DNR's urban fishing program celebrates 20 years of helping Illinois youth get hooked on fishing.

Raising a Generation of Anglers

Story By Herb Dreier
Photos By Mark Yehling

Three-year-old Caitlyn Scheibal proudly displays her first fish, caught during an Urban Fishing Clinic at the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Campus Lake.

Years ago, youngsters commonly spent their summer days outside, often from sunup to sunset. Outdoor activities—playing baseball in the neighborhood park, chasing fireflies after dark, bicycling down dusty country roads and hanging out at the local fishing hole—had a large following with the younger crowd.

Things are vastly different today. Children have far more choices, and many of their pastimes keep them indoors around the television or computer.

Throughout the state, staff of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) are working to change this trend by encouraging people back to the basics—stepping outdoors and spending their free time watching a baited worm for a hint of a bite.

Fishing is fun and easy to learn, especially for those attending a DNR Urban Fishing Program clinic. In just a few short hours, individuals learn the basics of what can become a new life skill—and get a chance to successfully reel in a fish at one of the numerous stocked lakes in the state.

Many parents are looking for outdoor activities for their children, and fishing is a consideration, but some parents lack the basic knowledge and skills to teach fishing. Urban fishing clinics are good family events providing a setting for all members to learn together. (Participating adults can fish during the clinic without a fishing license but must release their fish.)

(Photo by Herb Dreier.)

Tim Pryor watches as his son, 8-year-old Tyler, reels in a big one on the virtual fishing simulator, a popular highlight of Urban Fishing demonstrations. Erin Thomas, a student at St. Dominic's School in Quincy, landed a 20-inch largemouth bass during her outing.

The Urban Fishing Program started as a summer program in four Chicago parks in 1985, quickly growing in popularity and expanding to eight parks. Employees were hired to conduct 2.5-hour fishing sessions Monday through Friday for about nine weeks during the summer. During a 45-minute classroom session, attendees learned fishing safety, the importance of protecting the ecosystem, angler ethics, fish identification, different fishing techniques, how to tie an approved knot and properly rig a fishing pole, and more. Participants spent the majority of their time putting their new-found knowledge of how to cast with a rod and reel to use at a nearby stocked lagoon.

The formula was successful.

In 1994, the Illinois General Assembly approved a fishing license fee increase as part of the "Fish Illinois" initiative with a portion of the increase dedicated to statewide expansion of the Urban Fishing Program.

By 1998, five regional coordinators were employed to conduct activities that included summer fishing clinics and environmental education programs. Last year, 16,044 people attended the 847 summer fishing clinics held at 22 different sites. In 2003 and 2004, the Urban Fishing Program expanded its summer clinics to new sites through a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, allowing for an additional 18,269 individuals to learn to fish through one of the 778 clinics offered.

The success of the program relies on maximizing the chances these new anglers have to catch fish.

For this reason, catchable-sized fish are stocked in lagoons at the urban fishing

Borrow fishing equipment

Too often, a barrier preventing someone from fishing is a lack of equipment. A statewide equipment loan program makes borrowing equipment as easy as checking out a library book. Terminal tackle—hooks, sinkers and a bobber—also are available at no cost. More than 120 loaner sites exist in Illinois, at easily accessible sites such as lakeside concession stands, libraries and bait stores. For a list of sites, visit www.ifishillinois.org or call an urban fishing coordinator (see reference list).

Herb Dreier (pictured below), other regional coordinators and volunteer instructors conduct fishing clinics for scouting organizations and other youth groups, as well as programs designed for families.

Participation is key in fishing clinics. Clinic instructor Mark Yehling called upon two Girl Scouts attending Camp Keck in Belleville to help demonstrate knot tying.

Get involved

Volunteers are important to the urban fishing program. Some volunteers help by baiting hooks and removing fish. Other individuals, and some businesses, are trained and supplied with fishing poles and conduct fishing clinics for groups.

Additional men or women with an interest in helping youth learn to fish are needed. Call your regional coordinator to learn how you can assist with a program in your area.

locations. Last year, approximately 113,000 pounds of channel catfish and 88,000 hybrid sunfish were added to 33 lagoons located throughout the state. Because these waters also are open to the public, thousands of area residents have a chance to remain active in the sport and it is common to see youngsters return to a clinic site in the evening or on a weekend, often with their friends or family.

Any water body with a suitable fish population can be a clinic location, allowing urban fishing coordinators to conduct clinics for specific groups—school physical education and science classes, after-school groups, weekend or evening scout groups, park programs, senior citizen groups, 4-H clubs and other organizations. Throughout the year, coordinators also conduct numerous non-fishing environmental educational programs in schools, at state parks for students on field trips and for scout groups.

The reasons for encouraging young people to develop an interest in fishing are varied—giving a person a wholesome outdoor hobby that will last a lifetime; building better stewards of the environment; and helping people recognize the effects a growing society has on ecosystems. People who fish are usually interested in helping others develop similar hobbies in order to pass their skills onto the next generation.

After 20 years, the urban fishing program has shown youth the fun and excitement waiting for them on the bank of the nearest lake or river.

Herb Dreier is one of four DNR urban fishing program coordinators and is responsible for organizing fishing clinics and education programs in central Illinois.

DNR is associated with the nationally acclaimed Hooked On Fishing-Not On Drugs (HOFNOD) program. The HOFNOD curriculum combines angling activities with the ethical care of the environment and positive life skills such as self-esteem issues, decision-making, goal-setting and helping others—all components of most DNR fishing clinics. A HOFNOD grant program provides up to $5,000 for school physical education programs related to fishing and boating. Visit www.futurefisherman.org for information and an application form.

(Photo by Herb Dreier.)

Volunteers are a key component of Urban Fishing Clinics. Joe Sefton assisted youth participating in a clinic held at Eastern Illinois University's Campus Pond.