Trail Stewards: A Different Approach to Volunteerism

DATE AND TIME
Wednesday, 24 February 2010 / 1PM-2PM and 215PM-315PM

SPEAKER(S)
Jerry Pagac
Executive Director
Champaign County Forest Preserve District
PO Box 1040
Mahomet, IL 61853
jpagac@ccfpd.org

SESSION DESCRIPTION
Fire up the community for volunteering at the parks! How does an agency find willing workers to help fill the ranks at your park? This session shares some basic building blocks for volunteers in action, using a very successful model from the Champaign County Forest Preserve District. The CCFPD’s volunteer model emphasizes commitment, training, camaraderie and education through the use of half-day workshops.

SESSION LEARNING OBJECTIVES
- Understand the different needs of individuals and the populations that could be tapped for volunteer efforts in parks, facilities and public lands
- Develop the framework, tools and methods to implement a successful volunteer program for a park system.
Trail Stewards . . .
Making a difference one step at a time!

Trail Steward Program
- More than just “adopt a trail”
- Essential ingredients:
  - Service
  - Education
  - Fun!

Stewardship . . . The numbers!
- 5 Sites
- 33 Trails
- 32.75 miles
- 62 dedicated stewards

Master Naturalists
- Similar to Master Gardener Program
- 70 hours of training (54 classroom + 16 in the field)
- To be certified must give 40 hours of service
- To retain certification must give 30 hours service and complete 10 hours of continuing education
- 75% of our Trail Stewards are Master Naturalists

As a Trail Steward you will have the opportunity to:
- Explore and experience a trail as you follow it through the seasons
- Enjoy the serenity and beauty of nature
- Provide a very valued service to the district and the community
- Share the fellowship of stewards through networking and idea sharing
- This year . . . Get a Disney Day!

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature.
It will never fail you.
Frank Lloyd Wright
What is the Commitment?

- One year of service
- Visit your trail every 3-4 weeks . . . weather permitting
- Submit trail reports
- Attend four workshops per year

All tools and tool maintenance are provided

- Grant from Volunteer Steward Network…program of The Nature Conservancy and IL Nature Preserves Commission

Training Workshops

- Get together 4 times each year
- A Saturday or weekday evening
- Share ideas, concerns, best practices
- Program by Natural Resources Staff
- Held at a different site each time
- Food or refreshments!
- Education and Socializing
When you discover your mission, you will feel its demand. It will fill you with enthusiasm and a burning desire to get to work on it.

W. Clement Stone

It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Choosing Your Trail!

- Close and convenient to home
- A trail you are already familiar with
- Think totally out of the box and commit to a trail off your radar!
- Goal to have a steward assigned to every ½ mile of trail
- Staff members are available for an initial tour of a chosen trail by appointment

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world, indeed it’s the only thing that ever has!

Margaret Mead
Connections

- Stay connected with fellow stewards and the CCFPD staff.
- We are now on FACEBOOK!
- Secure site for stewards only
- Opportunity to share photos and unique trail findings!
- Mentoring — a way to see if you really want to take on a trail of your own

Trail Specs

- Trash cans are provided at the entrance to trails and are used for litter collected
- Dumpsters at the West Maintenance Facility are used for surplus material
- File report for large items that cannot be removed by the stewards
- Site Superintendents will relay any major work beyond mowing to stewards

Trail specs for Lake of the Woods, River Bend and Sangamon River

- The groomed trails are mowed 11 feet wide. Trail trimming should be mowed from the edge of the trail to 12 feet.
- Trimmings to be disposed in non-groomed areas of the woods or nearby prairie
- Spread trimmings out, not left in piles
- Minor erosion can be evened out with a shovel or turf rake. Please report extensive erosion.

So why do they do it?

- Do something to help the environment…
- Fun…
- exercise…
- educational…
- part of a unique group…
- What’s in a name?

The richness I achieve comes from Nature, the source of my inspiration.

- Claude Monet
Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant. All the flowers of all the tomorrows are in the seeds of today.
- Robert Louis Stevenson

The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual.
- Vince Lombardi

The brightest stars are those that shine for others.
Thank you trail stewards for shining your light on the Champaign County Forest Preserve District!
It's a cool, crisp morning and I am hiking a trail at River Bend Forest Preserve. The song of a cardinal above me seems to make my steps a bit livelier and I notice the heavy dew on the plants beside the trail. As I round a bend in the trail I see two people wearing bright orange vests. They are using lopping shears on some overzealous vegetation intruding on the trail. Meet Delores and Dean Patrick, Trail Stewards.

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District in Illinois has a very active volunteer program. We are particularly proud of the success of our Trail Stewards Program. Kim Horbas, the District's Volunteer Coordinator who designed the program, wanted it to be more than just an “adopt a trail” effort. Her goal was to combine education, service and fun as essential ingredients in the experience. She has succeeded on all counts.

