

8. EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND OUTREACH EFFORTS

The whooping crane can serve as a “flagship” species to educate Wisconsin’s citizens and visitors about the importance of conserving both wetlands and the species dependent on them, while also promoting other statewide conservation programs. The reintroduction of whooping cranes offers an excellent opportunity for the development of an education and outreach program centering on crane biology and ecology, wildlife and landscape management, the reintroduction program, and related environmental issues. To capitalize on these opportunities, education and outreach efforts must involve a diversity of partners, audiences, and approaches.

8.1 PARTNERSHIPS

Successfully managing the growing EMP of whooping cranes requires the support and involvement of partners at the federal, state, county, and regional levels. This is equally true for educational efforts focusing on cranes. To be effective educators and ambassadors, agency and private land managers, formal and non-formal educators, project staff and volunteers will receive educational materials, project resources, and training about whooping cranes and the reintroduction effort. To highlight cultural ties between cranes and the Native American community, education specialists will collaborate with tribal experts to develop targeted educational materials that focus on these connections.

Educating Wisconsin’s citizens and visitors about whooping cranes and the reintroduction effort is a huge undertaking. Agency staff and educators may be unable to meet the demand for educational programs, monitoring efforts, and other needs. The reintroduction program has captured the attention and support of groups ranging from sporting clubs and local conservation groups to birding organizations and environmental groups. These groups can offer valuable help in developing materials, providing training, and promoting educational outreach. For example, WCEP staff can work collaboratively with local communities; wildlife refuge, state park, and nature center staff; University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension personnel, and nonprofit organizations to present special events like bird festivals and field trips. Also, opportunities exist to collaboratively develop and market crane-related service learning opportunities such as habitat enhancement and restoration to interested groups (i.e., scout and 4-H groups, schools, nonprofit organizations). Existing public monitoring programs such as e-Bird and NatureMapping will be explored to support and enhance existing partner monitoring efforts.

However, having a well-trained corps of volunteers ready to contribute to such efforts will be critical. A volunteer speakers’ bureau will be organized and trained to present whooping crane education programs. Special interest groups can work with other partners to develop citizen monitoring and reporting programs for crane sightings. To assist crane monitoring efforts, a citizen science program will train volunteer monitors and provide necessary educational materials and reporting forms, including access through the Internet. These efforts will be integrated with other biological and research needs to maximize the value of data collected. In addition, the citizen monitoring program will be integrated with similar programs like the Friends of Wisconsin State Parks, local “friends” groups, volunteer naturalist programs, and e-Bird or NatureMapping electronic reports of sightings.

8.2 DEVELOPING EDUCATION AND OUTREACH MATERIALS

To maximize the effectiveness of educational materials and resources, an education team comprising agency personnel and classroom and non-formal educators will review existing educational resources (i.e., crane trunks) and develop additional educational materials. More crane trunks will be produced and distributed to key public properties and educators through WCEP partners.

Integrating whooping crane education efforts with existing environmental education programs in Wisconsin will broaden distribution while also encouraging vital linkages between programs and people. Crane educational efforts can be integrated with related programs at the International Crane Foundation, and through programs such as the Aldo Leopold Project, Project WILD and Project WET, One Bird-Two Habitats, Wisconsin State Parks interpretive programs, and other existing or newly developed programs in Wisconsin. Because whooping crane reintroduction is linked to habitat protection, education efforts will also focus on wetland conservation and restoration.

Educators will have a key role in teaching youth and adults about whooping cranes and the management plan to restore this migratory population. Regularly scheduled workshops will enable educators to access materials, learn from resource and education experts, and gain hands-on teaching experience. In addition, other educational resources will be promoted and distributed through WCEP partners, networks such as the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point's Environmental Education Liaison and the Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education, and nonprofit organizations like The Wildlife Society and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology.

New publications are planned, such as a "Landowners' Guide to Whooping Cranes." This outreach tool will provide information on crane biology, safe viewing practices, and related issues like agricultural damage. Media such as display boards and informational brochures will be distributed to key public properties, libraries, and other highly visible public sites. Other public outreach approaches may include production of a new endangered resources license plate highlighting the whooping crane.

