The first of a three-part series explains the new Conservation Congress process and highlights work of the Youth Recruitment and Retention Committee.

Voice of the People

One idea presented during regional Conservation Congress meetings was involving parents—and grandparents—in youth programs.

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You may not realize it on a daily basis, but conservation of Illinois' natural resources is critical for your life, and for each and every one of Illinois' 12.9 million residents. Conservation improves air and water quality, enhances public health, provides for a diversity of—and access to—outdoor recreational activities, preserves Illinois' scarce remaining natural heritage, secures open spaces and creates jobs.

Sadly, our resources are compromised. Urbanization, climate change, land ownership patterns and technological advances are steadily attacking our precious resource base. Swift action is needed, and needed today, to counter this devastating assault.

"During the previous administration, it had become clear to me that support for the effort to involve constituents in DNR programs had gone by the wayside," said DNR Director Marc Miller. "It was my desire to tackle this shortcoming, and to drastically change the agency's day-to-day operations with an open, transparent form of communication and regular town hall meetings. Those helped immensely, but we needed to go further."

The next step for Miller was to reopen the Conservation Congress process, once an effective avenue for open discussions among advocates for Illinois' natural resources, but a tool that had been eliminated several years ago. Once again, the collective voices of involved citizens are formulating recommendations on three of Illinois' most critical outdoor and recreational issues: youth recruitment and retention, funding and access to public lands.

To further engage constituents, members of the Natural Resources Advisory Board were named to chair

Organized events provide opportunities for youth to participate in outdoor service events, such as this Earth Day in the Parks prairie seeding project.

each committee, and people having expertise and experience in specific areas named to each committee.

"We have had very open and honest discussions with constituents attending the meetings around the state," Miller remarked. "Many responded there, and on our Web site, with incredible detail on the problems DNR is facing and suggested potential solutions.

"The outcome of Conservation Congress is not to develop a planning document for the Department of Natural Resources, but to implement a process for Prairie State constituents to meet, interact, determine what they feel the main objectives of the agency should be and provide ideas on how to accomplish each," Miller said. "Developing an action forum that crosses the lines of the various interest groups is crucial for the success of Conservation Congress. DNR cannot effect the changes the people want—and need—without knowing what their wishes are. To make this work, people need to get involved."

To ensure frequent and year-round conversation, Miller vows that the constituent input process will continue.

"We'll be reviewing the process over then next few months and making necessary adjustments, but maintaining the end result—a responsive constituent input process that moves the agency forward without impacting our limited staff."

Youth Recruitment and Retention

There is a saying that "children will save what they love." A quick look around the mall, on the school bus or in a travel center parking lot during the peak of summer vacation shows what today's children love—cell phones, MP3 players, portable DVD players and palm-sized video games. Today's youth love electronic entertainment.

Technology has created what author Richard Louv calls Nature Deficit Disorder—a trend where children spend more time indoors, tethered by cables and electrical cords, and less time outdoors

As a family, unplug the electronics and spend some time being entertained in the great outdoors.

Children are never too young to develop an appreciation for nature that will last a lifetime.

exploring, developing their creativity and realizing their connection to the world. Researchers attribute the electronic era to the growth in childhood obesity and children being more prone to attention disorders and depression.

Throughout Illinois, organizations are working to counter the trend by providing programs to engage youth, educators and parents in a healthy lifestyle that revolves around the natural world.

Richard Mark, a member of the Natural Resources Advisory Board and co-chair of the Conservation Congress Youth Recruitment and Retention subcommittee, explained the committee's charge to solicit and compile public views on DNR's role to develop, facilitate and deliver natural resources programs with young people and families.

"The fact that fewer children are outside playing, hunting and fishing is troubling to natural resourc agencies that financially depend on their constituency base and purchases of things such as hunting, trapping and fishing licenses and fees, and boat registrations," Mark said.

One major advantage the youth retention committee has over the fiscal and public access committees is the amount of legislative work required to effect change.

"Many of the recommendations we've compiled from interested persons attending one the five public meetings, or submitted through the DNR Web site, don't require legislative action," said Mark. "DNR can immediately embrace and implement a fair number of these ideas."

A full list of ideas presented to Conservation Congress is available at dnr.state.il.us. A sampling of just a few of the ideas generated for recruiting and retaining youth are:

- Expand the youth seasons and opportunities, especially over weekends when youth have free time. Provide incentives to landowners allowing youth to hunt on their property.
- DNR should serve as a catalyst for the development of more informal partnerships between youth groups and outdoor organizations.
- Develop programs to target toddlers and foster an appreciation of the outdoors at an early age.
- Involve more parents in family-oriented programs to retain youth involvement, especially with young and single parents who are less likely to be involved in outdoor recreation.
- Organize group hunts to retain youth interest following hunter safety courses.
- Focus DNR capital funds on recreational facilities that encourage youth involvement.
- Develop an urban marketing campaign to dispel gun fears, recruit new hunters and demonstrate how hunting can save money on the food bill.
- Develop a program to introduce children and families to camping in the outdoors.

—Next month we'll explore the second of the three Conservation Congress committees: Funding.

To review copies of the public meeting minutes and background documentation on youth programs, visit dnr.state.il.us/nrab/cc.htm.

Conservation CONGRESS

Hands-on discovery of nature makes a lasting impression on youth.