

Students Speak Out about Minnesota Parks & Trails

Final Report - January 17, 2010

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Purpose of work and process: Citizens League Students Speak Out hosted six weeks of dialogue about Parks and Trails to inform the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) from mid-November 2010 to early January 2011. Our specific charge was to approach teenaged citizens, who pay sales tax and therefore contribute to the voter-approved Legacy Fund, to further flesh out ideas and questions raised while drafting the DNR’s Public Review Draft Legacy Plan¹ as well as to further examine ideas that the Conservation Corps gathered from over 1,000 youth (elementary – high school) and young adults. The DNR plans to consider these insights while preparing the final plan to be submitted to the Minnesota Legislature as a recommendation for how to spend the Legacy Fund.

To accomplish this goal, Citizens League posted, publicized and moderated six weekly discussions online at www.studentspeakout.org (hosted on the CitiZing civic engagement platform). Four of these discussions incorporated quick polls to get participants thinking more deeply about the topics. See *Appendix 1* for the weekly questions and polls.

We spread the word about the effort using Citizens League networks (Facebook, Twitter, broadcast email) and Students Speak Out networks (Facebook, Twitter, various contacts). We further contacted a number of schools and youth organizations, focusing on those with an environmental focus, to encourage participation during a short project span. See *Appendix 2* for a list of school and youth organization contacts. Brian Hubbard at the Conservation Corps and at least one DNR staff also contributed to word spreading efforts.

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Teen insights and experiences are important to the DNR, as young adults, teens and children are one of the groups the DNR is targeting for increased participation. The DNR is seeking to reverse a state and national trend of declining per-capita participation in nature-based recreation. The draft plan explains:

This is a national trend that impacts national parks, national trails, state parks, state trails, and other outdoor recreational facilities. It includes activities such as hunting, fishing, boating,

¹ Minnesota DNR. 2010. Public Review Draft Legacy Plan. <http://www.citizing.org/data/projects/parkslegacy/Draft-Legacy-Report-2Dec10.pdf>

wildlife watching, and wilderness use. The primary driving factor behind this trend is a decline in involvement among younger adults and their children. Today's young adults and youth are not as engaged in traditional nature-based activities as older generations (DNR 2010, 37).

Targeting teens and children for increased participation in outdoor activities could also combat the rise of obesity in Minnesota. The draft plan explains:

The replacement of vigorous outdoor activities by sedentary, indoor lifestyles has far-reaching adverse consequences for our physical and mental health, for our economy and for natural resources. Six of ten adult Minnesotans are overweight or obese and an estimated 17 percent of children and adolescents aged 2-19 years are also obese (DNR 2010, 38).

Participation: There were 137 members of the Students Speak Out Parks and Trails Project. Over the six weeks of dialogue we hosted 500 unique visitors (not all visitors are members, but teens tell us that “visiting” ought to be recognized as learning and participating).² The average time visitors spent on the site was 12 minutes, 30 seconds. The average number of page views per visit was 17.

Participants posted a total of 132 comments (6 weekly discussions), and took polls 129 times (we offered polls 4 times over the 6 weeks).

The participation map (Figure 1, left) highlights our participants' geographic locations throughout Minnesota. The large circle to the north is Bemidji, MN, (school not known) and one of the large circles in the metro area is from Apple Valley, MN (School of Environmental Science). Students in these areas were

