



CONSERVATION EDUCATION — Success Story
Monongahela National Forest

INTRODUCTION — The Forest Service is always searching for innovative ways to connect people with the natural world. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many people to relate to nature, since greater numbers of us live in urban areas and have very little contact with natural resources. The Monongahela National Forest’s Cranberry Mountain Nature Center (CMNC) created an opportunity to help more youth connect to the natural world and learn about the National Forests while still in their own communities by developing an interactive wildlife program that brings the National Forest to the audience – wherever it may be. The program introduces youth, who may have never been in a forest, to the Forest Service and helps them develop an appreciation and understanding of the complexity of forest ecosystems.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION — In 2000, the CMNC received \$10,000 through a USDA Forest Service *Million for the Millennium* conservation education grant to begin intensive urban outreach for underserved youth efforts based on the idea that if you cannot bring the inner cities to the forest, then you take the forest to the inner cities. During 2000, the CMNC partnered with two Historical Black Colleges and Universities in Washington DC, and directly delivered its outreach program to over 2,500 students and teachers. During 2001, the CMNC outreach efforts flourished with the support of USDA Forest Service *Urban Connection* funds. With the \$22,448 received, the CMNC :

- Delivered its conservation education program directly to 10,160 people in three states and Washington, DC
- Partnered with the USDA State and Private Forestry and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources
- Expanded its live conservation education exhibits at the nature center

- Initiated a partnership with the Pocahontas County Commissioner for future nature center conservation education efforts
- Won Meritorious Achievement recognition from the Spirit of the Land Awards worldwide conservation education competition of the Salt Lake 2002 Olympic Games



ACCOMPLISHMENTS & PARTNERSHIPS — In a 5 month period during 2001, we delivered 264 programs to 10,160 youth, teachers, and parents, in 27 schools, 8 children’s camps, 3 schools for the deaf and blind, and 12 delinquent homes in West Virginia, Maryland, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC, at an average cost of \$2.00 a person. Our target audience is underserved youth, including urban youth, deaf and blind and other physically and/or mentally challenged youth, delinquent, at risk, and orphaned youth, underprivileged youth, hospitalized youth, and minorities. While we serve all people, we are strongly committed to taking our programs on the road to reach kids who are not able to come to us and ignite a passion within them for the natural world. For many inner city kids, we’re planting a seed that

there is another way – there is another life they can pursue. For many of these kids, we may be the only message they get of that. In addition, the CMNC provides our programs on site to our Forest visitors on a regularly scheduled basis and by visitor request.

The objectives of our program are:

- Nurture an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the essential interrelationships between people and natural systems of the environment
- Dispel myths regarding wildlife and eliminate fears people have in regard to the natural world
- Take a proactive approach in the enrichment of our youth and prepare for the future of our natural resources by the career mentoring and role models we bring to our underserved youth
- Form and nurture partnership relationships to support our future outreach efforts

Because our programs feature live native animals, (i.e. a red-tail hawk and poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes), these programs offer a once in a lifetime opportunity to the overwhelming majority of our audiences. We found that delivering programs with live wildlife has a lasting positive impact on youth and adults and provides a connection to the natural world. By providing hands-on encounters with live wild animals, we provide a personal connection to the natural world. Animals reach kids like nothing else can. Our presentations are highly interactive and are given to small groups to facilitate a close personal interaction. We ask the kids a lot of questions and encourage them to ask us questions. We want them to think. In addition, the program provides excellent role models for our youth. Program presenters are a female Hispanic woman originally from New or City, who pursued her dream to become a wildlife biologist, and a Caucasian male who grew up in a rural area of West Virginia and also realized his dream of becoming a wildlife biologist.

To monitor the success of our program and ensure that we are responding to the needs of our

audiences, we provide formal evaluations at all our presentations. Delinquent home staff we visit commonly tell us they have never seen their kids so interested in anything prior to our visit. Students of all ages have expressed to us that they were inspired to pursue education in the natural resource arena because of their experience with our program. A typical response to our program is:

I was extremely impressed with the level of knowledge and the passion that each speaker displayed. I feel that this type of teaching is extremely valuable. Because of this presentation, I will always think about the value of any species. Blair Moody, Washington, DC

CONCLUSION — In regard to the future of the Monongahela National Forest Conservation Education Urban Outreach Program, the CMNC will:

- Continue with our commitment to reach out to all underserved youth, wherever they may be and through the passion we share change attitudes and lives for the better
- Continue to build and nurture partnerships with other federal, state, non-profit, and private entities with the intent of forming an alliance group through which this outreach effort will continue to grow and thrive
- Continue to build a partnership with the Pocahontas County Commissioner for the future construction of a CMNC Conservation Education Center

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