

Information & Education Session

Conservation Education through a Cooperative Effort in Tennessee

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Abstract: A cooperative agreement among the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and 5 other organizations led to a unique conservation educational experience for visitors to the Unicoi County Heritage Museum (UCHM) in northeastern Tennessee. The adjacent grounds were designated a Wildlife Observation Area that provided an opportunity to view wildlife in natural situations. A quarter-mile nature trail and accompanying audiocassette guide were developed. A natural history exhibit featuring plants, animals, and geologic material was added to the museum. Local school groups and other citizens have taken advantage of this outdoor education experience through participation in Conservation Education Now for Tennessee Students (CENTS) and Project WILD activities.

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Most state wildlife agencies have public education on wildlife conservation as 1 of their objectives. Frequently, however, funds to develop such programs are inadequate. This report describes 1 means of developing an effective low-cost wildlife education program through cooperative efforts of public and private groups. The wildlife officer in each of Tennessee's 95 counties has the opportunity to take the lead in wildlife conservation and often is the only person in the county with the educational background to carry out such an endeavor.

The UCHM is located on the grounds of the Erwin National Fish Hatchery (ENFH), near the town of Erwin in northeastern Tennessee. The ENFH is managed by the U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The concept of a local museum, featuring items of cultural heritage of the region, was a product of numerous civic groups in the Erwin vicinity. The building that was chosen to house the exhibits and displays was an old Victorian-style house, once the home of the first superintendent for the ENFH. This house was slated for destruction by the USFWS until the community rallied for its preservation. Officers of the local groups formed the UCHM board of directors, which implemented a plan to save the old house and govern the direction and function of the local museum.

The citizens of the Unicoi County refurbished the house, and fund-raising events were held to pay for remodeling. Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander demonstrated state interest by helping to paint the house. Public contributions were encouraged by recognition; each room in the house features a specific exhibit and is sponsored by a local civic organization.

The newly-established museum, coupled with available adjacent natural resources and Unicoi County's need for a wildlife conservation education program, presented the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) wildlife officer with an excellent opportunity to develop such a program. The potential for outdoor educational opportunities was there, but it would take some effort to develop a quality experience for museum visitors, relative to conservation education.

Wildlife Observation Area

Woodlands on the fish hatchery grounds and 3 ponds adjacent to the museum are frequented by migrating waterfowl, providing an opportunity for a Wildlife Observation Area (WOA). The WOA concept as described by Hatcher (1984, 1986) includes locations throughout Tennessee where people can view wildlife in their natural habitats as well as learn about these habitats and how to improve them. The WOA idea was presented to Erwin officials, the UCHM board of directors, the Unicoi County Board of Education (UCBE), the USFWS, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). A proposed nature trail would encompass property of the UCBE, USFWS, and the USFS. A cooperative agreement was signed by all the organizations making the TWRA the lead agency for the WOA.

The Nature Trail

The wooded hillside immediately behind the museum was chosen as the site that would provide features of interest when developed as an interpretive nature trail. The initial labor used to dig holes and place locust signposts, as well as clear the quarter-mile loop, was provided from a pool of youthful offenders ordered by the juvenile judge to do community service work. The trail layout and design was according to the guidelines suggested by Sharpe (1976). The trail features numerous species of wildflowers, century-old trees, and an abundance of wildlife. Along the way are 20 numbered stations that are interpreted for the trail user on a 30-minute audio tape. The tape and lightweight portable tape player can be obtained from the museum's curator during hours of operation.

School classes as well as private individuals have used the trail. Trail use primarily has been during warmer months, May through October, with little to no use during the winter. Vandalism and litter have been a problem along the trail and many of the numbered signs have had to be replaced. A Unicoi County citizen who donated his time and material to replace the signs was awarded for his efforts through TWRA's nongame volunteer program. Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops help

maintain the trail, primarily by keeping it free from fallen limbs and trees, and by picking up litter. This activity is done in partial fulfillment for their conservation merit badge.

The Natural History Room

A natural history exhibit was added to the museum in place of a disrepaired porch. Funding for the new room to display this exhibit was obtained through efforts of the Retired Teacher's Association and a grant from the Tennessee Department of Education. Exhibits include handmade wall paneling from different species of native trees; each species of wood is labeled with its name and the name of the contributor. Wildlife exhibits include birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish native to Unicoi County. There are both mounted and live specimens. Also on display are original paintings depicting ecological concepts and a stained glass mural that depicts 2 Carolina parakeets, an extinct species; Tennessee's state insect, the ladybug; Tennessee's state wildflower, the crested iris; and a label explaining the reality of extinction.

The most recent project completed in 1989 is an amphitheater, located adjacent to the Natural History Room. A grassy field near the entrance to the nature trail was terraced to provide seating for the audience observing activities on the stage.

Programs concerning conservation education, specifically CENTS and Project WILD, have been enjoyed by many elementary school students in Unicoi County.

Project WILD is "an interdisciplinary, supplementary environmental and conservation education program for educators of kindergarten through high school age young people" (Charles 1986). This program is sponsored in Tennessee by the Department of Education, the Tennessee Conservation League, and the TWRA. Project WILD activities teach basic ecological principles to students at the museum by "role playing" shrews, hawks, grasshoppers, and bears. When young people can learn about our environment and some of the creatures with which we share this fragile planet, we all gain something for the effort.

The first Annual Backyard Wildlife Rally was held at the UCHM in the fall of 1989 and was a success. The combination of the nature trail, the Natural History Room, and CENTS for students makes visitors to the UCHM part of a strong conservation education program for this area of northeastern Tennessee.

Literature Cited

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