

# *Waupaca County*

## *Environmental Youth Connections (EYC)*

### **Introduction**

#### *Project Summary/Abstract:*

This Environmental Youth Connections (EYC) project will provide a direct connection between environmental learning experiences for Waupaca County residents to local parks, trails and natural resource areas (wcptnra). The recent needs survey from UWSP and UWEX documents the decreased environmental education (ee) opportunities and financial support, lack of awareness of local natural resources, lack of resources (trained individuals and materials), and interest in the EYC system.

Our outcomes are increased awareness of natural resource areas, increased knowledge of hands-on ee principles, increased availability of ee resources, and increased capacity of professionals, teachers, and volunteers to coordinate ee experiences in our county.

*Organization Information:* Waupaca County serves the residents of the county providing an infrastructure for sound government and services. As stewards of the county land, we are entrusted with its care and preservation. This EYC project plan will promote natural resource use and care. It will also set up a system to compliment and expand the ee reach of our local government to its citizens.

The mission of UW-Extension is to extend the knowledge and resources of the University of Wisconsin to people where they live and work. By connecting University environmental education resources to Waupaca County natural resources, we are making them available to all citizens. We will be able to strengthen our citizens' awareness, knowledge and ability to preserve the natural gifts of our beautiful county.

The vision of UW-Extension is built on the educational network for engaging people and their communities in positive change. Also this EYC project is building an educational network base for engaging people (paid staff and volunteers) and their county/community in positive change reinforcing local ee expertise with Waupaca County natural resource areas.

UW-Extension statewide has identified values that are similarly shared with the EYC project by taking the UWSP and UWEX environmental education research and addressing concerns of under-utilization, implementing new approaches, creating high standards for quality and effective programming, establishing the integrity of a system that promotes stewardship of our environment, involving a diverse population we serve in carrying out these programs, connecting with stakeholders that will establish a partnership of shared interest about the environment and Waupaca County natural resource areas, and evaluating for continuous improvement of our volunteers, staff, partners and our EYC system.

Waupaca County UW-Extension serves the population of our county with its rural communities and seven school districts within its geographical boundaries.

## **EYC Project Narrative Purpose Statement/Needs Assessment**

The **purpose of the Environmental Youth Connection (EYC) project** is to provide individuals, classrooms, organizations and families with resources (environmental education lessons, equipment kits, and maps), training (volunteers, staff, and organization), easy access (web, libraries/schools, and natural areas) of resources, and support for a sustainable environmental education system that connects to Waupaca County natural resource areas.

**EYC identified needs/issues** through a UW-SP study and UW-Extension done in Waupaca County. These studies clarified environmental education (ee) needs and utilization needs of the Waupaca County natural resource areas (wcptnra). In the UW-SP graduate research, the following needs were identified: eighty-eight percent of teachers indicated a need for more in-service/training and curriculum on ee; seventy-seven percent of teachers would like greater use of local county, community and school district environmental education properties; seventy-nine percent of teachers need environmental education equipment. Plus, in the UWEX survey, teachers stated they would be interested in participating in EYC workshops that connected learning to Waupaca County parks, trails and natural resource areas.

In the fall of 2007, UWEX invited public stakeholders countywide that work in natural resource areas. They identified several needs: to serve more youth and citizens in natural resource areas they oversee (During class sessions, park volunteers asked how many have visited the park before and about 75% had not); to have access to more resources and a volunteer naturalist; to have training opportunities for staff and volunteers to develop lesson plans that are appropriate for different ages and natural areas (Local park and trail volunteers expressed this need); and to find supports for tight budgets by doing more outreach with volunteers and conservation groups (Paid staff expressed this need.)

**The significance of these issues** not being addressed has economic, educational, environmental and health consequences for Waupaca County children and adults. *Economics*-With tourism as one of the main economic drivers it is essential to preserve the pristine natural resource areas that attract visitors. *Educational*-A directive in education on testing results has taken away from hands on learning and put tremendous pressure teaching to the test. *Environmental*-With reductions in environmental education and lack of paid county or community staff, it is necessary to have professional resources available for local residents, volunteers, families, and teachers to connect with our local environments. *Health*-With the recent research on obesity in our county, the benefits of recreational and outdoor experiences have clearly documented that activity and exercise improve the health of youth and adults.

**The primary target audience** for EYC is the young residents of Waupaca County. **The secondary target audience** is the paid staff (natural resource and school), families, organizations and volunteers (adults and ms/hs youth), who will make possible our ee experiences. The size of our target populations will grow every year. The first year EYC plans to engage over 30 paid staff and volunteers reaching over 500 young residents with environmental experience that will be repeatable without our assistance. Each following year EYC plans on doubling these numbers throughout the county.

