

2008 Report to NYS Conservation Council from Division of Public Affairs and Education

The Division of Public Affairs and Education's (DPAE) responsibilities involve both program and service components. DPAE's environmental education programs, centers, camps and *Conservationist* magazine are at the heart of DEC's effort to connect people of all ages and abilities to nature and to foster stewardship of New York's natural resources and the environment.

DPAE's service component focuses on ensuring that all of the agency's programs communicate effectively with the public, partners and regulated communities. DPAE actively supports all of the Commissioner's issue priorities through coordination of all the agency's publications, web resources, and public outreach and citizen participation activities.

Issue Priority: Connect New Yorkers to Nature

We conserve our environment not just to protect our health and enforce the law, but so that we and future generations can experience the joy of a hike or hunt in the woods, the thrill of a swim at a clean beach, or the beauty of an unspoiled view. Whether an urban waterfront park or a wilderness paddle, these connections to nature can refresh, teach, and sustain us. While use and demand for DEC's campgrounds, education centers, and youth camps remains high, participation in hunting and fishing has declined in recent years, and the Conservation Fund ended the last fiscal year with a \$21 million deficit. Meanwhile, research has documented a shift away from outdoor activities in the general population. DEC can help reverse this trend by helping more families rediscover the natural world.

Under this priority area, DEC will continue to promote environmental education and outdoor experiences for all. The Department will increase participation in hiking, camping, fishing, bird watching, hunting, and trapping, and seek to provide state-of-the-art facilities and opportunities for high-quality outdoor experiences. DEC will make a special effort to preserve and provide access to waters and green space close to where people live and work, and reach out to underserved populations. Our efforts to connect New Yorkers to nature will be conducted with the goal of providing access, increasing environmental literacy, enhancing public health and quality of life, and building the next generation of New Yorkers that care about conservation.

DEC Website

The DEC website received 8,872,609 visits in 2007, an average of 23,576 visits a day. The website, redesigned a year ago, won a "Best of the Web" award last fall from the New York State Forum for its innovative use of technology. DPAE's web team continues to improve functions and add new content, including

- A new "Purchase Your Sporting License" button on the homepage
- New and expanded mapping functions
- Outdoor Discovery, a new bimonthly web and email newsletter with family-friendly activities
- Green Living, 14 new pages of ideas, tips and resources for making environmentally responsible choices in daily life
- Expanded information on renewable energy
- Don't Flush Your Drugs, a web-based campaign to prevent pharmaceutical contamination of New York State waters
- Webcast meetings of certain environmental boards and councils

Conservationist

Conservationist magazine is a New York State-focused publication that is recognized nationwide for its beautiful photography and rock-solid educational articles. Regular features include "Empire State Adventures," "Outdoor Discovery," and "ECO on Patrol." The magazine underwent a significant redesign in 2007, employing a new masthead, increasing the page count, and using bigger opening photographs. In 2007-2008, it featured articles on walleye in Lake Erie, backyard bears, the use of trail cameras to explore wildlife activity, youth turkey hunting, fly-tying, the American marten, and the tradition of deer hunting in the Adirondacks. Special pullout sections included New York State symbols, bats, and "Champions of Conservation." A new feature, "Ask the Biologist," answers questions about nature. *Conservationist* also continued to provide public service through its Letters section, encouraging responses from program staff to interested correspondents and readers.

Brochures and Publications

DEC's publication production section worked closely with other agency programs to create several hundred publications and displays on topics including didymo, black bears, hunting, fishing, trails, and new fish and wildlife-related pullouts for the *Conservationist*. Several new outreach programs were created, including the "Don't Move Firewood" series and an interactive CD providing information and directions to Hudson River public fishing and boating access sites.

Conservationist for Kids

This new magazine-format publication for children in New York State is filled with photos, articles and tips on activities to encourage children to connect with the outdoors and the natural world. Launched in December 2007, the premiere issue was distributed to a limited sample of fourth-grade classes across the state, targeting 457 teachers and more than 10,000 students.

Positive feedback led to full-scale production. Three issues a year are now distributed in the classroom to all 200,000 public-school fourth-graders in the state and their teachers.

Digital Images

DPAE continues to process many digital images in support of DEC programs. Of particular note, in 2008, DPAE photographed bats for outreach on whitenose syndrome.

Public Outreach

Priority outreach programs during 2007-2008 included invasive and nuisance species, and large game and waterfowl seasons. DPAE organized and facilitated public meetings on proposed DEC actions, including unit management plans in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Staff responded to public and media inquiries about nuisance wildlife management, seasonal fishing limits and moratoriums on fluke and other marine fish species. DPAE gathered public input and provided information regarding eradication of invasive species, including snakehead, didymo, the emerald ash borer and the Asian long-horned beetle. DPAE convened Open Space Committee meetings that provided public input for the review of the New York Open Space Plan, which directs the state's land acquisition, protection and management strategies. DPAE also helped implement the carbon capture and sequestration project and the "Don't Flush Your Drugs" campaign, as well helping develop a report on wastewater infrastructure needs. DPAE coordinated and exchanged information with local Environmental Management Councils and Conservation Advisory Commissions to enhance its outreach efforts.