The old cliché that timing is everything was never truer. The District had been working with the University of Illinois Extension and the Urbana Park District to create a Master Naturalist Program for Champaign County and East Central Illinois. It is very similar to the already popular nationwide Master Gardener program. The Master Naturalist program requires graduates to complete a minimum of 40 hours of service each year. Horbas quickly saw a synergistic opportunity. The District needed help maintaining trails and the new Master Naturalists were looking for challenging opportunities to serve. In her words “it was a perfect match!”

The Trail Stewardship Program was launched and to date, approximately 75% of the participants are Master Naturalists. They commit to taking responsibility for a particular trail for one year, agreeing to visit every three to four weeks and handle routine maintenance to ensure the trail is safe and pleasant to use. The program begins each year with a detailed orientation workshop for new stewards but all take part as the old hands give valuable advice to the rookies.

Thanks to a grant from the Volunteer Steward Network, the District was able to purchase basic hand tools and supplies to equip each trail steward (safety glasses, trash picker, hand saw, work gloves first aid supplies and trail construction and maintenance notebook). Stewards accept responsibility for the care of tools which are on loan for the duration of their service. In addition, they receive an identification card and a vest to identify themselves as volunteers.

Each month Trail Stewards prepare a written report on “their” trail’s condition and activity. However, if they encounter something on the trail that is more than they can handle or requires mechanized equipment, they report it immediately to the site Superintendent. Their reports include observations like the location of downed trees across the trail, excessive trash, ground fire evidence, damaged or missing signs, vandalism, poison ivy etc. Initially these reports were mailed in but now most are emailed or faxed. Horbas forwards the reports to the District’s site superintendents to make them aware of trail condition and/or the need for further attention. Stewards often include photos which may document problems or just provide great shots for District publications or programs.

If a steward happens to witness illegal or inappropriate behavior, they are counseled not to be confrontational. It may be appropriate to educate people but definitely not to take on an enforcement role. Instead Stewards are encouraged to report the problem as soon as possible to staff or law enforcement personnel.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the Trail Steward program is the educational component and continuing involvement with District staff. This is more than just a work program. Three or four times a year on a Saturday or weekday evening, training workshops are held, giving Stewards the opportunity to share ideas on best practices, network and ask questions. Staff or other experts often present an educational program on topics of interest such as winter tree identification, invasive species identification and control or prairie ecology. These workshops are held at different sites to enable stewards to become familiar with all the sites in the District.

The overall success and popularity of the program has been remarkable. We now have 62 active Trail Stewards! Participants say the program makes their service interesting, fun and educational all at the same time. Horbas says “the District appreciates and values what they do for us and we make a commitment to them as well.” Quite often the Stewards are couples who work together on the trail. Mark and Kathy Schoeffmann live immediately adjacent to a trail at Lake of the Woods Preserve. However, they chose
to volunteer at Homer Lake, a Preserve located many miles from home. Why? They feel that getting away from home makes their experience special.

There is a social component as well. When the Stewards get together, it’s obvious they enjoy each others company and stories. One Steward, Lisa Bradock, has set up a Facebook page to keep everyone connected. It is a secure site for Stewards only. They can share photos and unique trail findings.

Speaking of unique... One Trail Steward family, the Cadmans, were walking their trail last summer when they found what they thought was a strange looking turtle on the trail. They took some photos on their cell phone and then carefully moved the turtle off the trail and out of harms way. On the way home they stopped for a snack at a gas station 12 miles away. Unbelievably, they noticed a poster with a picture of the missing turtle (Lola) offering a $100 reward. They immediately called the owners, showed them the photo they had taken and let them know that Lola was at the Middle Fork Forest Preserve! Both families rushed back and hiked the trail hoping to find Lola, who is actually an African tortoise. There she was...back on the trail! The kids split the reward and Lola is home once more.

The Trail Steward program keeps evolving. This year Horbas is initiating a mentor aspect. She emailed her veteran stewards to see who would be willing to mentor a person who has expressed interest in joining the program in the coming year. In this way, the new person can get a jump start and see what they are getting into before deciding to take on their own trail.

Unexpected benefits can result from a program like this. Jackie Roy was part of the first Master Naturalist class in the fall of 2006. After graduation, she committed to a year of service as a Trail Steward. Each year her involvement has grown at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. During one of her monthly maintenance hikes it occurred to her that the Prairieview Trail might benefit from a few bluebird boxes. By the spring of 2008 there were 16 nest boxes in place at Middle Fork! Soon she was going out once each week from April through September to record activity in each box. She recounts: “The excitement would build each week after finding a nest, then watching as the eggs were laid, hatched, and the babies grew and fledged. Seeing the bright flash of a male bluebird as the sun illuminates his wings in flight is a glorious sight that no one should miss.”

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District now has 62 Trail Stewards responsible for more than 33 miles of trail. If you have trails and never seem to be able to keep up with their maintenance, you may want to give a program like this a try. You will be rewarded in ways you could never imagine!