Friends Groups

When volunteers adopt a state park, friendships are built for a lifetime.

(Photo by Glenn Lyons.)

Funds raised by the Fox Ridge Foundation have been used for public programs, trail maps and creation of an interpretive pond.

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There are times when we all need to rely on our friends, and the Department of Natural Resources is fortunate in the friends we have around the state.

Formalized through DNR's Volunteer Network, friends groups are dedicated organizations, businesses and individuals joining forces to enhance, preserve and protect state sites, and provide interpretive and educational services.

Nearly 40 friends organizations exist throughout Illinois and, although all provide valuable support, space prohibits highlighting more than a few.

Founded and dedicated 25 years ago for the improvement and promotion of Fox Ridge State Park near Charleston, membership dues, fund drives and donations have allowed the **Fox Ridge Foundation** to fund a summer interpreter who conducts public programs on the park's natural, cultural and recreational resources. Undertaken in conjunction with Eastern Illinois University, the group provides the student a scholarship, and underwrites the purchase of educational materials, such as owl pellets, magnifying glasses and identification books. Donations also have paid for a four-color park trail map, new playground equipment and an interpretive pond at the nature center.

Chris Patton, foundation president said: "Volunteering has changed my life by exposing me to a whole group of people I wouldn't have otherwise known. I've met some really wonderful people and made some great friendships."

"The park is very fortunate to have a great group of volunteers who dedicate their time and talents," said Glenn Lyons, site superintendent.

Formed in 2003, the **Friends of Giant City** volunteers have donated

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Juanita and Earl Dickey find volunteering at the Giant City State Park Visitors Center enriching.

The Volunteer Network promotes improvement of existing Friends groups by helping to achieve mutual goals and objectives and it helps establish new groups where feasible. At least 50 percent of the mission of each group is to assume responsibility for supplementing a DNR site or district to help achieve high-quality public recreation and resource protection, raise site awareness or support a specific project. Some groups are 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations formed by citizens to support projects by raising funds, selling memberships, writing grants and receiving donations.

Many friendships are made and new opportunities are experienced by becoming a member of a friends group. To find a local DNR friends group, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/volunteer/index.htm and click on "Friends Groups." The site also contains the steps for establishing a friends group. Questions may be directed to Dianne Blasa, Volunteer Network manager, at (618) 462-1181.

thousands of hours—more than 1,000 hours in 2006—toward the operation of Giant City State Park. Along with assisting with daily operations at the visitor's center, volunteers conduct invasive species work days, monitor bluebird boxes, support the park's annual physically-challenged archery hunt, work to improve trails and more.

Recently, the group assisted the local chapter of the Civilian Conservation Corps with funding for the newly dedicated "CCC Worker" statue honoring Illinois' CCC alumni. Earl Dickey, a volunteer and Giant City CCC worker in the 1930s, enjoys talking with visitors who inquire about the old days. Along with his wife, Juanita, he feels that their lives have been enriched by their experiences at Giant City and volunteering is a way to give back to something they so enjoy.

"Rarely a day goes by that we don't hear from or see one of these folks," said park superintendent Bob Martin. "The friends provide the park and its visitors with many services we would not otherwise have and they are a valuable asset to Giant City State Park."

Dee Toombs, DNR conservation education representative, attributes the success of the East St. Louis Urban Fishing Program to the faithful, patient and dependable **East St. Louis Urban Fishing Volunteers**.

Hosting more than 1,200 youth, preschoolers and teenagers is no small feat and could not be done without a helpful group of volunteers who share a love for fishing and helping teach participants how to bait and remove hooks, cast and net their fish.

Regardless of the weather or temperature, the East St. Louis Urban Fishing Volunteers are at the summer clinics at Jones Lake in Kenneth Hall Park every day, willing to help with anything needed for the fishing program. One member of the group, Bo Stacker, affectionately known as "Grandpa Bo," helps with the classroom training, but his specialty is untangling lines. He also brings ice every day so the kids can have a cool drink. Another member, Arthur Dean, called "Coach Dean," brings a wealth of knowledge to the clinics as a retired educator.

The **Better Fishing Association of Northern Illinois** has a long history partnering with DNR through donations of time, money and equipment and are recognized for their educational activities during the annual Bakers Lake Kids Fishing Expo, the annual Lock 14 Kids Fishing Derby and the Lake Mendota Cub Scout Derby.

Through the power and determination of more than 150 BFA members, together with other groups and volunteers, the 2006 expo—the 50th anniversary of BFA—introduced almost 700 children, and at least that many adults, to the sport of fishing. Combined participation numbers for the three events means each year thousands of children and adults receive training and a strong message regarding ethical, safe and enjoyable outdoor recreation.

(Photo by Mark Yehling.)

A love of fishing and teaching youth is all the motivation needed for members of the East St. Louis Urban Fishing Volunteers.

Members of the Better Fishing Association of Northern Illinois help teach hundreds of children fishing basics each year.

(Photo by Better Fishing Association.)