions;
- committed partners who put time, money, and support where they make a difference;
- open communications that foster deserved trust;
- "conservation literate" people who understand what is going on in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them; and
- new, long-term relationships and partnerships for the future.

That is what "connecting people to the land" is about. That is what the Forest Service today is about.

The second concept is that of partnerships.

When we talk about partnerships, we're talking about a ***“mutually beneficial cooperative relationship, preferably one that is longer than an individual project”***.

Let's look at the individual pieces of that definition.

Mutually beneficial – An effective partnership must meet the needs of all parties involved. There should be an identifiable benefit to each participant.

In fact, most folks don't realize that this “requirement” for an identifiable benefit is built into the agreement templates that the Forest Service uses to formalize partnerships. The “Statement of Mutual Interests and Benefits” is the second item listed in most of our agreement documents. But very often in developing agreements we breeze through this section without giving it a lot of thought.

Cooperative – An effective partnership must be cooperative in nature. All parties should work together to conceptualize, design, implement, monitor and evaluate the project or program. Ideally, each partner is treated fairly and contributes equally to the relationship.

Relationship - Most importantly, a partnership is a relationship; it's not just the project, or the money, its people working with people.

Long-term – Preferably, partnerships should be long-term, even though they may have a short-term, project focus.

Keep these definitional terms in mind when we discuss these two partnerships.

The third concept is “place-based education.”

Place-based education brings together students and teachers, the local community, and the resource.

Across the nation, both formal and non-formal educators are finding that rooting their educational programming deeply in the local community, both physically and thematically, is an effective strategy for achieving educational goals. Today's students will become responsible citizens if they understand the places in which they live, and if they have educational opportunities based on real life issues that encourage them to be stewards of their own communities. As students and teachers engage in studying and addressing relevant local issues, the results have included higher levels of learner engagement, stronger community support for education and conservation, and a renewed sense of value for the spirit of place.

As noted conservationist Wallace Stegner so eloquently stated, “If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.”

The bottom line is that before students learn about the Amazonian rainforest or the Siberian tiger, they should know about the place they live in, what's in their own backyard. They should know what happened to the land, culturally, in the past one to two hundred years. They should be able to identify such things as common bird calls, talk about why forest edges are so amazing, and demonstrate on a map where all the one-room schoolhouses were.

For public land management agencies such as the Forest Service, our public lands are a "place" where many of these lessons can be learned.

I think that's enough background information. Let's now talk about these two "mutually beneficial cooperative relationships."

The Clear Lake Education Center (CLEC) is a partnership between the Delta-Schoolcraft Intermediate School District, the Marquette-Alger Regional Educational Service Agency (school district) and the Hiawatha National Forest. This partnership has been in place in various forms since 1991.

Each year several thousand students come to CLEC, a former Civilian Conservation Corps facility, to spend three to five days immersed in an outdoor classroom. Teachers choose from a menu of fourteen interdisciplinary courses from managing a forest to using the technology of science, along with "extra-curricular" team and confidence-building activities such as high and low ropes courses. All classes enhance the Michigan Framework educational requirements and offer students a unique hands-on learning experience.

Many of the classes are taught by local resource professionals, and camp staff is recruited from natural resource and education majors at local universities.

From their Clear Lake experience, students gain an understanding of the natural and cultural aspects of the Upper Midwest, environmental sciences, and natural resource career opportunities. In 2005 the Center received the Education Excellence award and the prestigious Michigan's Best Award from the Michigan Association of School Boards.

Here's a short video segment that captures the Clear Lake experience (show CLEC DVD).

The camp itself consists of eight heated cabins, a modern restroom/laundry building, a classroom, dining hall, staff quarters, and several outbuildings. The camp is located at a Forest Service facility that is operated under a permit to the school districts. Presently the camp is in operation from late April through October.

As we mentioned earlier, the Clear Lake partnership consists of two local school districts and the Hiawatha National Forest. The partnership is overseen by a three person board consisting of the two school superintendents and the Forest Supervisor. The board provides overall policy direction, while an executive director oversees long and short-term planning and operations. The director is a Forest Service employee, but funding for the position is shared equally between the partners. Other positions include a school district funded administrative assistant for nine months of the year, and a contracted program director who is on-site to handle the day-to-day operations. In addition, several university interns are hired to serve as camp staff.

Currently, with the exception of the executive director's salary, the camp operates solely on receipts and grants.

So, why do we consider this partnership a success?

In the past several years student numbers have more than tripled, and in 2005 over 2000 students participated in day long field trip programs and three day residential outdoor education camps,

revenues have increased, and programming has expanded. During this time the camps have received a 98% satisfaction rating from teachers and students.

Beyond the numbers there are other reasons to consider this partnership a success. Both the Forest Service and the school districts have experienced extremely tight budgets the past few years, but commitment to this partnership from all parties has not waned. Policies such as “No Child Left Behind” and the focus on standardized testing mean that teachers do not want to spend any time on curriculum and activities that do not support these agendas, yet they continue to sign up their students for classes at Clear Lake. In fact, in the central Upper Peninsula of Michigan, it is not unusual for a student to attend Clear Lake programs two or three times during their K-12 experience.

Teachers and administrators alike have stated that the opportunity to bring students out into the woods and to have them participate in hands-on, real-world activities is a very effective learning method, one that can't be duplicated in the classroom. When they do get students back into the classroom, however, they can then relate classroom activities back to the real world. Similarly, the opportunity to have students interact with resource professionals, and to conduct surveys and take measurements with them, brings learning alive, and provides a relevance that can't be experienced in the classroom. Additionally, anecdotal comments from students that have gone on to natural resource careers have shown that the Clear Lake experience has been a turning point in their career decisions.