8.3 SHARING INFORMATION

The future success of this program hinges on the understanding and support of Wisconsin's citizens. Project staff and partners will regularly distribute media releases highlighting crane "happenings," success stories, educational events, and related issues to keep the program visible. Periodic field days may be scheduled to offer non-disruptive whooping crane viewing opportunities.

All informational materials will include safe viewing guidelines. Whooping cranes are extremely sensitive to disturbance by people. In most cases, people are just hoping to get a closer look or take a photograph, unaware of the potential negative impact of their actions. Safe viewing guidelines, project brochures, videos, and other materials for distribution will be available to field staff, visitor center personnel, and staff at all properties at which the public may have viewing opportunities. Safe viewing locations at Necedah NWR and the ICF will be publicized to encourage crane watching at these easily observable sites. In addition, an electronic public domain photo file will be created and publicized to discourage close approach by the media and

other interested parties. The Bird Watcher's Code of Ethics developed by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology is available at <http://www.uwgb.edu/birds/wso/ethics.htm>.

Whooping cranes in Wisconsin use habitat on private and public lands, encompassing federal, state and county parks, forests, and wildlife areas. Field staff may serve as a liaison to landowners when whooping cranes use private property habitat. The DNR whooping crane coordinator together with the whooping crane educator and other WCEP partners can help provide project information to landowners, and may request monitoring aid from these landowners. Electronic list-serves will be created to share information and media releases with special interest groups.

Continuing legislative support at the state and federal levels is critical. To keep the legislature abreast of the reintroduction program, an annual report may be developed and distributed. State and federal legislators may be alerted when cranes are spotted in their districts, and they will be invited to attend educational and special events and “media days” held in their districts.

Using the whooping crane as a flagship species to help conserve wetlands and promote statewide conservation programs will raise public awareness and enhance the education efforts put forth in this plan. A strong educational component at all prominent public viewing sites including signs, printed materials, and trained interpretive staff will insure that the public hears messages designed to answer their questions and enlighten them on the value of bringing cranes back to Wisconsin.

8.4 ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. travel industry (The International Ecotourism Society, 2005). Combined with rural and agricultural tourism, nearly 90 million people seek out rural communities and nature in their travels each year. From canoeing the Kickapoo River to warbler watching at Wyalusing State Park to wildlife viewing from a vehicle window, people travel to and in Wisconsin to observe, experience, and learn about the unique biological and physical resources found here.

The restoration of whooping cranes will provide this growing segment of the population—ecotourists—with another reason to make Wisconsin a preeminent nature destination. Ecotourism provides people with outdoor travel experiences that enrich their lives with the sights, smells, and sounds of nature. Within minutes or days from their homes and communities, people can experience something new and learn new skills while building connections with nature in their own unique way. Reaching this additional audience with our education and outreach efforts will benefit both ecotourists and whooping cranes.

8.5 ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Crane related activities stand to contribute significantly towards state and local economies. More than two-thirds of Americans participate in at least one outdoor activity annually (Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2005.) In Nebraska, approximately 80,000 people visit the Platte River area during the peak spring sandhill and whooping crane migrations. At the AWBP wintering site, the Rockport, Texas, Chamber of Commerce estimated that whooping crane-related activities resulted in annual gross economic benefits of \$6 million to the local economy (CWS & USFWS, 2006).

In 2001, nearly two million people watched wild birds in Wisconsin, both in their own backyards and away from their homes. Resident and non-resident wildlife watchers in Wisconsin expended

\$1.3 billion on food, lodging, transportation and equipment needed to watch birds and other wildlife (USFWS & U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Raising awareness of whooping cranes and the reintroduction program while providing opportunities for businesses to share the success of outreach efforts will build support at the critical local level. Travelers come for an experience that is real and worth their time and money. In return, Wisconsin must offer access to crane viewing experiences, well-designed educational materials, quality customer service, and comfortable travel amenities provided by the local community. Ecotourism can be a winning proposition for both Wisconsin's cranes and communities.