

INTERPRETATION PROGRAMMING IN THE NYS FOREST PRESERVE CAMPGROUNDS: SUCCESSFUL CONSENSUS BUILDING, PARTNERSHIP, AND REGIONAL MANAGEMENT

W. Douglas Fitzgerald

Interpreter Activity Program Coordinator
Bureau of Recreation, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Ray Brook, NY 12977-0296

Abstract: The focus of this paper concerns how an established program was modified to better support the mission of the sponsoring agency. As an introduction, the NYS Forest Preserve and the Department of Environmental Conservation's role is discussed. Formal educational programming has taken place in the Forest Preserve campgrounds since the 1930's. The present Interpreter Activity Program is a direct outgrowth of earlier offerings. It is based on an established list of goals set forth in 1996 by DEC campground managers. Formation of a partnership between the Bureau of Recreation and the Bureau of Environmental Education has helped to meet these goals. Program development and administration is guided by a steering committee with a strong emphasis on consensus building. The committee process has worked well and goals have been reached. New initiatives have been developed and attempted. Daily activities are offered using seasonal personnel with on-premise oversight. Regional management of the program allows for consideration of local interests and leads to acceptance of the program goals. Staff members are hired on the regional level and establish strong working relationships with local managers. A blend of both recreational and interpretive programs are offered, leading to a high level of customer satisfaction and accomplishment of program goals. Special offerings such as the Junior Naturalist Program are extremely popular with camping families. Program evaluation is accomplished via surveys, on-site visits, and analysis of reported data. Reasons for success of the program are explored in this paper along with a look to the future.

Introduction

Outdoor recreation programming can be different things to different people. For some it may be macaroni necklace making or a spirited game of staff versus campers volleyball. Still others may prefer a guided walk filled with interesting facts about the natural world. At campgrounds in New York State's Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves, the Department of Environmental Conservation has developed a balanced approach to programming. Every year, over 25,000 people with an assortment of interests find something of value from the daily activities offered. The Interpreter Activity Program provides a high quality, organized, recreational, educational, and environmental awareness experience for campers and day users. Eight campgrounds offer formal programming from the end of June to Labor Day. Additional campgrounds offer activities through the *Junior Naturalist Program* and the *Outreach project*.

Outdoor programs have an extensive history of success at DEC campgrounds. In 1996, the Department embarked on the remake of the long standing Interpreter Activity Program, with the goal of creating a program that aligned itself more closely with the mission of the agency. The new offering has been successful, due in large part to the partnership formed between two different bureaus within the Department. This partnership, along with productive consensus building and regional management, have enabled the agency to produce a well-liked nature based program. Campers have fun and at the same time return home with a greater environmental awareness.

Historical Background

As a setting to this subject it is useful to gain a perspective on the Department of Environmental Conservation's role in the administration of recreational activity within the Forest Preserve. The structure of outdoor recreation management varies from state to state. In New York State, it is additionally complicated by the involvement of two separate agencies. The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation administer most of the Park Districts in the state. The exceptions are the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves. In these two unique areas the Department of Environmental Conservation administers recreation facilities. To comprehend the reason for this, an understanding of the NYS Forest Preserve is helpful.

Based on concern about destructive logging practices, the NYS Legislature created the Forest Preserves in 1885. The protection of the Adirondacks and Catskills was further strengthened in 1895 with the enactment of Article 14 of the NYS Constitution. The strong Constitutional protection of the state lands within the Adirondacks and Catskills has held up well over the 100 plus years of its existence. Management of the Forest Preserves was passed on from the original Forest Commission to the Forest, Fish and Game Commission to the Conservation Department and finally to the present Department of Environmental Conservation.

Visitors to NYS will find that the character of recreational facilities within the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves is different from that of facilities in the rest of the state. This character of development is in no small way the result of trying "to conserve and protect (the Preserves) natural resources and scenic beauty," as required by Article 14.

