

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Wisconsin's Northern State Forest Assessments:
Environmental Education and Awareness

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Executive Summary

Wisconsin's Northern State Forest Environmental Education and Awareness Assessment report gives guidance to participants in the master planning process regarding the roles that education and outreach can play on the Northern State Forests (NSFs) and within the master planning process itself.

To clarify the role of education on the NSFs, the Land Division assembled a cross-divisional team of resource professionals in education, research, wildlife, planning and endangered resources. This team, then, worked to outline a coordinated and effective State Forest education and outreach program which encourages a broad understanding of Wisconsin's NSF management issues and makes the best use of educational opportunities on NSFs. In order to achieve its purpose, the team began by suggesting recommendations that integrate learning with the master planning process itself.

Since master planning depends on input by participants who are knowledgeable about forest issues and management, the team developed learning goals and outcomes which would enable people to make sound recommendations regarding resource management alternatives. They created a master planning "vision for learning," identified learning opportunities and challenges, and recommended steps for integrating learning with the master planning process.

Next, team members inventoried the educational components of current NSF master plans. These plans, developed in the late 1970's and 1980's, made few mentions of education. They referred to education in a generic way, suggesting that natural areas could be used by the public for general nature study. The current master planning process presents an opportunity to address educational programming and facilities in forest master plans.

To find out about the current state (late 1997) of education on the NSFs, team members interviewed five forest superintendents. Interview results indicated that all forests distributed printed materials including a brochure and, usually, a newspaper-style information sheet. Upon request, staff from each forest presented guided tours for schools and other groups visiting the properties, sometimes using one or two successful "canned" programs. Also, each forest provided some special events, but these events were not necessarily scheduled regularly and may be more recreational than educational.

All five forests targeted the general public, adults, some students and specific recreational users. Programs did not usually target teachers and community members. None of the properties reported having an educational facility, and, at the time of the interviews, none reported having an education plan or conducting evaluations of their program. In short, education had been

essentially overlooked in previous master plans, and current conditions reveal many under-utilized opportunities for educational programming.

To expand and improve the educational value of our NSFs, the assessment team focused on identifying available resources, including partnering with other educational providers and sharing resources and information among the forests. The team also provided suggestions for inventorying potential resources and planning for educational programming. Then, the report gave each NSF some site-specific suggestions regarding general recommendations for non-personal services, details on available educational resources, suggestions for possible funding sources, and alternatives for staffing.

In summary, this assessment report recommended that, as each NSF completes the master planning process, some planning relative to the educational program should take place. We strongly recommend that learning and educational programming be recognized as valued components of the master planning process itself. *Each forest's master plan should include an educational component at least in the form of an objective to develop an education plan and some discussion on how the education program could be monitored and evaluated.* After completing master planning, forest staff should consult with interpreters and educators to develop an education plan which will guide the implementation of the educational component of the master plan.