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Illinois Coastal Management Program Issue Paper

Education and Public Awareness

Introduction

Bordered by highly urbanized communities, millions of people are drawn to the shores and waters of Lake Michigan to fish, swim, boat, bike, walk and hike, or to simply relax and enjoy the skyline. The recreational component of our Lake Michigan coastline is priceless and very important to Illinois' economy. Biological diversity and habitat unique to the Great Lakes often struggle to survive with all the various societal demands and activities on our coast. With the continued pressure to balance societal uses while protecting the Lake Michigan ecosystem, creating strong and successful educational and outreach initiatives will be an essential component of the Illinois Coastal Management Program (ICMP).

Better education and public awareness of our Lake Michigan resources through the ICMP will increase the opportunity for better management of these resources. The eight general categorical issues and five geographic areas identified as meriting special attention should be the focus of our educational and public awareness initiatives. Several objectives for a successful educational and public awareness program to pursue in the administration of the ICMP are as follows:

- Educate the public of the coastal boundary resources and their significance.
- Provide awareness of the public connection of their use of these resources.
- Provide awareness of the current impacts to these resources.
- Educate and provide awareness of various means to protect these resources.

Public Outreach Challenges and Considerations

An ICMP challenge is to increase the public's general awareness of the various land uses within the coastal boundary and the effect these uses have on our coastal resources, waters and shoreline. Though much of the Lake Michigan shoreline is accessible to the public, increasing public space and access may better allow the public to physically connect with the value of Lake Michigan and raise public awareness.

As with any significant source of information, reaching all users is a considerable challenge. Our bordering communities and outlying cities consist of diverse cultures. Collaborating with existing organizations and community groups will be an essential strategy to meet this outreach challenge.

Once users are reached, communicating the information clearly and presenting it properly will enable the public to better understand the issues. Providing accurate information and cause-effect relationships can spark public involvement and promote positive actions.

It is recommended that ICMP staff utilize experts from organizations that currently focus on public outreach. Working partnerships should be developed with these experts to draw upon existing volunteer networks, media and non-media sources. The benefits are numerous, as regional experts have spent many years striving to access the public for their input while simultaneously educating them about important environmental, land, and water resource issues. Many groups reach out to the public and seek their input to help organize events, educate students, and participate in various activities such as restoration and cleanup events.

The general management theme for an ICMP Education and Public Awareness Plan will be to seek citizen input and volunteer opportunities, recognizing the immense value and strength citizen voices can have in implementing policy.

ICMP Education and Public Awareness Plan Components

The following components and tools are recommended for ICMP implementation:

1. Identify lead volunteers for an ICMP Public Outreach and Education Steering Committee. Committee members would involve communities all along the Illinois shoreline to represent all interests. Committee members will have insight to their community demographics and an understanding on the best means for communication.
2. Outline a long-term communication plan to seek citizen input and volunteer opportunities and a plan that brings organizations and grass root groups together.
3. Consult and coordinate with higher education institutions in assimilating elements of the ICMP and the science of Lake Michigan into their curriculums, clubs or activities.
4. Develop workshops as learning tools to train students interested in environmental fieldwork. Examples include workshops on data collection, sampling techniques and analysis, GIS, Riverwatch programs, or workshops focusing on specific coastal issues, such as water quality and habitat restoration.
5. Develop seminars on interpretative presentations on topics of coastal interest, such as natural and unique habitat, economics of the region, invasive species, and on various key historical aspects within the coastal region, such as industrial, harbor development, navigation, geology, maritime, and land use.
6. Prepare a calendar listing on the ICMP website of all activities, events, workshops, etc., open to the public and include links to the actual organization or group organizing the event. Utilize newspapers, cable TV, etc., for disseminating coastal educational workshops and activities. Promote educational events and activities sponsored by other organizations.
7. Use informational tools such as kiosks, pamphlets, posters, events to educate the public about issues such as water quality, unique habitat, invasive species, maritime activities, climate patterns, coastal history, bird sanctuaries, and significant historic properties. Consider sponsoring design contests (e.g., signs, decals, logos) to create educational incentives and interest.
8. Create an inventory of existing outreach initiatives and educational materials in order to offer multiple opportunities for public education about the value of the Illinois coast. Sort the contents by subject, identifying areas for potential consolidation of data collection, to combine research efforts and to reduce duplication and research costs.
9. Work with regional educators in formal and informal settings to integrate other existing educational programs, such as the Great Lakes in My World K-8 curriculum, Shedd programs, and Chicago Wilderness programs.
10. In coordination with existing educational outreach programs, consider sponsoring a Coast Week program to promote various educational activities and events. Consider coordination of this event with neighboring Great Lake states.

11. Create an annual ICMP report to cite grant accomplishments, program issues, priorities, and new initiatives.

Examples of ICMP Opportunities

Education and Public Awareness is a common goal in addressing all the resource issues and areas identified as meriting special ICMP attention. Examples of specific areas and projects for consideration include the following:

- Provide a centralized information hub on the ICMP website containing beach closings and water quality information. The hub could contain information on causes for beach closings and possibly suggest measures to improve water quality.
- Create an inventory on Bird Sanctuaries and Habitats with information on desired protection, maintenance or enhancement measures.
- Create a post-construction Natural Habitat Plantings Guide, providing management guidelines, appropriate BMPs, implementation assistance, public workshops and training. Possibly identify one or two sites (e.g., Shoreline Protection Project, Morgan Shoal Natural Area) for on-the-ground training in planting establishment and maintenance.
- Prepare an Illinois Lake Michigan Coastal Resource document as a resource guide and educational tool.

Existing Educational Outreach Programs

The following organizations currently have educational programs and activities:

Adopt-a-Beach (Alliance for the Great Lakes)

Annual beach cleanup (Alliance for the Great Lakes)

Great Lakes in My World – a K-8 curriculum (Alliance for the Great Lakes)

Shedd Aquarium Educational Programs

Chicago Wilderness restoration, education and outreach programs

References and Links

Alliance for the Great Lakes link: <http://www.greatlakes.org/>

Shedd Aquarium link: <http://www.sheddaquarium.org/>

Chicago Wilderness link: <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/>