

**Project Name:**

Children's Canopy Walk

**Brief Description:**

Our current social and environmental challenges require that all individuals, especially underprivileged children, possess environmental literacy. We define environmental literacy as an individual's understanding, skills and motivation to make responsible decisions that considers their relationship to natural systems, communities and their connection to future generations. At the same time, underprivileged youth need education environments that foster belonging and promote affective outcomes.

**Mission and Goals:**

Our main mission is to enhance, restore and preserve the Reserve and educate all people in the importance of conserving our natural resources while promoting the Reserve's many recreational opportunities. Engaging the Fox Cities communities in low to no cost environmentally focused programming is central to our success. Providing a natural area alone for people to visit is not enough. We are passionate about connecting them to nature through naturalist led programs. We believe this is key to the success of our mission!

**Issue/Problem:**

"If getting our kids out into nature is a search for perfection, or is one more chore, then the belief in perfection and the chore defeats the joy. It's a good thing to learn more about nature in order to share this knowledge with children; it's even better if the adult and child learn about nature together. And it's a lot more fun." - Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. This quote and the nature-play movement are the driving forces behind this project. There is a need for self-discovery natural areas that are in close proximity to our daily lives and our urban nature center can fill that void. These designated areas will allow us to protect key animal habitats while creating new areas for free play and nature engagement!

Heckrodt Wetland Reserve's (HWR) four interpretive pillars of education provide a natural context for engaging these youth in environmental education, while fostering connection to nature and student self-efficacy in ways that are experiential and relationship-based.

**HWR Interpretive Pillars of Excellence**

- 1) Hands-on Discovery Based Learning
- 2) Site-specific Interpretation
- 3) Relevant and Impactful Experience
- 4) Fosters an Ethic of Environmental Stewardship

School districts that make up our service area have an average free and reduce rate lunch program participation of 50%. The school district, of which Menasha is a part, last reported a rate of 57%! Students living in households between 130% and 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) are eligible for reduced price meals. Students are categorically eligible for free meals if they are homeless or if anyone

in the household is on TAFDC or SNAP, meaning that many children between 130-200% of FPL still have access to free school meals.

**Distinctive Approach:**

By removing the barrier of a use fee, we are open and accessible to underprivileged youth and their families throughout the surrounding counties. Our grounds are free and open to the public from 6:00 am to 9:00 PM seven days a week. This allows most families the opportunity to visit at any point on any given day.

Additionally, we plan to coordinate special public programs and events around our new outdoor classroom area. One such collaboration would include a "Hiked It Liked It!" Program. Starting January of 2021, HWR programming will be encouraging youth visitors and their families to experience Wisconsin's seasons through exploring the Reserve at four different times throughout the year. We believe that immersing youth and families in nature in all seasons helps to cultivate an attitude of importance of self-discovery and the world in which we live.

Activities will include the following;

- \* Winter: Snowshoeing at the annual Candlelight Snowshoe Hike
- \* Spring: Squishing in the mud during our Mayhem in the Mud event
- \* Summer: Investigating the Canopy at the Children's Canopy Walk
- \* Fall: Exploring the displays at our Community Creepy Crawlies event

Upon completing their first seasonal experience, participants will be given a "startup kit" to begin their "Hiked It Liked It" journey. By participating each season, youth participants will receive the award of a different link on their hiking kit. Additionally, they will receive a special nature gift for experiencing all four seasons. Following the fall season, we will be able to evaluate how many participated in the "Hiked It Liked It" Program.

**Determination of Success:**

From the results noted in the previous question, we will develop a report showing how many families, youth and adults participated. These statistics will also help us monitor the number and type of people utilizing our trail systems. With the addition of this program, our yearly visitation rate is expected to exceed 70,000 people per year. Project success monitoring will be co-managed by the Reserve's Executive Director, Director of Education, Site Maintenance Supervisor, and Director of Development. Volunteers and support staff will report to them for all things relating to the project including but not limited to visitation frequency and use. The project manager team will update the Executive Director and Board of Directors as major visitation milestones have been met.