

Technical Completion Report

Children and Nature/Generation Wise Summit

RM-CESU Cooperative Agreement Number: H1200040001 (IMR)

College of Forestry and Conservation, University of Montana, supported by the National Park Service Unit of Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance

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June 14, 2010

Introduction

The University of Montana hosted the inaugural Generation Wise Think Tank workshop in Missoula, Montana from February 11-13, 2009, and through these efforts established an active consortium of local conservation organizations and children’s advocacy groups that continues to engage youth and young adults in outdoor learning events that support the protection and appreciation of nature. In addition, the Children and Nature/Generation Wise Summit allowed the citizens of western Montana to turn out over 60 young adults to provide input into a special “young voices session” for first Great American Outdoors Listening Session held on June 2, 2010, demonstrating the staying power and continued energy of young people in Montana in public land management. This report summarizes the accomplishments of the Children and Nature Network and the 2009 Generation Wise Summit and encourages the National Park Service to continue its focus on providing opportunities for younger Americans to become engaged in the care of our natural heritage.

Children and Nature Network

The Children and Nature/Generation Wise Summit established the Missoula Children and Nature Network through a series of events on the University of Montana campus beginning in February 2009 and continuing to this day. In his best-selling book “Last Child In The Woods”, child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today’s kids—he calls it nature-deficit—to

some of the nation's most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Even in Missoula, where nature seems to be an inextricable part of daily life, kids are not immune to the allure of television, video games and the internet. Missoula City-County Health Dept. Health Promotion Director Greg Oliver sees a reason to be concerned. "It's not rocket science for Montanans that there are many benefits for kids spending time outdoors. It's our heritage. The recent thinking is that quality time outdoors is more important for healthy child development than we ever imagined. It is a sad commentary on our times that even in Missoula we need to work together to counter the trend of kids not getting out enough to move, play, and explore the natural world."

The University of Montana's College of Forestry and Conservation in conjunction with a coalition of Missoula's youth organizations, educators, health experts, and resource managers joined forces to form the Missoula Children and Nature Network, based on support from the National Park Service to create the Missoula Children and Nature Summit, February 11, 12, and 13, 2009, to raise awareness of the needs throughout western Montana to increase opportunities for children to re-connect with nature.

The Summit opened with a free public lecture on February 11, with keynote speaker Rick Potts, the Chief of Conservation and Outdoor Recreation for the National Park Service. Potts spoke on the "Amazing Impacts of Nature on Kids," and shared his personal and professional observations and experiences related to nature-deficit. This opening session will also featured music from Missoula's Coyote Choir and singer/songwriter Amy Martin, plus a Kids Nature Night Hike for ages 5 to 12.

On February 12, the summit continued with a more formal workshop in the University Center on The University of Montana campus from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. A wide range of citizen and students attended, hearing from a panel of experts on children's health and education, with a focus on opportunities to create healthy places in Missoula for citizens and children to experience the out-of-doors. The session was moderated by College of Forestry and Conservation Interim Dean James Burchfield, with speakers Greg Oliver from the Missoula County Health Department, Roger Millar from the Missoula County Office of Planning and Grants, Rick Potts, and Steve Archibald, a local advocate on educational opportunities for youth. From 3:00 to 5:00 participants joined in smaller group discussion sessions to design opportunities for nature connectedness, the built and natural environment, and unstructured outdoor play.

This network over the past 16 months has sponsored six major community-wide events and has mobilized a variety of public entities and private sponsors to create outdoor learning experiences for the young people of western Montana. The web site of this network can be accessed at www.missoulachildrenandnature.org. The organization has positioned itself as a clearinghouse for information and resources on youth outdoor activities. It has been an enormous boost to outdoor recreation providers, parents, and of course, young people, as it connect several different ongoing programs under one, easy to use umbrella. Its clever logo of “Got Nature” has become a presence all across the community. The mission of the Children and Nature Network is to advocate and facilitate the development of meaningful, life-long connections between children and the natural environment, aimed at improving the health of the youth and the natural world in the greater Missoula area. It is the network’s vision that every child in the greater Missoula area will experience nature directly on a regular basis, develop healthy living habits, and connect to the region’s natural places.

This attention a community-based network as a result of the Children and Nature/Generation Wise workshop was a conscious choice of participants to focus energies in a specific, identifiable locale – the Missoula valley - where schools, parents, and local advocates spend most of their own time with children. Although other, more broadly felt programs might look at policies or investments on a larger scale, this direction to form and nurture a community-centered network for children appears to be paying off, as the network continues to sponsor programs on a bi-monthly basis that are consistently well-attended by Missoula area youth.

