

Youth Conservation Congress member Maegan Loka displays muskrats she trapped along the Wisconsin River in Lincoln County in 2014. Maegan was a former president of the Future Trappers of Wisconsin.

A seat at the table

YOUTH CONSERVATION CONGRESS HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE PRESERVE WISCONSIN'S OUTDOOR TRADITIONS.

Story by Marcus Smith / Photos submitted by the Loka family

You'd never know it from the evidence of their successful hunts in the living room today, but this is the home where two young daughters once laid in wait for the sound of their father daring to leave and go hunting without them.

They would cry on those rare occasions he was able to slip out unheard and unseen. How could they not? Their love of hunting didn't begin later in life when they were pre-adolescents or teenagers. Diaper-clad and strapped into car seats, mom and dad would take turns watching them, while the other parent hunted bear.

Grandma and grandpa took the two daughters' parents hunting and fishing when they were younger. Hunting, fishing and trapping are memories cherished and traditions passed down. In this Lincoln County home, a love of outdoors is as natural as deer rubs in early fall. These two daughters are heirs to a way of life. By hunting and trapping on family land in the town of King, they have seen the future of outdoor recreation.

And it's them.

Maegan Loka, 17, and her sister Macey, 15, are participants in a Department of Natural Resources and Wisconsin Conservation Congress initiative that invites them to the table to make decisions regarding our outdoor traditions. They're both members of the Youth Conservation Congress.

Both girls attend Tomahawk High

School. When Maegan was a freshman she harvested her first wolf. Macey harvested her first bear in 2014. According to their mom, Tammy, "The girls are very competitive with each other but very close. They get together during trapping season, and gather their buckets and off they go in their own direction to set their own traps."

In 2009, Natural Resources Board

Chairman Preston Cole submitted a question in the Wisconsin Conservation Congress spring hearings questionnaire: "With youth declining in outdoor activities, should the Wisconsin Conservation Congress establish a Youth Conservation Congress?"

The answer was "yes" for the majority of Wisconsinites attending the annual spring hearings. After receiving a positive response from the citizens, the Natural Resources Board asked the Conservation Congress to lead efforts to get the Youth Conservation Congress started.

Given its history and mission, it makes sense that the Conservation Congress would help drive this project. It was created in 1934 so that Wisconsin residents would have a way to share their concerns and ideas on managing natural resources. In 1972, the organization was recognized under state law as the citizen advisory board to the Natural Resources Board and Department of Natural Resources. The Conservation Congress has over 300 delegates elected by congress members in all 72 counties.

The Youth Conservation Congress was established to get students under 18 involved in managing and protecting Wisconsin's natural resources by working with the Conservation Congress and Department of Natural Resources. As YCC members, they learn different aspects of resource management, understand how Wisconsin's natural resources policies are shaped, and learn the history of the Conservation Congress.

Youth Conservation Congress members are invited to participate in their two Conservation Congress district meetings each year, along with the spring hear-



Maegan, Snickers and Macey take a break from ruffed grouse hunting.



Macey displays her catch of the day (a northern) while ice fishing.



As a member of the Future Trappers of Wisconsin, Maegan has conducted trapping education courses.

ings, the annual convention and Conservation Congress advisory committee meetings. The majority of YCC activities occurs during the spring but opportunities to engage in resource management activities can take place all year.

As of this writing, there are 21 youth delegates, up from 12 in 2014. Rob Bohmann, Conservation Congress chairman, would like to see those numbers climb even higher and is mentoring a young teenager from Milwaukee.

"I'd like to see at minimum, one youth delegate in every county; possibly two or three in every county, and start getting those kids involved in conservation," he says.

He hopes that becoming YCC members will encourage them to continue to stay engaged by joining the Conservation Congress when they're adults.

"The youth are our future and we want to get young people engaged civically, as well as physically, in conservation at an early age, so they can continue their involvement," he adds.

Mark Loka joined the Conservation Congress in 2003 and has been a hunter safety instructor since 2005. He's a WCC mentor for his two daughters since they joined the YCC.

"We're trying to get kids from every county. Lincoln County is in the WCC's District 3, which includes Lincoln, Oneida, Vilas, Wood and Marathon counties. As of now, we have four kids from Lincoln, Oneida and Vilas counties involved with the program," Loka says.

Youth Conservation Congress mem-

bers volunteer for committee assignments such as Turkey and Upland Game, Legislative/Outdoor Heritage and Education, and Outreach and Public Relations, among others. Maegan and Macey are on the Fur Harvest Committee.

Both girls also are members of the Future Trappers of Wisconsin. Macey is the District 3 representative for the organization. Maegan started attending meetings with her dad when she was 11. She became president of the organization in 2010. As president, she wrote articles for the newsletter and worked to get other young people interested in outdoor recreation.

"I was president for four years," she recalls. "We'd hold a camp every year. For two years, we went to Trees for Tomorrow at Eagle River. During that time, we made weasel boxes, snares and disposable stakes. There were a lot of kids who wanted to learn how to trap, so they would come to the camp, and we'd teach them all the right ways how to trap. Several kids joined the Future Trappers of Wisconsin after being exposed to the event."

Maegan has been a member of the YCC since its beginning. Macey joined in 2015, because she wants to "speak on behalf of youth in Lincoln County and I want to make a difference."

If you want to see the difference a member of the YCC can have on state policy, consider the following: Maegan introduced a resolution that proposed lowering the trapping license fee for youth under 16 from \$19.25 to \$9.25. Her

resolution was adopted and became state law as part of the items included in 2011 Wisconsin Act 168. (Trapping regulations list the youth fee as \$10 because there's a 75-cent issuance fee). According to Maegan, reducing the fee "helps families and kids go outdoors" and enjoy trapping.

Conservation Congress leadership is working to increase youth participation and is developing plans for YCC members to take part in activities with DNR personnel, such as assisting with geese banding, participating in tagging or marking fish at a hatchery, and warden ride-alongs. Perhaps 2016 will be the year Bohmann's dreams of having YCC members from every county in the state come true.

If young people who are interested in outdoor recreation need a reason to join the YCC, they should ask the Loka daughters. "Today's youth need to realize that their voices can be heard and they can play a major role in our heritage," Macey believes.

Maegan says her peers need to become involved because they'll learn a lot about outdoor activities they can enjoy. To her way of thinking, this is an activity they shouldn't pass up.

"The more someone knows about something, the more you can share with others. Because of the Youth Conservation Congress, Wisconsin opens up the doors to youth and gives them a hands-on opportunity to learn," Maegan says. 

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