

CONSERVATION CONGRESS 2020 – RECAP



Shaping the Next 50 Years of Conservation in McHenry County

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, McHenry County Conservation District reconvened delegates to the 3rd Conservation Congress of McHenry County. The Conservation Congress provided both delegates and members of the community who attended a formal process to propose and advocate for actions that can be taken by the McHenry County Conservation District to protect and conserve our natural resources, as well as provide compatible education and recreational opportunities on public lands in McHenry County.

This assemblage of thoughtful leaders and influencers offered their insight and opinions throughout the day-long event on three conversations: *Reciprocity Returning the Gift*; *The Pursuit of Healthiness*; and *Our Wild Calling: Transforming our Daily Lives to Connect Children, Families and Communities to Nature*. Below is a brief, compiled summary of the conversations. Additional information and complete summaries can be found on the District website, which includes notes from this year's youth delegation! [MCCD.me/CC2020](https://mccd.me/CC2020)

Conversation #1— Reciprocity Returning the Gift

What does ethical reciprocity look like?

Ethical reciprocity between humans and the natural world also includes the biological system that we do not see—all of the organic material below the soil. The prairie lands of Illinois are unique due to the richness and complexity of prairie soil. A big part of reciprocity relates to what we do not see.

We know we have to restore nature through restoration efforts: burning, re-planting, and helping native oak trees reproduce and thrive. We need to restore our landscapes to allow plant and animal communities to reproduce themselves. We cannot restore naturally without controlling invasives. Promote planting of natives to preserve our environment. We are happier people when we exist in the natural world and are connected to it.

Provide people with experiences to create a sense of wonder and then they will feel a responsibility to reciprocate. Create an “aha” moment for someone that changed their mindset to be more grateful for/respectful of nature? Provide experiences to create a sense of wonder and ideally people will feel a responsibility to reciprocate. Need to start early and instill these values in young people.

How can we return the gifts Nature has given us here in McHenry County?

Reciprocity also means ownership and responsibility. We need to practice respecting life in all forms, starting with our own backyards: Provide Backyard Habitat; Plant Butterfly Gardens; Plant Natives; Compost to divert food waste from landfills—residential AND commercial waste- encourage/promote them to do; Natural Fertilizer—contact a local horse owner; Recycle.

Advertise and educate about environmentally friendly options. Sometimes people just aren't aware that certain options exist. Be Caretakers, respect the land, and see

yourself as part of the system. Host a weekend workday—Tree Planting Party—Promote ways/ideas to go chemical free. Target young people. Involve Students in restoration projects—partner with schools for habitat days.

Volunteering is a way of giving back and learning and then teaching others what you have learned. It's also rewarding to see what you have accomplished.

As planners, it's important to think beyond conservation activities and into transportation plans, water plans and involve municipalities and stakeholders. The way Infrastructure is planned and built, from big county level projects to homeowner projects like rain gardens can have a role.

Given this diversity, how can your group give back to the greater conservation community?

The county has developed a water resource plan to retain water in the county. Small waters and the wildflower preservation society work with schools to plant native gardens. Paddling group is working to open up 14 miles of the Kishwaukee to paddling, hoping more people can experience the river. Openlands did a headwater study for the Chicago Wilderness region. Headwaters are small and easy to explore so a great citizen project involving private individuals and schools. MCC has an Agrarian program where the main goal is farm business sustainability but it focuses on organic food production and sustainable farming practices.

Educate all providers in mental healthcare to give Rx outside. Create Partnerships with the Health Department and hospitals. Partner with PACE or other transportation means to get people out to sites. Add a bus stop to open space areas/natural areas. Need more location to connect with trails; wayfinding signs to point people from businesses to natural areas and vice versa. Lead by example. Not kicking the can, be present in the moment.

How do we inspire individuals to take a more active role in advocating for District programs?

Education is key to all conservation efforts. Encourage participation of youth. Weave conservation ethic into programs for youth. The younger generation has a strong environment awareness; they know about carbon footprint. They “get it”. Are we giving them the tools to address environmental challenges?

Partnerships are necessary—Go to the people: Libraries, Sage YMCA, Health clubs, park districts, the church community, NW Astronomers—Creative programming like Bagpipes and bonfires, encourage Walking Groups, etc. Partner with nurseries: Ex. Host a spring plant sale where a percent of sales for certain native species would be donated to the District; Homeowner’s associations can give awards for people who implement native plantings.

Create events that attract a younger audience with a low ticket price. Make things interactive. Create silly, crazy ideas (think ice bucket challenge) to get people, especially kids, involved in supporting the District. Mini Edu-Videos—and “behind the scenic views” videos. More interpretive Trails. Once you reach them—hook them and bring them back.

Get Nature RX videos in Doc waiting rooms.
Promote *Landscapes* subscriptions.

Conversation #2—The Pursuit of Healthiness

What can we do to make McHenry County a regional hot spot?

Easy access to conservation sites is critical; make sites easily accessible, especially bicycle paths. Participate in employer sponsored health fairs and wellness events. Leave MCCD brochures out in the public spaces (cafeterias, break rooms, HR departments). PACE should have stops at MCCD sites so that people can get out to the sites and be picked up. Market forest bathing; Encourage geo-caching. Give awards for outdoor participation. Develop apps and use of technology like iNaturalist and Mapmyhike. Develop clubs and Facebook groups based around outdoor activities

Advertise the health benefits of District sites with signage and educational materials. For example, on the bike trail you can have a sign that says, “You’ve just ridden 10 miles! You’re going to feel a lot better!”, or show how many calories you can burn if you hike this trail (like the way restaurant menus show calorie counts). Can show study findings about the benefits of being outside (less stress, less inflammation, better cognitive ability, lower blood pressure, etc.)

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

Host a meeting of health community members to discuss partnerships. Connect with the American Pediatric Association and the County Health Department. Create education materials to be left in waiting rooms for doctor’s offices and the health department. Instead of looking at a 3 year old copy of Sports Illustrated they can look at *Landscapes*! Create a magazine targeted to the health benefits of getting outside. A brochure for MCCD on how to use areas to benefit physical and mental health. Provide nature related mental health tips in newsletters and on website. “Did you know that MCCD is a healthcare provider?”

Conversation #3—Richard Louv Presentation Our Wild Calling: Transforming our Daily Lives to Connect Children, Families and Communities to Nature

When *Last Child in the Woods* was published in 2000—there were 60 research studies on the effects of health and getting people outdoors. Today there are over 1,000 studies completed or ongoing. *ChildrenandNature.org*

Cities and villages that saw tremendous population growth over the 30 years are realizing the importance of nature and making great efforts to reincorporate green space in urban setting and encouraging to include from the start of planning phases. We need to set and meet goals for # pollinator gardens, Rx Nature, whatever your goal is.

Everything comes back to stories about your “special place”—the connections we make with nature—so start with this instead, especially if working in politics. Louv refers to this as Habitat of the heart—you can’t protect or love something you don’t know or haven’t established an emotion toward. If you want to create change, stir that deep emotion in people. Need to promote healing in the outdoors; “We are surrounded by a great whisper if you just listen”—ex. even in a city there’s birds, you’ll realize you’re not alone if you just pay attention.

See more >> MCCD.me/CC2020

If the legacy of public lands bequeathed to us is to continue for the next fifty years and beyond, all interest groups within the county need to come together to speak with one voice. The McHenry County Conservation Congress offers that opportunity.

Thank you for these thoughtful discussions!

