



Youth workers Trey Nelson (left) and Neil Oustigoff, Jr., from the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, prepare to erect bluebird houses. They also spent part of the summer setting fyke nets and banding geese.

Helping themselves, helping their tribes, helping the environment

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE MONEY FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE SUMMER TRIBAL YOUTH PROGRAM.

Story and photos by Marcus Smith

Whether it's the Youth Conservation Congress, the Wisconsin Explorer Program, youth hunting events or annual kids' fishing clinics, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has a range of programs designed to foster an appreciation of Wisconsin's natural resources in young people. A little known addition to that list of youth-focused initiatives is the DNR's summer tribal youth program.

Under the state grant program, Wisconsin-based, federally recognized American tribes or bands can obtain funding for Native American youth to earn money while working on natural resources projects. The program also provides Wisconsin's Native American youth with a look at potential careers in resource management with their respective tribes, federal agencies or DNR.

Although the program became law in

2013, the backstory began years earlier.

Program takes root

In 2007, Steve Petersen, Northern Highland-American Legion state forest superintendent, began discussions with Lac du Flambeau tribal council leaders about a summer program where DNR staff would mentor tribal youth to encourage them to pursue careers in natural resources. The program got underway

in summer 2008.

A year later, John Gozdziwski, secretary's director for DNR's northern region, met with Mic Isham, a member of the Lac Courte Oreilles tribal council and head of the tribe's department of natural resources, about a similar program for their tribal youth. Under Gozdziwski and Isham's leadership, the DNR, Lac Courte Oreilles Conservation Department and U.S. Forest Service developed a 12-week multi-agency summer youth program. A college intern and six employees worked on stream shocking, campsite relocation and trail maintenance, in addition to other tasks.

Gozdziwski then worked with the Lac du Flambeau's tribal leadership to broaden their project from a mentorship to a summer youth employment program, with an emphasis on natural resources management. While the summer youth programs were being operated by the Lac Courte Oreilles and Lac du Flambeau, Gozdziwski searched for ways to expand the program to other tribes.

Opportunity knocks with a new governor-sponsored initiative

The Wisconsin Walleye Initiative was created by DNR with the support of Gov. Scott Walker, with the goal of increasing walleye production at state-owned, private and tribal fish hatcheries, and improving public accessibility to waters stocked with walleye.

While the walleye initiative was being developed, Gozdziński had several conversations with DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp about the tribal youth programs underway in the northern region of the state. Stepp, along with Mike Huebsch, then secretary of the Department of Administration, supported expanding the program. Funding was included in 2013 Wisconsin Act 20.

While Gozdziński credits Stepp, Huebsch and Walker, he also acknowledges the role played years earlier by several tribes in laying the foundation for the program's expansion.

"The summer tribal youth program developed because of work begun by the Lac Courte Oreilles and Lac du Flambeau, two of the Chippewa tribes up north," Gozdziński said. "Both tribes saw the value of a partnership to help their youth years before the program became law. The state budget provided the dollars in 2013, but four years prior to that, these two tribes were saying, 'Hey, this is good stuff.' If the program helps youth, it also helps the tribe and the DNR to bond together on something that's very positive."

Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa

I'm riding in a boat on the Chippewa Flowage with two summer tribal youth workers from the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and Dan Yankowiak, DNR parks and recreation specialist. Yankowiak manages the flowage, a 15,300-acre impoundment in Sawyer County with some 200 islands.

Yankowiak is taking us to one of the 11 campsites on the flowage managed by the DNR, where the youth workers he supervises will begin their first assignment of the day. Yankowiak, along with his co-crew leader Brady O'Mara and crew coordinator Thayne Marlow, supervises six youth workers taking part in the 2016 summer tribal youth program. The youth workers are employed by the Lac Courte Oreilles Conservation Department and U.S. Forest Service.

After reaching the island, Yankowiak and the youth workers got over their



maintenance assignments on the island and get down to work. I asked Yankowiak to describe one of the projects his crew worked on.