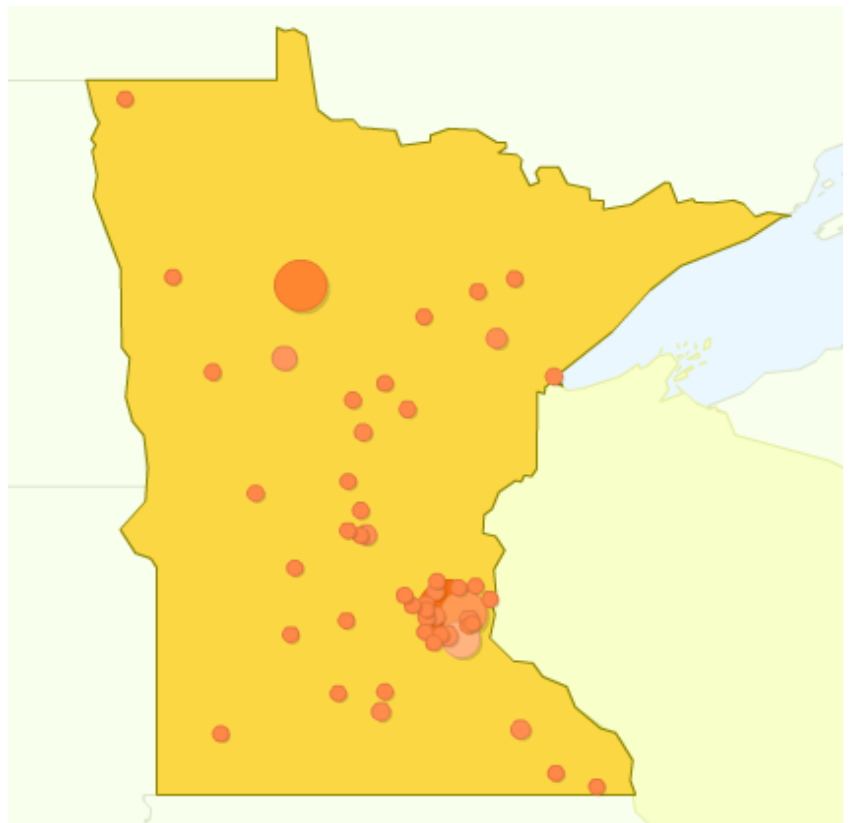


Figure 1. Geographic Locations of Participants, Students Speak Out Parks and Trails Project

² Farris-Berg, K. and Alexander, L. 2011. *Seven Ways to Engage Teens in Civic Problem-Solving Online: Participation Strategies That Work, In Their Own Words*. Citizens League. <http://www.citizing.org/data/pdfs/sso/Engaging-Teens-in-Civic-Problem-Solving-Online.pdf>

participating from their schools, at the encouragement of peers and/or teachers. This influenced large numbers of sign-ups from these areas.

Findings from weekly polls and discussions

Increased use of parks and trails as well as “quality experiences” top teens’ list of what will make them confident that the Legacy Funds are being well spent. For experiences, opportunities for physical exercise are highly desirable.

Of 83 survey participants, 37% said they would have confidence the state is on the right path in spending the Legacy Funds if in 3-5 years many more people were using parks and trails. Twenty-nine percent said that the quality of experiences with parks and trails will have improved (good maintenance of facilities, relevant programming, etc.). Eighteen percent said we will have identified and started working on a few big projects (a project might be a new park). And 12% said projects that reflect each region’s unique needs will be underway.

Asked to add their own insights, a good portion of comments said that the increase in parks and trails use would be for physical exercise. Delving deeper into this issue, some teens suggested offering training programs for athletic events as gyms do. Several young women liked the idea of “yoga in the parks.” The aesthetics alone would draw me away from the gym, one said.

“Another thing that would be fun is semi-pick-up sports. I stopped playing soccer because it got super competitive and the parks didn't have much in the way of soccer for kids my age. If the parks opened up their fields at designated times and encouraged teens and maybe young adults to come play a certain sport it would not only be fun but promoting active lifestyles.”

Another good portion of teens said the infrastructure is there, and parks are great as is, but awareness is not (not only for exercise, but for all parks and trails offerings).

“I know personally, I never knew about the bike trails in Lebanon Hills until I heard about them at school.”

Teens are interested in parks and trails, but not sure what they’ll do, what they will be allowed to do, or how well they’ll be received when they arrive.