History of Interpretation in DEC Campgrounds

The practice of providing interpretive programs at Forest Preserve Campgrounds can be traced back to 1935. The following are excerpts from the 1935, 1936 and 1937 *Conservation Department Annual Report to the Legislature*. 1935 - "Educational Work. In co-operation with the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University, the Department last season inaugurated educational work along nature lines at the Fish Creek Pond Campsite. This work is felt to have been very successful, and without exception the campers at Fish Creek were enthusiastic in their support of it. It is hoped that the work

may be extended to other of the larger campsites in 1936. The College of Forestry furnished the services of Mr. Louis Wessel as nature guide, a type of work in which Mr. Wessel had had previous experience at some of the National Parks, and the Conservation Department furnished the facilities for carrying on the work including the construction of nature trails, tent platforms for Mr. Wessel's headquarters and for the nature museum. The latter played an important part in the work as it contained many native specimens identified and labeled by Mr. Wessel.

The Department also constructed a rustic amphitheatre which was used not only by Mr. Wessel for his evening lectures and campfire talks but also frequently by the campers themselves in staging impromptu entertainments. This amphitheatre was named the Alexander Macdonald Amphitheatre in honor of former Conservation Commissioner Alexander Macdonald, a life-long resident of Franklin County in which Fish Creek Ponds Campsite is located, and was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies on August 28th.

	"1935	1936	1937
Number of evening programs....	51	51	43*
Total attendance.....	16,510	25,420	31,402
Largest attendance.....	1,300	1,300	950
Number days museum was open..	58	55	59
Total visitors to museum.....	6,965	7,505	6,990
Miles of nature trails available...	3	3	3
Number of users.....	3,000	3,500	4,100
Number of organized field trips..	9	9	12
Attendance.....	336	440	806"

In the 1960's and early 1970's, a Forest Preserve Interpretive Program was conducted by the Division of Educational Services in cooperation with the Division of Lands & Forests, which operated the DEC campgrounds. Each Interpreter conducted programs at three campgrounds, traveling between them each week. Three staff worked in the Adirondacks; one in the Catskills.

Campgrounds that offered the programs included:

- Fish Creek Pond/Rollins Pond, Meacham Lake, Cranberry Lake
- Roger's Rock, Lake Luzerne, Hearthstone Point
- Moffitt Beach, Northampton Beach, Golden Beach
- North/South Lake, Devil's Tombstone, Woodland Valley

The program ended due to budget cuts in 1976. Throughout this period, campers continued to stage programs at various campgrounds on an informal level. During the late 1970s & early '80s, Paul Smith's College students held occasional programs at the Fish Creek Pond Campground Amphitheater.

Programming - 1982 to 1996. In 1982 a pilot Interpreter Activity Program was started at Fish Creek Pond Campground. From that point the program evolved and grew into offerings at seven locations. Fish Creek Pond/Rollins

Most of the credit for the success of this venture goes to Mr. Wessel who was affectionately known to campers as "Uncle Louie." His unfailing zeal and devotion to the work made failure impossible. A similar amphitheatre was constructed at Hearthstone Point camp site."

In 1936 Mr. Marvin Wilson was the camp naturalist at Fish Creek Pond Campsite. The following excerpt reflects the Department's feelings about the program:

"The two years of experience in this work has clearly demonstrated its value and the desirability of extending it to include campsites in other areas. Probably a total of four additional set-ups such as that at Fish Creek would cover the entire Forest Preserve area in the Adirondacks and Catskills in a satisfactory manner."

The table below from 1937 summarizes the program for the three years it was conducted. There is no reference to this program after 1937.

Pond, Meacham Lake, Moffitt Beach, Cranberry Lake and Nicks Lake in the Adirondacks, Mongaup Pond and North/South Lake in the Catskills.

After the 1996 Season. On October 3, 1996, twenty-two members of the Division of Operations and one representative from the Bureau of Environmental Education met in Lake George, NY to discuss the future direction of the program. At that meeting a partnership was formed between the Bureaus of Recreation and Environmental Education. The later offered assistance with training, recruiting, and campground programming, while the former would maintain administration and management of the program.