## **How will the population be involved in the design and the implementation of the EYC project?**

In the organizational meetings, stakeholders and a dozen teachers were engaged in developing the lesson plan format and EYC project design. School administrators arranged for group meetings in each of the buildings where over 45 of the science/ agriculture teachers at the high school, middle school, and elementary levels have shown interest as creators, trainers and implementers of lesson plans/kits/maps. The advisory board will continue to engage key supporters and practical users of the system for evaluation and process improvement. Students will be involved as advisory board members, direct evaluators of this effort and as student teachers assisting community groups and local educators or environmentalist.

EYC has **targeted the entire geographic area of Waupaca County**. The initial resources are connected to areas in the southern section of the county, but EYC will expand resources and utilize other areas as the project grows.

**The proposal compliments existing services and accomplishments and collaborates with organizations such as DHHS-NuAct and County Parks on the Explore and Discover Waupaca County Map, Land & Water on Environmental Education Initiatives and Conservation Field Day, State/County/Community Parks promotion and utilization, trail development, School and Conservation Group Environmental Education, Business Environmental mission, and School/County/Town High School Land Use Planning curriculum.**

**The proposal expands** the network of support for environmental education with buy-in from school educators to develop and help other educators with resources, from school administration for teacher professional development time and transportation to sites, from volunteers to assist with ee and resources, from state, county and city park professionals for natural resource education areas, and from conservation groups and business for financial and structural support. They have also discussed their continued support for sustainability of this EYC project.

**EYC compliments both Waupaca County and UW-Extension's mission (summary page).** Waupaca County's mission is to serve the residents and the University's mission is to extend resources to the people where they live and work.

UWEX has undertaken many steps to gather **community support and can provide evidence of participant buy-in** through the work that has already been accomplished, the fall meeting of stakeholders in 2007 supporting submission of technical assistance from the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board, the February 2008 meeting of partners that identified needs and possible strategies for the EYC effort, the stakeholders' commitment to an advisory board and EYC resources, the June meeting determining the EYC system of support for building capacity of staff and volunteers, resources and utilization of natural resource areas and support for financial aid and pursuance of grants.

EYC project Outcomes **Describe the outcomes of the EYC project in measurable terms.** Outcomes will include youth, adult and community/county results. Youth and adults will increase their awareness of Waupaca County natural resource areas through an ee experience at a new site. Outcome will be documented by increased numbers of new visitors. Also their knowledge (achievement of standards appropriate for their age) of environmental education topics in our natural resource areas will be increased. These outcomes

will be documented by evaluation at the end of each outing that records what they have learned and whether the outdoor site enhanced their learning. And finally if a service opportunity exists with this lesson and site, it will be carried out as a part of the ee experience. The impact of this stewardship act will also be evaluated at the end of the outdoor experience. To accomplish these outcomes, EYC will have to have in place resources and training. Thus EYC will assist staff in developing lesson plans, equipment kits, and maps to support environmental education experiences for youth and adults of Waupaca County. This outcome will be documented by the number of resources created, how often they are used, and evaluation documenting the effectiveness of the resource in accomplishing the environmental topic outcome.

The EYC advisory board, which was formed from the community stakeholder and partner meetings, will be organized and evaluated for its effectiveness. This board will oversee process improvement of the EYC project and continue to secure funding as needed for expansion to more youth and adults in the county.

**At the end of the grant period, who will be better off and how?** Individuals will be better off with an increased awareness of sites, increased environmental topic knowledge, and ownership/stewardship for living a balanced life with nature. Our non-profits, local government, and citizens will have a system that is self sustaining and supporting of Waupaca County natural resource areas. **What changes in people or institutions are expected to occur?** Individuals will develop greater capacity to care for Waupaca County natural resource areas because of their increased awareness and knowledge of environmental issues. Government and schools will show a greater capacity to utilize individuals, non-profits and conservation groups through volunteers and financial donations for natural resource areas and environmental education.

**Method Describe the sequences of activities and timeline needed to accomplish the EYC project outcomes.**

September and October \* Inventory ee in districts to identify innovative programs (done for this year in the southwest, but will continue assessments in future years in other districts) \*Promote EYC project involvement by additional staff and volunteers (have begun this process and will continue to recruit as lesson plans are developed)

October & throughout \*Assist staff and volunteers in developing resources (have begun this with staff so a few examples exist for modeling and will continue this throughout the EYC project) \*Create maps for each ee site to connect to ee lessons (have begun with draft maps and existing maps from EYC partners and will continue as lesson plans develop throughout the EYC project) \*Build and then update website with EYC information and resources

\*Distribute resources to appropriate partners as they are developed \*Plan and conduct workshops that support ee resources \*Develop an evaluation plan for all activities and audiences about outcomes and process improvement \*Support EYC partners, staff and volunteers in conducting new ee experiences in our own backyard

February & throughout \*Support the structure for the EYC Advisory Board that will oversee professional development, implementation, expansion and sustainability \*Identify gaps in ee content programming, age groups and sites

Continue workshops on innovative programs and state materials that address identified gaps \*Continue to assist staff and volunteers in developing resources \*Promote continuous sharing with new partners, staff and volunteers

**Describe the responsibilities of staff and volunteers and their qualifications to perform these tasks.**

Connie Abert, UW-Extension Youth Development Educator, will oversee the EYC project and provide educational workshops in partnership with specialists from UW-SP. She will also design the evaluation tools with specialists from UW-Extension in Madison and design the website from the UW-Extension resources already available to the Waupaca County office. All of these are primary roles of Extension Educators. Connie will also work closely with Kristi Jackson, EYC project consultant, and EYC Advisory Board, partners, staff, and volunteers already committed to the EYC effort.