New York State Fair and Other Events

DPAE coordinates DEC's presence at the New York State Fair and creates the agency's posters and handouts for the fair. DEC's exhibits are extremely popular with fair goers and include

- The Aquarium Building, which features several oversize aquariums displaying live native fish and other aquatic life, a river otter display, and opportunities to buy fishing and hunting licenses, talk to Environmental Conservation Officers, and subscribe to *Conservationist* magazine
- A new (in 2008) "Green Home" display showing what New Yorkers can do in their homes to help protect the environment
- The Log Cabin exhibit with a nature trail, a mineral display, a pest management display and opportunities to talk to Forest Rangers, obtain outdoor recreation information, and receive a free tree seedling

DPAE also conducted and coordinated the agency's activities at other events throughout New York State, including wildlife conferences, sportsman shows, and statewide meetings regarding wildlife management.

DEC Environmental Education Centers

DEC's four environmental education centers-Rogers in Sherburne, Five Rivers in Delmar, Reinstein Woods in Cheektowaga and Stony Kill Farm in Wappingers Falls-offer year-round programs for school and youth groups, teachers, youth leaders, community groups and the public. Each center has interpretive trails and exhibit areas, and offers family events year-round. Visitors to the centers total 250,000 annually.

DEC Environmental Education Camps

The DEC summer camp program celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2007. DEC camps have a long and proud tradition of fostering an environmental ethic in future state leaders. DEC's four summer camps (Pack, Colby, DeBruce and Rushford) serve children 12 to 14 years old and 15 to 17 years old. Activities such as sampling streams for aquatic life, netting butterflies, bird-watching, hiking, archery, fishing, fly-tying, shelter-building, and hunter safety bring conservation concepts to life and heighten campers' environmental awareness. Nearly 1,200 boys and girls attended DEC camps in 2007.

Hunter Training and Shooting Sports Programs

All new campers at DEC summer camps are offered basic hunter safety. The shooting sports program is offered at Pack Forest each week, and camp returnees can take a bowhunter education course. Thirty percent of campers took hunter safety, including nine percent of campers participating through the Diversity Initiative.

Diversity Initiative

This initiative recruits youth from urban areas across the state to attend DEC summer camps. Similar to scholarships, camperships are made available through a variety of community-based agencies and non-profit organizations in metropolitan areas. Partners recruit campers, help parents with paperwork and assist in transportation. In 2007, 202 children participated in the program. One partner in this effort is the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Under a grant from the New York City Environmental Fund of the Hudson River Foundation, DPR's Urban Park Rangers sent many youngsters to DEC camps. Besides offering a one-week camp experience, DEC and its partners arranged for pre- and post-camp programs to help children learn about New York State's natural resources through outdoor recreation and hands-on experiences. Typical activities included hikes, canoeing, overnight camping and field trips to nature centers. During the fall, several partners conducted service projects, such as park and beach cleanups, and helped youth explore environmental careers.

Project WILD and Project WET

Project Wild, funded through the Conservation Fund, prepares teachers to help students develop problem-solving skills through exploring responsible human actions toward wildlife and the environment. Project WET (Water Education for Teachers) focuses on cultural, social and scientific issues related to water, including fish and wildlife-related activities. In 2007, about

2,700 educators attended these workshops. Over the years, more than 47,000 educators have attended teacher workshops in New York State.

Educators in Long Island City and Stony Brook

Regional environmental educators in Long Island City and Stony Brook conduct teacher workshops, in-class and after-school programs on the environment, and displays at fairs and other events in the New York City and Long Island areas. More than 43,000 people participated in these programs in 2007.

After School Conservation Club

The After School Conservation Club for elementary school students is conducted at 10 sites in New York City and runs for 10 weeks, four hours a week, involving more than 350 children each session. Inner-city students connect to nature and the urban environment and do hands-on stewardship projects, such as the recycling programs created in 2007 by four clubs. At the same time, staff from participating sites develop the skills to conduct environmental education programs

AmeriCorps

DEC hosts the Student Conservation Association's Hudson River Valley AmeriCorps Program. AmeriCorps members conduct programs at DEC education centers and other sites, greatly expanding the programs and services offered to the public.

Nature Recreation Program

Starting in 1935, nature programs have been a part of the camping experience at several of DEC's Forest Preserve campgrounds. The overall goal of the Nature Recreation Program is to provide campground users (overnight campers and day visitors) with educational and recreational opportunities. These programs include walks, lectures, games, crafts, music, paddle trips, and mountain hikes. In 2007, more than 35,000 campers attended these programs at campgrounds where the program was offered.

Junior Naturalist Program

This program is conducted for children who are camping in Adirondack and Catskill forest preserve campgrounds. Boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 12 earn patches by completing modules in a colorful activity book, the "Junior Naturalist Journal," which is different each year. More than 10,000 journals are distributed annually, and more than 6,000 patches are issued at the 39 campground or day-use facilities that offer the program. In 2007, the patch, which also changes each year, depicted an eastern bluebird.