From the Forest Service standpoint, this partnership has provided the opportunity to connect to students and the community “on our turf”, to raise awareness of conservation issues and sustainable forest management concepts of future decision-makers, and hopefully, to encourage some to pursue careers in natural resources. It has also allowed us to take a facility that was under-utilized and in danger of falling into disrepair and turn it into a valuable community resource.

More information on the Clear Lake Education Center can be found at www.clearlakeinfo.org.

A second example.

We'd now like to move from the forests and lakes of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to the northwoods of Vermont.

Inspired by a common vision of students learning from and caring for public lands, the Green Mountain National Forest, Shelburne Farms, the Conservation Study Institute, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Northern Forest Center created a program titled *A Forest for Every Classroom* (FFEC). FFEC is a model for how collaboration can increase the effectiveness of organizations to serve communities, enhance educational outreach, and protect public lands. Teachers who participate in FFEC develop standards-based curriculum that integrate hands-on natural and cultural explorations addressing ecology, sense of place, stewardship, and civics. Assessments of the program have yielded impressive results and helpful insights.

FFEC was designed based on input from partners, community members, teachers, and forestry professionals on the concepts and experiences that students should have in a curriculum about forest stewardship. The ideas generated from focus group sessions shaped the goals and structure of the FFEC program.

Following the public forums, the partners developed and launched the FFEC professional development program. A year-long series of three seasonal 2-day workshops and a 5-day summer institute provides educators with the opportunity to develop the skills, knowledge, and support they need to create standards-based curriculum that connects students to the public lands in their communities.

In these workshops natural resource professionals teach teachers about natural resources and natural resource management, both in the forest and in the classroom. Teachers across different disciplines use what they have learned about forests--ecological and cultural--and develop curriculum that is innovative and correlated with state standards, with the assistance of experts in curriculum development. The curriculum that is developed includes both instruction in the classroom and in the forest. Both the Green Mountain National Forest and the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park have put together forest "plots" close to schools so teachers have a "place" to bring their students every year to do measurements and speculate about changes that are taking place and/or to reflect on that plot in poetry and artwork.

The curriculum the teachers develop must also include a community service learning component that involves the students in a natural resource project the community needs accomplished.

Let's hear what teachers have to say about this program. (Play DVD excerpt 7:42 – 9:05).

To date, 62 teachers have gone through the program. The program is not a "one-shot deal", however. Teachers who have gone through the program are periodically involved in additional professional development in natural resources. They are also encouraged to maintain contact with the resource professionals who have instructed them.

What makes this a successful partnership?

This partnership builds on the strengths of each partner, and supports organizational missions.

The mission of Shelburne Farms is to cultivate a conservation ethic through teaching and demonstration. In this role, the organization provides two individuals to develop the teacher training and provide overall program administration, and one person to pursue grants. Created in 1886 as a model agricultural estate and established as an educational nonprofit in 1972, their respected presence in the community provides a strong foundation for the program.

The Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park and Green Mountain National Forest provide technical support as well as "the place" for the outdoor education to occur. Because these agencies and their lands are there for them, the teachers and their students, in turn, love the organizations, feel pampered and herald the Forest For Every Classroom program.

The other three supporting organizations all have conservation education related goals. The Conservation Study Institute's vision encompasses natural and cultural heritage in defining sense of place, and emphasizes the role of people in stewardship. The Northern Forest Center's mission is to connect people, culture, and the land. The Northeast Office of the National Wildlife Federation has a goal to provide conservation leadership and protection for wildlife for generations to come through education. FFEC provides an ideal forum to carry out these missions and goals.

And, of course, the teachers gain from participation in the program, and help further the conservation education goals of the supporting organizations. As one teacher puts it, "this course has re-kindled

my soul and passion for teaching. It has made it meaningful again. I am so grateful for the vision, the inspiration, the follow-through, and the commitment and knowledge that the partners have channeled through us.”

FFEC's unique partnership of public and private organizations is a model for how collaboration can increase the effectiveness of organizations to serve communities, enhance educational outreach, and protect public lands.

An independent assessment of the FFEC program reported that the strengths of the program include:

- Demonstrating best practices in place-based education,
- Cultivating an understanding of public lands and the local community,
- Offering diverse and balanced perspectives about public lands issues,
- Developing relationships with teachers through sustained professional support,
- Fostering connections between the school, community, and resource specialists,
- Enhancing the role of public and private organizations as community resources, and
- Fostering students as active participants in the care of public lands through service learning activities.

This year the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire is working with partners to begin their own FFEC program, and representatives from Stephen F. Austin University have expressed interest in bringing the program to Texas.

More information on FFEC can be found at www.nps.gov/mabi/mabi/education/forest.htm

In closing we'd like to go back to the definition of partnership that was provided earlier, and the Forest Service's goal of furthering environmental literacy. As you'll recall, a partnership was defined as a “mutually beneficial cooperative relationship, preferably one that is longer than an individual project”, and an individual is considered environmentally literate when they have knowledge of environmental processes and issues necessary to make informed decisions and participate in civic affairs.

If you look at the “pieces” of these definitions again, that is “mutually beneficial”, “cooperative”, “relationship”, “longer than an individual project”, “foster environmental literacy”, “knowledge of environmental processes and issues”, and “make informed decisions and participate in civic affairs”, we think you'll agree that these two examples exemplify these definitions.