

A Trail to Every Classroom Briefing Paper

A Professional Development Program for Teachers in Trail Communities from Georgia to Maine

Project Description:

The Appalachian Trail Park Office in partnership with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), the Conservation Study Institute, the Center for Place Based Learning and Community Engagement, and Shelburne Farms are replicating the successful Forest for Every Classroom professional development program in Vermont along the Appalachian Trail as *A Trail to Every Classroom (TTEC)*. This program would focus on teachers (K-12), promoting civic engagement, environmental awareness and healthy lifestyles by using the Appalachian Trail as an educational resource. Trail club volunteers and agency partners would be encouraged to participate. *TTEC* bundles together a wide array of education and service-learning activities including volunteer and field research opportunities, curriculum development, and community resources. Piloted in July 2006 with great success, *TTEC* is now poised to enter a year-long demonstration phase that doubles the number of teachers and community partners involved and expands the reach of the program geographically to nine states: ME, VT, NY, PA, MD, WV, VA, NC, GA.

Justification:

The 2002 Independent Sector report, "Engaging Youth in Lifelong Service," states, "Adults who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to give time as they grow older." A recent report from the Corporation for National and Community Service, "Youth Helping America," also suggests that volunteering is a learned social behavior. As a teaching strategy that promotes volunteerism by linking curriculum with community service and fulfilling education goals as well as the needs of community organizations, we believe service-learning will promote civic engagement in Trail communities, ultimately sustaining volunteer management of the Appalachian Trail.

Through our education efforts, we are now focusing resources on addressing two national community needs – human and environmental health. In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control found that adult obesity rates have increased dramatically in the United States. Of the fourteen states traversed by the Appalachian Trail, three report a 15-19% obesity rate, nine a 20-24% obesity rate, and two an obesity rate of 25% or more. These rates are projected to increase, not only in adults, but in adolescents as well. The Journal of the American Medical Association (vol. 294, no. 23, 2005) reported low fitness rates in 33.6% of American adolescents (aged 12-19 years) resulting in an increased prevalence of cardiovascular disease in this young population.

In his latest book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder," Richard Louv connects the lack of physical activity and outdoor recreation to behavioral problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. He describes how children have become separated from their natural surroundings through a lack of

outdoor recreational experiences, resulting in restlessness and short attention spans. He then shows how educational programs like service-learning activities help reconnect children to their communities, rekindling their curiosity and encouraging exploration of local green spaces.

In addition to rising concerns for human health, we are also concerned with the health of our natural resources. Beyond 2,175 miles of hiking trail, we are responsible for the management of more than 185,000 acres of public land acquired as the Trail's corridor, including more rare, threatened and endangered species than any other national park unit in the United States. This corridor has been described as an "environmental mega-transect" serving as a flyway and migratory corridor for birds and mammals and the source of thousands of first-order streams. We have only recently begun to assess and understand the wealth of the natural resources present on these lands based on extensive inventories over the past ten years. This massive holding requires a process that brings scientists and land managers together to design programs involving citizens at the local level who will assist in monitoring and protecting these resources within their communities. As we engage students in outdoor recreation and resource management activities we will synergistically address community human and environmental health needs.

A Trail to Every Classroom, piloted in 2006, was a great success. Findings from the program evaluation includes the following:

- "What made it so good was there was such a variety of presenters and topics, they all meshed. The lead instructors did such an awesome job of taking all of these pieces and putting them together in one week, and making a big pretty picture out of the puzzle...instead of having all these pieces scattered around the table, where you don't know what to do with them."
- "This is a gem among a lot of rough stones that we take as teachers to get credit and build up our salaries."
- "I've been teaching more than 20 years, and this is the best conference I've ever been to!"
- "I was just floored. I knew the AT existed and that people tried to hike from one end to the other, but to see the enormous amount of support of the different agencies connected to it just floored me. I never imagined that the NPS and ATC had this information to connect up to other groups."

Seventy-eight percent of the participants requested local follow-up workshops to keep the network and momentum going. Sixty percent of the participants are already implementing curriculum developed during the summer institute and are seeking resources to expand for future semesters.