



Iowa Master Conservationist Program

Principal Investigator:

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Abstract: *A county-level Master Conservationist Program educated many Iowans about conservation and sustainability in exchange for the participants volunteering both time and expertise to their communities.*

Budget:

\$10,500 for year one
\$12,500 for year two
\$ 7,032 for year three

Question: *What does the Master Conservationist Program do?*

Answer: *It brings together a diverse group of people to learn about a broad range of conservation topics, including sustainable agriculture. While no single effort, even one of 32 hours in length like this one, can make one a "master" at anything, this program puts people on the road. They come to understand some of the functions of both natural and human-made systems, how they interact, and, in the process, create stronger and better communities.*

Background

In 1996, a group of Story County environmental educators met to explore ways to educate others on a broad range of environmental issues and concerns. The Master Conservationist Program (MCP), based on the highly successful Master Gardener Program, emerged as one way to offer training to the public.

A model program was tested in Story County in 1997 and 1998. The program was introduced in three other counties in 1999 with the help of grants from the Leopold Center and the ISU Department of Animal Ecology. In 2000, six new counties implemented the MCP. There were eight counties offering the MCP in 2001; four new counties (Black Hawk, Hardin, Iowa/Johnson, and Pottawattamie) and four repeats (Story, Webster, Buchanan, and Linn) of previously successful programs. The programs were all co-sponsored by ISU Extension and the local county Conservation Boards and received assistance from other local groups and agencies.

Approach and methods

The Master Conservationist Program consists of at least 32 hours of instruction for adults, usually offered at eight, four-hour, hands-on educational sessions. Each session has a different presenter, and a variety of organizations and agencies are represented. Class sizes range from 14 to 35 individuals. Topics covered include:

- Iowa's physical environment;

- Basic ecological principles;
- Prairies, woodlands, wetlands, and streams and the wildlife that inhabit them;
- Sustainable agriculture and land use; and
- Energy and waste management.

The exact session titles varied from county to county, depending on local needs and interests. All counties included a substantial amount of experiential outdoor learning and all had sessions on sustainable agriculture. The primary references for the course were environmental publications produced by the Iowa Association of Naturalists and distributed through ISU Extension.

Results and discussion

The programs have attracted an eclectic mix of citizens interested in conservation. Local organizers listed participants from many walks of life: grocery store clerk, teachers, agricultural professionals, retirees, farmers, newspaper reporters, students, nurses, bankers, landscapers, Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel, postal worker, secretary, factory workers, computer programmer, lab technician, and stay-at-home moms and dads.

In return for the benefits of the course, participants are expected to plan and carry out at least 32 hours of volunteer activity in the broad area of conservation during the year following their participation in the course. In 2001 there were 188 MCP participants who contributed more

than 750 hours of work to date. Those counties repeating the program also report 3,941 hours contributed by MCP graduates from previous years.

Volunteer activities conducted by the participants covered a broad spectrum of conservation-related interests. Some of the projects included composting demonstrations and exhibits; planting of filter strips, stream buffers, and field borders; wildlife habitat restoration; energy education presentations; birdhouse construction; parks and water monitoring; park maintenance; fish habitat installation; butterfly garden construction; prairie restoration and management; and mussel surveys.

Conclusions

While no single course, including this one, can make a person a “master” at anything, the organizers believe that this course sets people on that path. Conservation is a series of lifestyle choices that each person makes. If people receive accurate information from programs such as MCP, they will be more likely to make informed, intelligent choices about how to contribute to environmental sustainability. The

course also was an important opportunity to teach non-farm residents about sustainable agriculture.

Impact of results

MCP Coordinator LeAnne Rohrberg has analyzed data about those who attended MCP classes. Further analysis should be available in spring 2002. These were some of her initial findings:

- MCP participants showed a significant gain in knowledge in surveys conducted prior to their participation and up to 12 months after completion of the program.
- MCP participants' knowledge scores from surveys were significantly higher than those of a control group of non-participants from the same counties.
- Scores from attitudinal questions indicated that while the course elicited positive (but not significant) changes in attitudes, they were significantly more positive than those of a control group of non-participants from the same counties on eight of 12 attitudinal statements.

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