Additionally, the support from the National Park Service generated a research opportunity for Masters graduate student, Sarah Megyesi ,to acquire additional resources from private sponsors to conduct a research project on the outdoor recreational behaviors of high school girls at Missoula, Montana’s largest high school. Although research findings are still under analysis, preliminary results indicate the vital role of parents’ behaviors in creating outdoor habits among young women.

Generation Wise Think Tank Kick-off

In conjunction with the formation of the Children and Nature Network described above, the University of Montana hosted a selected group of young conservation leaders from across the nation to identify new roles for the upcoming generations of Americans to more actively interact with natural systems and

conservation initiatives. At the kick off meeting on February 12, 2009, the group established a vision to forge an “outdoor nation,” a vision that has subsequently turned into an active program within the Park Service. The outlines of this vision became apparent with the early steps of a mission statement and draft charter. Components of the Think Tanks dialogue that occurred during its kick off included the identification of problems to solve, target audiences, mobilization strategies, and a phased implementation process. Leadership to the Gen Wise Think Tank was provided by National Park Service employee Jamie Fields, and the role of the University of Montana cooperators was largely to create the space and the opportunity for this dialogue to come to fruition.

The dialogue was supported by the simultaneous Children and Nature event that offered a creative crucible and immediate feedback to ideas being assembled by the Think Tank. The Think Tank Kick Off was able to fold in a series of break-out sessions at the Children and Nature workshop, providing material for all participants to consider and critique as part of a joint youth/community learning event. As an illustration, ideas to support additional incentives to engage young people in nature protection included the following:

- Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) of the State of Montana will provide 30 internship opportunities over the course of the 2010. University of Montana faculty will provide input on how best to recruit interns and design the internship experiences to better engage young professionals.
- University of Montana academic programs such as Recreation Management and Environmental Studies will make partnerships between middle-schools, high schools, and colleges relevant to young people so that both college-level mentors and secondary school students will be encouraged to interpret nature *from the students’ point of view*. This means finding out what mobilizes young people and what will be satisfying and educational to both groups. Typically, this will be finding areas of discovery that can “make a difference” in protecting nature or improving people’s lives.
- Create opportunities for children to break free of the “safety zone” of their normal behaviors so they can develop outdoor-type skills. Recognize what outdoor skills are attractive to young people so that there is an incentive to participate.
- Use the student recreation association at the university to help recruit students to work with children in local schools. REC-NET, a College of Forestry and Conservation web site, is an additional on-line tool that can be a vehicle to encourage this engagement. The key will be to offer university students opportunities to receive internship credits as they teach younger students elements of natural resource science, recreation, and management. The students will receive valuable work experience, and they will learn their topics through the process of teaching.
- Have Education students work with Recreation Management Students. Make sure the Recreation Management students gain experience working with children.
- Overcome administrative barriers to tap into the school system. This means legitimizing the outdoor educational activities as part of a curriculum and addressing the necessary educational

standards. Understanding these standards will be an early step in incorporating new college student/secondary student interactions. Having these outdoor sessions as part of a teacher's portfolio will be necessary for adoption.

- Develop a series of internships that join college students with secondary students. Internships will require tangible outcomes that people can recognize as accomplishments.
- UM College of Forestry and Conservation can host a "networking meeting" for student internships or job opportunities once per year so students know about potential to work on nature-based projects
- The events that are sponsored by the C&N network need to be fun for students and all other participants. Trail rides, or outdoor courses could be designed as social events.
- Use the special locations in Montana – such as Glacier National Park – as assets for outdoor activities. Have federal agency personnel help guide events, to demonstrate that the workplace can be exciting, fun, and attractive. In short, get young people to go to workplaces that are in the forest or grassland settings. Work with agency personnel to have field personnel take on the role of a "ranger mentor" to children.
- Get a synthesis of the research on the value of outdoor health and an active lifestyle to teachers and other decision-makers on curricular matters.
- Undertake a concerted effort to address liability issues when hosting children's events outdoors, so this barrier is addressed honestly without misperceptions.
- The Recreation Management curriculum could offer training on how to facilitate or lead a group of younger children – addressing concerns about children's behaviors and potential group management problems.
- Have senior-level undergraduate students provide mentoring for freshmen in more formal ways – perhaps for credit or hourly wages – to ensure that the skills for working in the outdoors are learned and there is confidence to operate independently.

Conclusion

Subsequent to the Kick Off event in Missoula, the National Park Service has generated a great deal of energy and made progress on its "Outdoor Nation" program, showing how the commitment of young employees can create a vital new approach to fostering a broader spectrum of public supporters for conservation goals. The Generation Wise Think Tank event was a critical investment to help launch this program, and it provided an initial step for managers, academics, citizens, and students to reconsider the opportunities for young Americans to provide independent leadership in conservation. As the Obama Administration advances its Great American Outdoors agenda, the value of engaged, energetic young participants will only increase.