Establishing goals, partnerships, building consensus

The October 1996 meeting was facilitated by the DEC's training coordinator. Goals were established, discussion at the meeting involved how to best administer the program. It was decided that a committee would be formed to oversee and develop the program. Committee members were designated from each working circle, Central Office and the Bureau of Environmental Education.

Goals of the Interpreter Activity Program

The goals of this program are to provide educational and recreational opportunities for the enjoyment of campers that:

- Are compatible with the Forest Preserve management.
- Heighten awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the environment.
- Foster proper recreational use of the Forest Preserve and its facilities.
- Promote understanding of the Department and its programs.

In addition to establishing the goals stated here, a list of tasks was created for the Committee to accomplish. Among these were:

- Find job titles that were appropriate to the duties of the staff and paid a competitive wage.
- Establish an internship program that would be manageable and affordable.
- Develop training that help meet the goals of the program.
- Revise of the existing Program Guide.
- Determine the supplies, materials and equipment necessary to conduct activities with an interpretive focus.
- Research and develop a Junior Naturalist Program.

Bureaucrats everywhere would probably agree that a good way to foul up a program and stifle enthusiasm is by forming a committee. Although the committee process is widely used in government organizations, it can be a cumbersome system to use when trying to develop new initiatives. The Department of Environmental Conservation's Interpreter Activity Program breaks that stereotype. Believe it or not, two bureaus from the same agency can work together and produce quality programming for the public.

Establishment of the committee helped ease the partnership formation between the two bureaus. The committee process allowed everyone to come to the table with an equal voice. Each working circle utilizing the program in their campgrounds provided representation. This allowed for a true sense of program ownership which ultimately transferred into success.

Program Management and Application

As illustrated by the tasks listed above, the committee's function is program development and guidance. Two major undertakings have been the creation of appropriate staff training courses and the development of a Junior Naturalist Program. To accomplish these responsibilities, two separate working groups were formed.

1. The **Training Sub-Committee** is made-up of two representatives from each bureau. They plan a four day, preseason training held annually at Paul Smith's College. This consists of field based, hands-on sessions. The location is ideal due to the college's outdoor setting, with the

Adirondack Park Visitors Interpretive Center adjacent to the campus and Fish Creek Pond Campground (DEC's largest) only 16 miles away. Sessions include topics such as Leading Interpretive Walks, Fishing and Conducting Evening Activities.

2. A team to guide the ongoing development of the **Junior Naturalist Program** was formed as the program grew beyond the capabilities of just a couple of people. This team consists of recreation personnel, artists, naturalists and other professionals. Each year a unique workbook (Journal) and a new patch are created. Journal modules and patch designs will be reused on an eight year rotation.

The Committee is now in the fourth year of overseeing the IAP. The first three years were successful, with new concepts and methods continuing to be developed. The partnership between the two Bureaus continues to flourish.

Regional Administration - Each working circle manages the program within their own campgrounds. This includes staff hiring and program monitoring. In this manner, managers maintain local control and ensure quality programming. This has been a key element to success. A program such as this requires support from the ground up. A sense of ownership is critical for the program to function properly. Central program control over large geographical areas like the Adirondacks and Catskills can result in negative impacts. Local management has worked well during the first three years of the Interpreter Activity Program.

Staffing - At each campground the Interpreter Activity Program staff consists of one or two Environmental Education Assistants and one intern.

Basic Qualifications for EEA

Candidates for the position of Environmental Education Assistant must have successfully completed two years of college training in Natural Resources, Natural Sciences, Environmental Education, or a closely related field. Full time work experience in Environmental Education may be substituted on a year for year basis in lieu of formal education.

"Environmental Education" is defined as teaching about or interpreting the natural world, the principles of ecology, natural resources management, and environmental quality management. It deals with the interrelationships of plants, animals, and the non-living environment and emphasizes human interactions with these components.