The most popular response for why teens would spend their downtime (or more of their downtime) using Minnesota parks and trails is if they were exposed to more ways to use them. The next most frequent response was if their friends were interested. Following that, if there were organized ways to meet people such as activities, competitions, or bike rides. Safety and equipment access were the least

frequent responses. A few students commented that although parks are great as they are, and they already use them frequently, organized activities and gathering places are desirable.

“I feel that parks are a nice part of society, but often I have no idea what I will do when I go to one. It often feels like it almost wouldn't be worth the trip because my friends are often not interested in joining me. If the parks developed programs or group activities, such as a canoeing class or a hiking day, [or ‘teen days’ where teens could try things in the parks free of charge,] then it would be easier for people to get together and develop more of a community surrounding their park experience. “

“I think that part of the reason people don't use the parks as much as they could is because they don't see many of the benefits. For example, why go to the park to play catch when you could just play in your backyard? But if there were activities at the parks that could not be done at home more people would be drawn to the parks.”

One participant questioned if teens are legally allowed to camp. And, if so, he wondered how well they would be received by rangers and other campers. He assumed “no” and “not well”, so he and his friends don't go camping. Emmett Mullin from DNR clarified that teens are indeed allowed to camp. Although this comment was only made once, the perception is legitimate given that teens are restricted nearly everywhere else in our culture and that nature often gives teens an opportunity to connect with their adult instincts (such as trip planning and survival skills). This issue, explored further, might reveal a real “edge” that parks and trails have to attract teens away from other, more restricted activities.

“When I don't know the restrictions or limitations due to age, time, etc. of a place or event I want to go to, I am less likely to try planning a visit... My advice for the DNR on making teens feel welcome is to emphasize [consistency with requirements (e.g. which identification is accepted) and] transparency [about what teens can do].”

Teens seek activities to learn well-roundedness. Also, employment and academic learning opportunities.

When considering what sort of “real world” opportunities the DNR might offer to teens, employment opportunities are desirable (as is currently outlined in the draft plan). But equally as desirable to teen participants were opportunities related to academic learning. More desirable than both were activities that would help teens learn to be more well-rounded (to take downtime; to develop outdoor skills).

“At my school, we use the parks and trails for studying ecology and local wildlife. I have found these opportunities exciting and educational, and I think other students would be drawn to the parks if they were offered the same opportunities with their schools.”

“I think teens would enjoy activities revolving around school. If there were activities that could give you credit for school or have activities relating back to what students learn during the school day. Things like showing real world impacts of population growth or global warming. This would let teens see what was actually happening in the real world.”

“I think it would be really great if the DNR tried to get more involved directly with schools. If we are always learning about what the DNR does and how we can help, then students will be more informed and would probably seek out the DNR more for opportunities to help out.”

“It would be really cool to have outdoor survival or, as the poll refers to it, outdoor skill development of some kind offered. If there was something at all times throughout the year I think that would be nice because winter in Minnesota is obviously different from the summer time, and there are outdoor skills pertaining especially to individual seasons that would be fun to learn about.”

Teens seek real and impactful responsibilities and opportunities to contribute to DNR.

In general, teen participants responded very favorably to the idea of the DNR boosting participation by offering real, impactful opportunities for teens to contribute to the DNR, with authentic responsibilities involved. Most popular choices were guided service afternoons and being on an advisory board to help solve problems facing parks and trails (this was preferred over an advisory board to improve teen participation). They also emphasized that communicating *why* the work is important and needs to be done is key to gaining teen interest.

“I'm already involved with a camera survey in a park, and before that I never really went to DNR parks. Now, I love going there and wish I had more time to be there for fun. Walking in circles around a park isn't fun—if you want people to show up and be involved, give them (a) something to do and (b) a reason to do it.”

“Development projects involving members of a community (of all ages) could help achieve a balance [between tangible efforts and marketing efforts, both ‘legacy worthy’]. Invite people to canoe on the lakes twice a month to help the DNR monitor biodiversity; create a legacy building in a park with a new garden/energy project/green building style project each year done by volunteers, and use [the product] to attract events to the park. When my school goes hiking in the spring, we end with a service project.”