Kristi Jackson, board member/present coordinator for the City of Waupaca Oz Natural Area, member of the River Ridge Trail/Waupaca Tree Advisory Board, and a past Waupaca County Coordinator for the Waupaca County Environmental Education Initiative which included Adopt-A-Lake/Stream, school consortium coordinator and ee instructor, will be utilized as the EYC consultant to work with outstanding educators to develop standardized ee plans, prepare equipment lists, and gather materials into resource packs, including park maps with designated learning areas. Subsequently all materials will be shared through an EYC website, new employee orientation, school in-service time and special designated workshops.

**Describe any training, participant selection procedures, or policies if applicable.** Training will be designed from evaluation.

UW-SP Specialists have offered to assist with training as needed. Participation will be open to anyone interested. Even though efforts have originated in the southern part of the county, invitations will be sent to all residents. Check out and return of the equipment kits will follow institutional policies or procedures (parks, schools and libraries).

**Data Collection-Information collected will measure** improvement of individual awareness and knowledge about environmental topic, increased number of resources (lessons-kits-maps), increased number of trained staff and volunteers, increased number of sites visited, and increased capacity of EYC Advisory Board to sustain EYC project.

**Data collection methods to be used include** pre-post surveys for access (sites and websites), events, training, focus group evaluation for the Advisory Board, and a database documentation for long term youth outcomes.

**Expected outcomes include:** Youth and adult volunteers will be more prepared to work with young residents in the outdoors. Paid staff and volunteers will utilize resources and sites. Youth will increase awareness, knowledge, and ethics about ee. EYC Advisory Board will have the capacity to support ee in Waupaca County natural resource areas.

**How will the results be used and/or disseminated?** EYC will make direct connections of our formal and informal classrooms and with local natural resource areas through assembled EYC project kits, shared articles, networking and EYC website. The EYC project kits will include natural resource area maps, lesson plans and supplies to facilitate learning in different grade levels. These will be available at schools, park offices and the local libraries. Partners will share articles in professional journals, conferences and local

newspapers around the county and state whenever possible. These EYC project kits will be solidified into packaged programs for sharing with colleagues in the school, community and on the EYC website.

**Funding Plan-Current and Future Funding: EYC line-item budget including expenses and income sources.**

a. The individuals will develop approximately 120 lesson plans for age appropriate standardized curriculum (\$7200 + professional development time), b. modify environmental education plans to match the 100 natural resource area maps (inkind-\$1000), c. prepare 12 equipment kits for 7 school districts/communities/libraries (\$8400), d. create a website for resources (inkind-\$1000), and e. recruit/train individuals that are willing to support new teachers or groups as resources through mentoring and workshops (\$7000). f. The EYC consultant expenses would be contracted for five years at \$8000/annually for a total of (\$40,000). EYC project totals \$64,600 for five years. **The rationale for the amount being requested** comes from discussion with previous programs and the challenges they faced. Plus the EYC design was created through the Advisory Board which includes teachers, volunteers and natural resource partners. The teacher partnership for standardized lesson plans gives us the buy-in we need for expansion and continuation with the classroom. Natural Resource partners are committed to utilization of local areas. The maps and resource kits make for easy access to sites and connected activities. School administration is committed by offering professional development time for workshops and creation of materials. The website is necessary for promotion and marketing. The workshops will be necessary to expand EYC to Waupaca County northern natural resource areas and residents and to build the capacity to orient new staff. Initially UWEX will utilize the EYC consultant to assist staff and volunteers in building the parts of the EYC system and developing the advisory board that will take over in three to five years.

**Describe the financial plan for current and future support of the proposed EYC project.** EYC has received conservation club donations to begin developing resource kits for natural resource areas. This grant will enable 5000+ students to be reached. The project has opportunities to apply for Community Foundation Grants and the Wisconsin Environmental Education Grants in future years for \$1000, \$ 5000, and \$20,000. Long term EYC will partner with Conservation groups like Whitetails Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and Trout Unlimited. All of these groups have educational programs and the EYC would give them greater exposure to a wider range of youth. It is also important to recognize the in-kind contributions from teachers, volunteers, UWEX, city and county parks, and land and water.