"We noticed the benches on one of the islands were in bad shape," Yankowiak said. "The DNR purchased an island from a private landowner who had this rough milled pine left on site that he planned to use to build cabins. We were able to take the pine, plane it down and make benches for our campsites. The kids learned construction skills and got out on the flowage."

Many youth workers return to the program each summer, making Yankowiak's job somewhat easier because they don't require as much training.

"Usually the kids who come back are the hard workers who know the program and those are the kids we want on board," he said.

O'Mara and Thayne Marlow are co-crew leader and crew coordinator, respectively. This is O'Mara's second year with the program. His crew worked on a project at the Wild Rose fish hatchery where they cut birch poles and brush for future ponds. O'Mara recently graduated from the Lac Courte Oreilles Community College with a degree in natural resources.

"For me, the program is a way to get

a foot in the door, to see how the agency works," he said.

As crew coordinator, Marlow helps Yankowiak plan each day's activities and wants to work as an environmental engineer.

"This summer the crew built a hoop house, did stream restoration and worked in the Flambeau State Forest, helping out with the elk project," Marlow said. "We all work well together. I definitely recommend my relatives take part in the program. You learn a lot."

St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin

The day I visited with the St. Croix tribe, a group of youth workers were preparing to erect bluebird houses, just one of the tasks the workers had been involved with for the summer.

"We helped out at our own ponds where the tribe's been raising walleye and helped out at the Spooner fish hatchery," Tristen Oustigoff, the youth supervisor for the program, told me. The workers also kept busy setting out fyke nets to count young fish. This is the tribe's third year participating in the program.

Oustigoff, and youth workers Trey Nelson, Neil Oustigoff and Jameson Matrious, also cleaned culverts, banded geese and cleared beavers away from ponds.



James White, Jr., a member of the Oneida Nation, removes weeds from one of the 200 islands on the Chippewa Flowage managed by the Department of Natural Resources.

Sarah Slayton is the environmental and natural resources director for the St. Croix and manages the program. Her office promotes the program in their tribal paper, and on the tribe's website and electronic bulletin board. Slayton is enthusiastic about the program because it highlights the role her office plays in improving the quality of life for the tribe and its youth.

"I think the program's been great, just to be able to have youth involved with what we do here at the office," Slayton said. "Sometimes we are a little bit under the radar, and the word doesn't get out like it should. The program has really helped with that. Youth are exposed to projects that provide for protection and enhancement of the natural resources, things the tribe appreciates a lot. I think it's been a good program."

The Oneida Nation

You would never know how hot it is by watching Tiana Danforth work. Along with several other youth workers, this St. Norbert's sophomore is pulling and lifting tree branches into a chipper at a steady clip. For this, her third and final summer in the program, Danforth and her co-workers are participating in community hazardous tree removal and wood waste reduction activities. When

there's a break in the action, I ask what motivated her to become involved with the program.

"My sister told me about it because she works with the program that handles all the youth jobs," she said. "I thought it was interesting to explore nature and find out what these people do."

This summer Danforth has operated a high pruner and tractor under close supervision.

"I know most of the people around here, so they will come up and say 'Thank you for helping us take care of this,'" Danforth said. "I recommend it to other kids. It will teach you a lot about trees and nature, which is very important."

This is Joseff Cornelius' first year in the program. Like at other reservations, providing services to tribal elders plays a key role in youth worker assignments.

"This is an elder's house, so we came here and removed trees that we'll put in the chipper to be used for firewood or funeral burning," he said. "I think this is a good program and it gets me a new experience, something I wouldn't have done before."

Cornelius plans to attend UW-Stevens Point and become a wildlife biologist.

Dan Brooks, the forestry and trails program manager for the Oneida, supervises the youth workers.

"We do a lot of forestry work here," Brooks said. "We generate woodchips, firewood and specialty wood for community members for sculpting or basket making. We offer tree services to community elders, 55 and older. We also offer those same services — whether it's tree removal or planting services — to all our programs."