“We as teens have new minds, fresh ideas and the more places we have for letting us be heard, the more likely teens like the ones at my school will be willing to put forward the time and energy to voice them. Hands on activities are great. We get to see what work we've done and let other people see them as well. As teens, we sorta like to brag and boast, so if we can do something big like this, we're gonna be excited to tell others about it!”

To get teen visitors of one park/trail to gain interest in using other parks and trails, consider Web-, smartphone- and school-based marketing.

When asked what the DNR should prioritize first to get visitors of one park/trail to gain interest in using other parks and trails, three of nine poll takers chose “provide interpretation (e.g. This park is one of 5 that has this native flower”; “These 3 parks are also good for watching wildlife”). Two selected “provide access (e.g. park passes, bus routes, school partnerships)”. Others split between educational outreach, marketing, activities, and “other”. In their written comments, Web-, smartphone- and school-based marketing were the teens’ suggested means of making connections. Teens viewed “making connections” as one means of helping address the problem of teens’ lack of understanding about what they would do at Minnesota Parks and Trails.

“I feel like schools are an important tool that should be utilized in order to get Minnesotans to extend their park experiences. Students bring the messages home—wasn't it a recycling study that found parents to be learning about recycling programs from their children who brought the messages home from the classroom?... I think one of the most beneficial resources given to me in school was a map of all the parks and trails in the immediate area; it gave me an opportunity to explore new places because I knew where to go.”

“I was planning a trip to do some winter activities at a park reserve up in Maple Grove earlier this week. I heard about the park by word of mouth. I had difficulties locating a database online for the parks in the metro area. There was no good way to compare the facilities and pricing for all the parks nearby to find an optimal park for what I was looking for. Each park had a very nice individual Web site, but there was no good ‘parent’ site.”

“A lot of teenagers simply don’t know about of state parks and the benefits of visiting them. More marketing, such as internet and phone applications, can increase awareness. A Facebook page or phone app would be something teenagers would use more frequently than a regular Web site and could provide information about all the great things to be done at a particular park, how to get there, and what it will cost to visit.”

Teens agreed with adults involved in the Parks and Trails Project that “legacy worthy” projects will be long-lasting, but also emphasized that no long-lasting investment will be worth it if we don’t also make short term investments to inspire their generation to use parks and trails in the first place.

Presented with the findings from earlier Parks and Trails project efforts, attended primarily by adults, teens readily saw the importance of two “legacy worthy” goals they hadn’t prioritized as highly: *Acquire land, develop opportunities* –and– *Take care of what we have*. In general, teens agreed these initiatives should be a priority. At the same time, they warned against under-investment in efforts designed to inspire their generation to use parks and trails in the first place. After all, “what good is a legacy if there is no one to carry it on?” Teens’ suggested participation-boosting efforts weren’t limited to marketing,

but also included programs, activities and approaches they suggested in other dialogues. Simply “building it” doesn’t guarantee they will come.

“Long-term spending is where the majority of the funds should be allocated, but short term investment is necessary to give Minnesota’s Legacy Project a boost... If participation is a major issue, acquiring land or investing in other long term projects won’t solve it, regardless of how necessary they may be. To build lasting connections while expanding the park service in any respect, the DNR has to reach out in some capacity.”

“If short term connections are made, such as the outreach ideas that are being suggested, it’s more likely that the long term connections will be made. Specifically, if [teens] are involved in the creation of new facilities and then are brought into the continual growth of the land and area, the goal of getting people to be more involved in the parks and trails and to start to really utilize the resources [will be realized].”

“Marketing [of] activities would also encourage many young people to use these state parks. If we want people to use the state parks in future generations, we need to get young people involved. These young people will then create a legacy for others in the future.”

“I think we should get wildlife sanctuaries and vast amounts of land put aside for teens and adults alike to take nature walks but there being no paved or machine made trails... And we really need stuff like this in northern Minnesota because we have such beautiful forests.”

