

## **Arrowhead Environmental Education Center: A Partnership in Education**

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*Abstract:* Wildlife education is an important component of the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division's mission. Funding for educational positions and programs are difficult to obtain. A partnership between local school systems and the Game Management Section at its Region I headquarters near Rome, Georgia, successfully initiated a wildlife education center. The Game Management Section provided facilities such as a nature trail, classroom, and lab. The school systems jointly funded a coordinator/teacher position. The center reaches 3 school systems through a combination of on-site and outreach programs.

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a state wildlife agency can successfully work with local school systems in the development of an environmental education center. Like in many southeastern states, the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division recognized wildlife education efforts as a primary part of its mission in the 1980s. Initial efforts focused on "Project Wild" and wildlife trails at regional offices. In 1990, the Game Management Region I staff selected wildlife education as a primary regional goal. The Lake Arrowhead Wildlife Trail, located at the Region I Headquarters in Armuchee, Georgia, was revamped and upgraded. Directional signage was placed along the trail and interpretive signs were added at natural educational viewing areas. Meetings were held with local school systems to solicit their ideas, suggestions, and support. Concurrently, funds were solicited through the Nongame-Endangered Wildlife Program to renovate the conference room and lab at the region office. Changes were made, through consultation with the local school systems, to make these rooms more compatible with public school needs. As with many government facilities, these rooms were being maintained daily but were only used by Wildlife Resources Division staff once or twice a month. They were, therefore, available for use by

schools as part of field trips to the wildlife trail. These efforts proved marginally successful in attracting more use; however, the limiting factor was on-site teaching staff.

In October 1993, Ms. Kim Mehaffey, a biology teacher employed with Floyd County Schools approached the Wildlife Resources Division with plans to develop an Environmental Education Center in the Rome/Floyd County area. At that time, she was advised that a facility already existed but needed a teacher/coordinator. The decision was made to work together to solicit the necessary funding to staff the Wildlife Resources Division facility with a coordinator and create a resource for the local schools. Ms. Mehaffey presented a proposal to the administration of the Floyd County Schools and they were very supportive of the concept. The limiting factor, again, was the financial support for the position. However, Floyd County Schools did agree to allow Ms. Mehaffey to solicit possible donations, grants, and other means of funding. In May 1994, a meeting was arranged with all of the 15 school systems superintendents and curriculum directors in the Northwest Georgia Regional Educational Services Agency (RESA). At the meeting a proposal was made for each school system to support the position based on student enrollment. If all schools joined, the RESA agreed to support one-third of the salary, further reducing the individual system costs. A financial commitment was received by 3 of the 15 systems; Floyd County School, Rome City Schools, and Trion City Schools. The late date in the school year that this meeting was held contributed to the other 12 systems being unable to participate due to budget constraints. Fortunately, Dr. Jackie Collins, superintendent of Floyd County Schools, agreed to support the position on a 1-year trial basis. He also agreed to let Rome City and Trion City participate at the originally proposed per student rate based on all 15 school systems participating in the program. This meant the Floyd County School System supported approximately 93% of the budget for the coordinator's salary with Rome City and Trion City supporting approximately 7%. Additionally, the Wildlife Resources Division agreed to provide all facilities, a vehicle for "outreach programs," office space, secretarial support, and all necessary start up supplies. During preplanning of the 1994-95 school year, the lab was transformed into a Nature Center using collected items from the natural world. Mounted birds, mammals, and study skins were donated by local taxidermists. Collections of bird nests, preserved specimens, skulls, etc., were added to the display. Aquariums were set up with living specimens of herps native to Northwest Georgia. The local Wal-Mart donated \$500 that enabled us to set up an aquarium with native species found in area lakes. As a wildlife rehabilitator, Ms. Mehaffey was in the position to have numerous opportunities to use non-releasable wildlife in environmental programs. The classroom was prepared to house 30 students for these programs. The WMA trail lent itself to a multitude of educational opportunities such as the wetland area which provides habitat for beaver, numerous waterfowl, and various herptofauna.

The center began operation in August 1994 and by December 1994, 75

teachers and 2,000 students had participated in the program. The overall response to the program was overwhelming.

In a January 1995 meeting with superintendents and curriculum coordinators of the participating school systems, the decision was made to continue the program for an additional year. However, an adjustment was made to have Rome and Trion City School systems pay a larger portion of Ms. Mehaffey's salary (based on their student enrollment), and to include a new participant, Darlington School.

The Arrowhead Environmental Education Center and its Outreach Program was able to reach approximately 4,000 students in its first year of operation. Half of the participating students actually visited the site and the remainder of students were seen through the Outreach Program. Over 100 teachers were given materials and teaching strategies in environmental education through Project Wild and Aquatic Wild Workshops, Project Learning Tree Workshops, Watershed Management Workshops, and Water Chemistry Workshops. Student teachers from local colleges were given the opportunity to participate in practicums at the nature center thus expanding their experience for their future teaching careers.

All participating schools have been pleased with the success of the Arrowhead Environmental Education Center for it has provided a valuable educational resource to our local community.

The significance of this partnership cannot be understated. It is difficult to secure funding for projects of this type; therefore, collaborative efforts such as this could serve as a model for other systems and agencies. Suggestions as to the procedures to take when undertaking a partnership between Wildlife Agencies and local school systems is as follows:

- 1.(a) Identify the facility—fish hatchery, public fishing Area, Wildlife Management Area, regional office.
- 1.(b) Identify the teacher-coordinator.
2. Identify the target school systems or Regional Educational Service Agency equivalent.
3. Identify budgetary front money or in kind match—(materials, truck, office space, etc . . .).
4. Arrange an on site meeting with the selected partners.
5. Develop a job description.
6. Solicit donations from local businesses and wildlife organizations.

Due to the success of the Arrowhead Environmental Education Center, we are confident similar projects in which partnerships between school systems and fish and wildlife agencies can be formed will prove equally successful.