Next Generation Youth Delegate Congressional Sessions

Conservation Congress 2020 – February 8, 2020
Conversation #1 – Reciprocity Returning the Gift

Respectfully Submitted by Bill Donato and Ed Collins, Director of Land Preservation & Natural Resources

What does ethical reciprocity between humans and the natural world look like?
Youth delegates felt there was an imbalance between the gifts we receive from nature and those we return and a need for people to do more.

Physical gifts back like protecting land, doing restoration work, not littering are important but so also is education. The giving of knowledge to people in order to make them aware of nature and their responsibility for it as well as how to be more involved in nature activities.

Some of the personal examples youth delegates used as examples of giving back in their personal lives included helping with prescribed burns, clearing brush at Pioneer Fen.

How can we return the gifts we have been given by the earth here in McHenry County and in the larger region we are part of?
This question and question one had some overlap and the conversation continued in the general direction that began in question one.

- Doing real science to get data in order to understand what is really happening with loss of species was identified as a way of giving back to nature.
- There was some discussion on making sure the way you were living was sustainable and allowed resources to be used indefinitely instead of being destroyed.
- Youth delegates felt that meetings like the Conservation Congress were important because it allowed them to be part of a larger idea and they felt that was true for many other delegates as well.
- The concept of educating people when they are very young was brought up again as an effective way to move conservation forward.
- The idea of having direct experiences in nature was brought up with personal examples of how it changed the lives of the delegates offered. The ability for such experiences to change the direction of a person’s life was discussed because being in nature is “real life” and not a digital world.
- The idea of giving back being a social possibility was discussed and examples from stewardship work days used.
- One participant brought up the importance of a mentor and how he had learned to hunt this year from a mentor in the Conservation District’s hunting program. He talked about how the experience of sitting quietly in a tree stand had given him a new appreciation for what is going on around him. It made him feel he could someday return the mentorship to someone else just starting out.
- The idea of clubs as mechanisms for involving people in returning gifts to nature was brought up with examples from the schools.
- The idea of the importance of guided hikes was brought up so people could learn about nature.
- The massive problems facing the world were discussed and the consensus form the youth delegates is that they are ready to tackle those problems.
Given this diversity how can your group give back to the greater conservation community?

This question entered on students’ ability to give back as a group.

- Clubs and in school organizations were brought up again as an easy way to involve students. Examples included the Johnsburg outdoor club and the fishing club at Prairie Ridge.
- The need for volunteer hours for National Honor Society might be a good way to channel involvement
- Real world activities are very appealing to students.
- All the students recalled how doing actual science in the field like water testing and invertebrate sampling made a big impact on their outlook.
- Student delegates felt there was a place for both in curriculum and extra curriculum activities to involve people more.

How do we increase public awareness of their role in an Honorable Harvest lifestyle while inspiring individuals to take a more active supportive role in advocating for District programs lands and the funding necessary to sustain them?

Students had a number of concrete suggestions for the Conservation District to consider. These included:

- Go to elementary and middle schools into the classrooms and do it repeatedly to interest students at an early age.
- Go to High School career days or just set up a lunch table.
- Reach out to environmental clubs at the schools and let them do the word of mouth advertising for what a good time activities can be socially.
- Don’t rely on the digital because it is too impersonal. Digital has to really grab someone’s attention otherwise it goes into the SPAM folder. You have to present something that really makes people stop and actually read what has been sent along digitally.
- Consider a conservation minute or other method that brings info to students on a regular basis each week. Examples included Tic-toc and the Great Hack.
- Things need to be fun and entertaining to keep people’s attention
What can we do to make McHenry County a regional hot spot where people live healthy and enriching lives?

- Weave green space into existing school campuses
- Redefine class work breaks and employment work breaks to include an outdoor option
- Create open areas for lounging in schools if they are not already either or use existing ones. The goal is to “destructure” the feel of the school.
- Areas locally the student delegates thought were hotspots were Glacial Park, Prairie View and the Hollows.
- Schools need to encourage more freedom in decision making and outdoor class areas would help do that
- Make Conservation District sites available after hours for students to gather and hang out in. Allow these to be certain areas on certain days and send out after hours open reminders digitally.

How can we use this as a way to gather support for our agency’s conservation mission?

- Host events at “hotspots” to get people to become familiar with the sites
- Once they are used to coming there use the hotspot to further educating them

How can the District grow partnerships with those in the health industry?

- Work with insurance companies to give young people a discount if they spend the 120 minutes per week outdoors. This could be done using their phones.
- Have the district try and get administrators to understand that the outdoors is an essential part of a healthy life for students. If the administrators won’t listen go to the county board of education. Possibly set up an experiment with test scores to show that outdoor time is helpful to learning.
- Develop and internship program with local high schools
- Do a nature RX program for students which would be a new audience for that program.
- Talk to school nurses and health people about the value of getting outdoors for students
- Use existing peer to peer mentoring programs by offering meeting space of these programs at District sites.
- Make nature part of the regular curriculum

What makes a good life?

- Being active in a community or school
- Using places to be active and socialize and give back to nature at the same time

General Observations and Suggestions

- Would it be possible for particular demographic groups such as youth or the Hispanic community to report to the Board every six months or every year on issue of conservation/education/recreation that are important to them?