“What I would *love* to see, concerning the development of facilities, are green buildings. As green as possible; ones that use new green technology and innovation so that not only are these buildings making the smallest impact, but they rival green buildings of countless organizations and institutions. How awesome would it be if Minnesota was the first state with such a green overhaul of its DNR? It would be quite a nice legacy to leave behind.”

“Teens don't know about the state parks and all they entail. I think some effort needs to go into marketing or the parks won't be used to their full potential. But I do see the point that too much marketing isn't worth it. I think ‘legacy worthy’ is something that will have short term benefits to jump start the use and long term benefits to continue it.”

“Long-term goals are important, but they become useless if connections between Minnesota citizens and their local or favorite distant parks aren't being made (what good is a legacy if there is no one to carry it on?). “

Connecting teens' insights to the DNR's Public Review Draft Legacy Plan's four strategic directions

The DNR laid out four strategic directions in the Draft Plan: (1) connect people with the outdoors; (2) acquire land, develop opportunities; (3) take care of what we have, and (4) coordinate among partners. In this section the Citizens League will make connections between these four directions and teens' insights in the weekly polls and discussions for the DNR's consideration when developing the Final Plan. Important for final plan authors to consider is that teens' insights for each direction have implications for all of the other directions (in other words, the strategic directions are inter-related).

This information should be used in concert with the Conservation Corps findings, but authors should consider carefully that the Conservation Corps approached a wider age group of young people. It might not always be appropriate to lump together the thoughts of all age groups.

Connect people with the outdoors

Since participation among youth is a key concern for the DNR, the weekly discussions and polls focused heavily on what it would take for teens to feel connected.

- ✓ Teens aren't necessarily *disinterested* in parks and trails; they're just not sure about how to use them and if they'll be welcomed. It would help to clarify and publicize what they'll do, what they will be allowed to do, and how well they'll be received when they arrive (legally and socially speaking).
- ✓ Regarding "what they'll do", teens seek quality experiences. To them, quality experiences include:
 - Opportunities to improve well-roundedness (to take downtime; to develop outdoor skills)
 - Organized opportunities for physical exercise, such as yoga in the parks, athletic training programs, or organized sports
 - Employment opportunities
 - Academic learning opportunities (for credit) that also introduce them to beyond-the-classroom opportunities to continue their learning and involvement
 - Authentic and impactful service opportunities to contribute to the DNR (guided service afternoons; serving on an advisory board to solve problems facing parks and trails)
- ✓ Teens recommended Web- and school-based publicity methods.

Acquire land, develop opportunities –and– Take care of what we have

- ✓ While a portion of teen participants viewed these strategic directions as top priorities, most said that increased use of parks and trails, as well as quality experiences, would give them the most confidence that the Legacy Funds were being well spent.
- ✓ With continued dialogue, teens respected, and even agreed with, adults' prioritization of these strategic directions. But they warned against under-investment in efforts designed to inspire their generation to use parks and trails in the first place. They did not see the investment in participation as contrary to these strategic directions, rather as an important element of the directions' success.

Coordinate among partners

- ✓ Teens stated that school-, smartphone- and Web-based marketing efforts would be prime spaces to connect teens interested in one park or trail to other parks and trails.
- ✓ Teens would like information online, set-up as a database that allows them to compare and contrast parks and trails without having to visit individual park sites and read maps to do the work themselves. Information would include:
 - Facility descriptions
 - Maps
 - Activities offered/possible (including seasonal) and their hours
 - Equipment available for rent
 - Nature-based interpretation (such as which 5 parks have x wildflower and which parks offer great wildlife viewing)
 - Information about where trails might diverge (for example, if a bike trail connects via a road and whether that road has a bike path)
 - Costs
- ✓ Outreach efforts can also be as simple as distributing maps at schools and introducing teens to the park and trails, and associated activities, available to them in their specific geographic area.