Experience in the following areas are desirable: outdoor recreation skills and leadership, natural resources interpretation, dealing with people, supervision, writing/word processing, program planning/development, use of audio visual equipment, sports leadership/organization, and group entertainment. Certificates in CPR, First Aid, and Basic Water Safety are recommended. Qualifications for interns are similar, but only one year of college is required.

Recruiting and hiring - what has worked, what hasn't.

Environmental Education Assistants - The majority of the EEA positions are filled annually by returning candidates or by previous program interns. At a pay rate of \$10.34 per hour plus housing there has been little difficulty filling these positions with highly qualified persons.

Interns - In the first year of the revised program only three interns were recruited. At that time compensation consisted of \$75 per week food allowance plus housing. Alternatives had been investigated, such as using Empire State College or the Student Conservation Association. These and other recruiting services would have cost approximately \$2,500 per intern with the candidate still only receiving about \$50 to \$75 weekly. Given the cost of these options, it was decided in the second year that interns would be paid a wage of \$210 per week plus housing. For a ten week season, interns would then earn \$2,100. Over 30 students applied that year, nearly 60 applications were received the following season. Academic integrity of the internship is maintained by assigning academic coordination to the Chief of the Bureau of Environmental Education, since that bureau has worked with numerous interns over the years.

The Summer Season - The Interpreter Activity Program is designed to enhance the campground experience. The program's interpretive goals are to make campground users more aware of the Forest Preserve setting in which they are camping, to raise their appreciation and understanding of the many elements that make up the Preserves, and to encourage attitudes of stewardship toward these public resources. Activities are conducted in a recreational setting and are designed to be enjoyable, recreational and educational. The program's purpose is to provoke an interest in learning more about the natural resources of the Forest Preserves. Offerings are varied and balanced, consistent with the purpose of the DEC. The program does not attempt to organize activities for the camper's entire stay. The aim is to enrich their Forest Preserve experience and perhaps be a highlight of their vacation.

Two to four activities are offered daily at each of the eight campgrounds. While nature based programming is the emphasis, some activities of a more general recreation character and pure entertainment are also offered. A balanced approach is critical. At Fish Creek Pond Campground, staff have found that some interpretation can be worked into most programs, but around 40% of activities need to be just plain enjoyment. Volleyball would most likely fall into this category and is always a popular event.

Three Special Programs and Offerings

3. **The Junior Naturalist Program** has become extremely popular with our customers. In the three years it has been offered, a total of 7,509 journals were distributed with 4,775 children completing the journal and receiving a Junior Naturalist patch. Program participation and completion increased by 126% in the second year and another 25% in the third year. In addition to the seven IAP campgrounds, seven other facilities offered the program. These are referred to as

JNP Satellite Facilities. This use of the JNP at Satellite sites has enabled us to reach many children that would otherwise not receive the benefit of the program.

Returning camping families now look forward to this program. They anticipate new journal activities and new patch designs. The Junior Naturalist Program is a great tool for exposing children to the natural world. In addition, it achieves an outstanding level of customer satisfaction. The formation of an inter-bureau team to produce new materials on an annual basis has worked well. There is a continual improvement in the quality of the journals and patches. The IAP Committee has made specific recommendations to the team regarding the need to present new modules every year. With our base of returning customers, it is necessary to keep the program fresh.

The 2000 patch features the Sugar Maple, thus portraying a NYS symbol for the third time. Future designs will continue to feature New York State symbols such as the Lady Bug and Brook Trout.

Due to the high quality of the JNP, other agencies and groups have requested use of the program. A group of State Parks (OPRHP) in the Thousand Islands Region used the first JNP journal as a model to develop their own program and materials. Their final product utilized the strengths of our program, but was customized to be more appropriate to their local area. This past summer, the *Conservationist* featured a full color pullout section of the Bluebird module from the 1999 journal. Both of these uses of the JNP materials have been good methods to better utilize the work put into development of the program. This has also resulted in a larger number of citizens benefitting from the program. These outgrowths are a genuine example of the value of the JNP. To foster a continuation of this type of material use, specific guidelines have been recommended by the committee and approved by Central Office. These guidelines will preserve the integrity of the JNP as it is offered at the campground level, while at the same time allowing materials to be shared with others.