Brooks said the tribe has 22 natural resource trails they try to keep safe from hazard trees. This year they focused primarily on forestry because of the blow-downs that occurred.

"Part of the program is career growth programming, which means expanding their thoughts on natural resources-related fields," Brooks said, "trying to help them understand what kind of curriculum is involved in attaining a natural resources degree. The program also helps them hone their communication and writing skills."



Dan Brooks, forestry and trails program manager for the Oneida Nation, chats with youth workers Joseff Cornelius and Tiana Danforth.



Oneida Nation youth worker Tiana Danforth spent part of the summer providing tree services to community elders.

The Stockbridge-Munsee community

When I asked how his tribe decides which projects their youth workers will undertake, Randall Wollenhaup, ecology department manager for the Stockbridge-Munsee, said planning begins with a staff meeting in early spring.

"I talk to the other departments," Wollenhaup said, "be it forestry, hydrology or environmental, to find out what projects they want the youth to work on and how much time they have to donate to the program. We set up a rough schedule with their projects, then fill in with smaller things."

Wollenhaup said the youth workers do a lot of stream surveys on reservation waters. They learn how to operate a backpack shocker or staff a barge shocker, measuring and identifying fish. Fish surveys are a mainstay and are conducted annually, he said.

"Last summer, the community came to us about landscaping around the tribal office," Wollenhaup said. "They were looking for suggestions to be sure nothing they planted was invasive. The youth workers went out and got all native plants from around the reservation, brought them in and planted them. They'll follow up with interpretive signs

to identify plants that have a cultural significance to the tribe, such as species used for medicine."

The youth workers also stayed busy removing invasive plants from elders' property, Wollenhaup said. "We talk to the elders if we remove invasives. We let them know why and tell them some of the impacts they have on the environment. I'm really a fan of the program. It helps us pass on the knowledge we've acquired. It's something the staff looks forward to each year; the opportunity to work with the kids."

Secretary's directors help make a difference

Jean Romback-Bartels is the DNR secretary's director for the northeast region. She works with the Oneida Nation, Stockbridge-Munsee, Menominee and Forest County Potawatomi. She meets with the tribes accompanied by Shelly Allness, DNR's tribal liaison. The meetings cover a range of topics in addition to discussing the youth worker program.

During one of those meetings, members of the Oneida Nation expressed an interest in increasing their trail system. Romback-Bartels suggested it could serve as a project for their youth work-

ers. During a meeting with the Menominee tribe, members told her it was difficult to find people interested in taking part in the tribe's wildlife or fisheries program, because their young people are afraid to go into the woods.

"It was amazing to me that they were struggling with that," said Romback-Bartels. "Yet now, they're looking to take the tribal youth involved with the grant-funded summer project and get them involved with the bear surveys or the fish surveys, to get them into the woods and more comfortable with the outdoor environment."

One constant for both Romback-Bartels and Gozdziński is their commitment to using the youth worker program as a way for Native American youth to learn about natural resources management career opportunities outside of their tribe. Romback-Bartels has dispatched foresters to meet with youth workers to encourage them to consider careers in forestry with the DNR.

"It's important for these kids to realize that while there may be limited job opportunities on their reservations in a particular program, we give them other options," she said. "All the tribes submit annual reports on the youth program when the summer is over. Some indicate a lot of the tribes have staff who have been in positions for 30-40 years. There may be a vacancy now and again, but not nearly often enough to allow for all of the tribal youth to find positions, especially in their natural resources program. We give them an opportunity to see what DNR has to offer as an alternative career path."

In addition to each tribe submitting an annual report to the DNR, many of the youth workers make presentations to tribal elders on their summer projects.

"These public-speaking opportunities not only build confidence but reinforce the personal importance of the program so the tribes can continue to feel it's important to work with us," Romback-Bartels said. She has attended several presentations and remembers one given by Stockbridge-Munsee youth workers.

"It's always a pleasure to watch the youth and how truly important the program was to them," she said. "You can see it in their eyes; you can see it in their smiles and the pride they take in presenting this to the people who matter most to them." 

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