Appendix 1

Weekly Discussions and Polls

Week 1. In 3-5 years you'll have confidence the state is on the right path in spending the Legacy Funds if:

Poll: We [heard from Minnesotans](#) that they want the [Legacy Funds](#) (millions of dollars in state sales tax revenue Minnesotans voted for in 2008) to build something big and lasting. If we do that, **what milestones will we reach as a state that show we're on the right path?** (*choose 1*)

- We will have identified and started working on a few big projects (a project might be a new park) (12%, 85 respondents)
- Projects that reflect each region's unique needs will be underway (18%)
- The quality of experiences with parks and trails will have improved (good maintenance of facilities, relevant programming, etc. (29%)
- Many more people be using parks and trails (38%)
- Other (tell us your answer in the comment section after you submit the survey) (5%)

Question: In 3-5 years you'll have confidence the state is on the right path in spending the [Legacy Funds](#) if...

Week 2. I would spend my downtime using Minnesota Parks & Trails if:

Poll: I would spend my downtime using Minnesota Parks & Trails if (check up to three answers):

- I already use parks and trails frequently (8, of 19 respondents)
- I felt more welcome (5)
- I had transportation (2)
- More of my friends were interested (8)
- I had a better idea of what I'd do there (5)
- I were exposed to more ways to use them: athletic training programs, geocaching, camping, fishing, etc. (10)
- I had access to equipment (for camping, geocaching, biking, etc.) (2)
- There were ways to meet people: activities, games, competitions, organized hikes and bike rides (6)
- Fees at state parks were less expensive (park passes; camping fees) (4)
- I/my parents sensed park use and activities were safe for teens (1)
- Other (1)

Question: Recently, brain [imaging studies](#) have suggested to researchers that periods of rest are critical in allowing the brain to synthesize information, make connections between ideas and even develop the sense of self. "Downtime is to the brain what sleep is to the body," said Dr. Rich of Harvard Medical School in [this article](#) from the New York Times last weekend, "but [teens] are in a constant mode of stimulation." Adults wonder if

teens' access to technology, and even the constant nature of school and extracurricular activities, could actually be hindering learning and self understanding.

What do you think – is the constant stimulation hindering? Does non-tech related, non-organized “downtime” seem to be an option for you? And, if so, could Parks & Trails be the right outlet for the suggested rest? What, if anything, could the DNR do to make Parks & Trails a go-to space for downtime, as opposed to your other options?

Week 3: Teens Not Welcome? How would YOU roll out the welcome mat?

Question: *Background:* The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources just released a draft of the [Parks & Trails Legacy Plan](#) for spending funds from the [Legacy Amendment](#) sales tax (which teens pay!). The plan will be submitted to the state legislature.

Among the recommendations is to create a welcoming environment for teens in MN's parks & trails. Specifically, the plan suggests creating employment, internship, and volunteer opportunities (from lifeguards to program leaders).

Having read your thoughts these past two weeks, I'm wondering if 'jobs' would be your main focus if you were responsible for creating a welcoming environment? What can the DNR learn from you about making teens welcome?

Challenge: If the DNR hired YOU to create a campaign to roll out the welcome mat for teens, what would you do? On what specifically would you focus? Be creative, and consider checking previous weeks' discussions to inform your ideas.

Week 4: If the DNR offered “real world” opportunities for me to learn and contribute, I’d most take advantage of...

Poll: If the DNR offered “real world” opportunities for me to contribute and learn, I’d most take advantage of (choose up to 3):

- Guided service afternoons (e.g., park clean-up) (5, of 16 respondents)
- Guided service weekends (e.g., for trail rebuilding) (3)
- Service opportunities I can do on my own time (e.g., I have a deadline, but can do on my own time while reporting my progress to DNR.) (3)
- Employment opportunities (e.g. lifeguard, program leader) (7)
- Any activities that count toward my school’s service requirements (3)
- Activities related to my academic learning (e.g., DNR could hook up with my science teachers) (6)
- Activities related to learning to improve my well-roundedness (downtime; outdoor skill development) (8)
- Activities related to leadership skill development (4)
- Advisory board for teens to solve problems facing parks. (5)