4. **Adventure Discovery Packs** - A day pack containing family activity suggestions, small field equipment and field guides is available at each campground. Campers can sign these out on a daily basis. Although actual use was low, the packs were enjoyed by the campers who used them. Despite low utilization of the packs, this opportunity will continue to be offered, as it is an excellent method for families to interact with nature. Little staff time is required to make the packs available.

5. **Outreach** - For a second year, existing IAP staff traveled to nearby campgrounds to conduct activities. There were six campgrounds that received the benefit of the *Outreach* project; 664 campers attended a total of 63 activities presented on 28 program days. This is a good method to expose more of our customers to the natural environment without the cost of a full scale set-up. The *Outreach* project will continue much as it has for the last two seasons. Additional interns at selected IAP sites would allow for

Outreach activities at an increased number of campgrounds. This method of expansion may be considered if additional growth is desired in the future. Concerns with the *Outreach* project are transportation difficulties and reduction of staff time at the main campgrounds.

Program Evaluation, Expansion, and Change

Every camping party at each campground receives a Camper Comment Card to rate their stay. Included on the cards are remarks about the IAP. The following are excerpts:

- **From Mongaup Pond:** "Jill, the recreation coordinator, was great! Very helpful and friendly."
- **From Fish Creek Pond:** "Recreation staff was great. Canoe guide was excellent - kids had fun."
- **From Moffitt Beach:** "Excellent program! We feel that Dan Connor did a great job with the recreation program." "I really liked the rec. program, it was excellent!"
- **From Cranberry Lake:** "We really enjoyed your DEC Recreation Program - very informative." "Our daughter received her Jr. Conservation Patch (JNP), and it made her day!"

The program undergoes continual internal review. Seasonal staff members are given the opportunity to evaluate training sessions and near the end of the program season they are requested to complete a comprehensive year end evaluation. Regional managers observe activities and meet with staff at the campgrounds on a regular basis. Their observations are collectively reviewed each Fall. Throughout the off-season, the IAP Committee meets to plan for the next summer.

Improvements and changes have been made regularly throughout the last four years. The most notable expansion of service to the public has been through the *Outreach* project and use of the Junior Naturalist Program at satellite facilities.

During the 2000 season the IAP will be expanded to include Luzern Campground in the southeastern Adirondacks.

In December of 1999 the entire staff from both the Bureau of Recreation and the Bureau of Environmental Education met for a brainstorming session on how to broaden the partnership which has been established. A number of ideas surfaced which may prove to be of mutual benefit.

Summary

In a world of advancing technology, it will be important for this program to stay current. At this point, equipment for program presentations is being upgraded. With the strong bond formed between seasonal staff members, electronic communications are being enhanced so that program experience and knowledge can be easily shared. As with most things, technical changes will probably have an effect on this program. The challenge will be to adjust to this change, while at the same time maintaining an outdoor, nature based program, not letting technology detract from hands-on learning.

After three camping seasons, the IAP has effectively made the transition from a mostly recreation/entertainment program to a more balanced format. The recreation base has been maintained, while at the same time the percentage of interpretive activities has increased. The interpretive portion of the program blends elements of recreation/entertainment into the environmental education experience. This blend of activities has enabled the program to meet the goals and objectives set forth in October 1996.

Comments from our customers illustrate the positive affect of the IAP. The Department is proud of the success that has been achieved by the program. The ground work that has been established will carry over for many years to come. By working to achieve the goals of the program, the Bureau of Recreation and the Bureau of Environmental Education will continue to contribute to the Mission of the DEC.

The Interpreter Activity Program continues to expand its range of influence to an increasing number of Forest Preserve users. By giving the public an increased sense of the natural world, the program fosters a commitment to the Forest Preserve and other outdoor areas.

NOTES

-
1. 1969 Amendment to Article XIV of the New York State Constitution
 2. New York State Conservation Department Annual Report to the Legislature 1935, 1936, 1937