- Advisory board for teens to improve peers' use-levels of parks and trails (3)
- Opportunities to advise DNR via my school (2)
- Opportunities to advise DNR online (2)
- I wouldn't take advantage (please explain your reasons below) (1)
- Other (please explain below) (1)

Question: In recent meetings around the state, teens told the MN Department of Natural Resources that they would be drawn to Parks & Trails if there were “hands-on”, “real world” opportunities for learning, community planning, and problem solving. Help us flesh this out a bit. What sort of opportunities are teens referring to here? Anything we're missing in the poll choices? And if the DNR wants to get the most bang-for-buck to attract teens like you with opportunities to contribute and learn, where should it focus most?

Week 5: How would you get visitors of one park/trail to gain interest in using other parks and trails?

Poll: What should the DNR prioritize first to get visitors of one park/trail to gain interest in using other parks and trails?

- Provide access (e.g. park passes, bus routes, school partnerships) (22%, of 9 respondents)
- Provide activities that bring park users to places new to them (e.g. competitions; geocaching) (11%)
- Provide activities that bring park users to places new to them (e.g. competitions; geocaching) (11%)
- Provide interpretation (e.g. “This park is one of 5 that has this native flower”; “These 3 parks are also good for watching wildlife”) (33%)
- Provide marketing - Web site and/or Apps (e.g. “If you like this park or activity in the park, check out this other park.”) (11%)
- Provide educational outreach to explain connections (tell us how, below) (11%)
- Other (elaborate in the comments, below)

Discussion: In discussions about how to spend the Legacy Funds, Minnesotans have again and again called for the DNR to take the lead in creating connections between spaces. In this case we're not talking about physical connections, but connections that help people using one park or trail to become interested in using others.

The DNR is looking to YOU to help us understand this better. What does this mean? What are the best ways to pull this off? Creativity most welcome.

Week 6. Define for DNR, What is “Legacy Worthy?”

Discussion: There has been some discussion about what is worthy of “Legacy Fund” spending. Many adults seem to agree that creating something long and lasting is a priority (in other words, let's not fritter away the money on a lot of small, short-term things). When asked to define this, many have indicated that “legacy worthy” means tangible products such as acquiring land or developing facilities.

At the same time, teens and diverse cultural communities have been encouraging programming, activities, and better marketing of opportunities in general to boost participation (a DNR goal) and encourage development of lasting connections to parks and trails.

The DNR would like your advice in sorting this out. Are these contradictory goals or do they somehow mesh? What does it mean to have a “legacy worthy” project? Perhaps, if you will, propose a working definition the DNR ought to use to evaluate whether something is “legacy worthy” or not?

Bonus: The Conservation Corps worked with the DNR to learn about young people's experiences with nature-based recreation. See the report and share your reactions.

Discussion: This past fall, the Conservation Corps worked with the DNR to visit in-person with more than 1,000 youth and college-age young adults from around the state. The goal was to learn about their experiences with nature-based recreation. [Take a look at the draft findings](#) and share your reactions below.

Appendix 2

Overview of Outreach to Individuals and Groups

This list represents outreach Citizens League completed in addition to Citizens League and Students Speak Out Facebook, Twitter, Broadcast Emails, existing networks and members, etc. We had positive response/interaction with those in bold font, and most indicated they would spread the word to their own members and students.

Alliance for Sustainability (U of MN)/Youth Environmental Activists MN

Will Steger Foundation

Great River School

School for Environmental Sciences

Teacher at East Metro Integration District 6067

Teacher at St. Louis County Schools IS #2142

Service Adventure Leadership Team High School (SALT)

Watershed High School

Voyageurs Expeditionary High School

EdVisions Schools (a network of schools throughout MN, many project-based and some environmental-focused)

Northwest Passages High School