The Journal of Extension

Volume 43 | Number 3 Article 8

6-1-2005

Assessing the Need for Master Naturalist Programs

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June 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 3 // Feature Articles // 3FEA7

Assessing the Need for Master Naturalist Programs

Abstract
We present a focus group-based needs assessment for a Master Naturalist program that would increase environmental education capacity in our state using trained volunteers. This assessment explored the potential benefits, challenges, and structure of the program. We conclude that the program would fill an existing need by providing research-based information on environmental issues; we should collaborate broadly with other environmental education programs; the program must become financially self-sufficient after initial supported development; and we need to work with environmental education professionals in the state to ensure the program does not infringe on their job security.

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Introduction

Woodland Advisor, Master Conservationist, Tree Care Advisor--many successful Extension programs combine education and community service. The prototype for these is the Master Gardener program, which was started in 1973 and now has programs in all 50 states and four Canadian provinces (Schrock, 1998). In Minnesota alone, the Master Gardener program has a substantial level of involvement, with more than 2,000 active Master Gardeners, each volunteering a minimum of 25 hours a year for a collective 75,000 hours of service (Kurtz, 2002).

Can this combination of education and service be used to increase the capacity of Extension to offer environmental education programming? Many state Extension services currently are exploring this question with the intent of developing Master Naturalist programs.

Notably robust programs already exist in Texas and Florida. The Texas Master Naturalist program organized at the state level in 1998 as a partnership between Extension and Texas Parks and Wildlife. This program operates through 18 local chapters with more than 1,665 volunteers that have provided more than 163,500 hours of service (Haggerty, 2002). Another impressive program, the Florida Master Naturalist, has taken a distinctly different approach, with instructors trained at the state level who have, in turn, trained more than 800 Master Naturalists in Florida since 2001 (Main, 2003).

Since 2002, we have been exploring ways to extend environmental science education and wildlife programming to an increasingly suburban population. The success of the Master Naturalist programs in Texas and Florida led us to assess the feasibility of initiating a similar program in our state. While these efforts have been focused exclusively on Minnesota, the lessons we have learned are applicable to anyone considering implementing a state-wide Master Naturalist program.

Initially, we completed a nationwide inventory of Master Naturalist programs and conducted telephone interviews with Regional Extension Educators in Minnesota who specialize in environmental science education. After recognizing the impressive results in other states and the potential benefits to Minnesota, we conducted a needs assessment utilizing three focus groups comprised of participants who are environmental educators and natural-resource professionals. We based our methodology on two helpful publications: Etling (1995) and Krueger (2000).

Objectives

We had four objectives for the focus-group needs assessment:

1. To identify potential benefits of, and partnerships for, developing a Master Naturalist program.
2. To brainstorm potential community service activities for Master Naturalist volunteers.
3. To discuss requisite training to implement service activities.
4. To identify potential challenges in program development.

After addressing these objectives, we could assess the overall need for, and feasibility of, a Master Naturalist program in our state.

Methods

The focus group-based needs assessment included environmental educators, naturalists, and land managers in state agencies, county governments, and non-governmental organizations. Of the approximately 50 people contacted, 22 agreed to participate in the focus group sessions. Before attending these sessions, attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire to assess their initial thoughts about a Master Naturalist program as well as to provide written feedback that might not otherwise arise during the dynamics of a focus group.

The participants in the three sessions included seven Department of Natural Resources (DNR) employees involved in volunteer service and education, six Extension educators, four individuals who work for non-profit groups, three who work at nature centers, and two county employees involved in management and interpretation. Six to 10 people participated in each session.

Overall, the participants had more background in education than in restoration, management, or research. Two restoration and research organizations were invited the DNR Ecological Services (Scientific and Natural Areas) and The Nature Conservancy, but they were unable to send representatives. Nineteen participants worked in the Saint Paul/Minneapolis seven-county metropolitan area, whereas three worked in outlying rural areas of the state.

At the start of each session, we delineated two broad structural requirements for the program:

1. To advance the University Extension mission of "connecting community needs and University resources" within the field of natural resources/wildlife and
2. To include a training and service component similar to that used in numerous Extension programs, including Master Gardener.

We left open other expectations for the program in order to generate as many ideas as possible from the knowledge collectively held by the focus-group participants. We recorded information during the focus groups and collected the written responses from the previously mailed questionnaire at the end of each focus-group session. Some participants chose to make additions to these questionnaires during and after the focus-group sessions.

Findings

Overall, participants identified a need for Master Naturalist programming. Participants' comments included "I'm really glad you're doing this," "I'm excited about the possibilities," and "Overall, I think this is a great idea. Especially with budget cuts, there is a huge need for this. I think there are a lot of people who will be interested in volunteering with this program." Below are the findings from individual objectives of the needs assessment, based on both the written questionnaires and the focus-group sessions.

1. Benefits and Partnerships

The first area explored in the focus group sessions was the potential benefits of creating a Master Naturalist Program and of potential partnerships with other groups involved in environmental science education and stewardship.

Participants emphasized the benefit of connecting an increasingly suburban population to nature. One participant stated that this education/service approach would "help local communities understand and care for the natural world." Another participant said, "If we train volunteers, give

them the support they need, and create meaningful opportunities for them, they will work in partnership with us and allow educators to reach more of the population." Many participants echoed this opinion and said that a Master Naturalist program could generate new energy and enthusiasm for the natural world at a community level. One participant mentioned, "It's helpful to have folks out there . . . at the grass roots."

Another major benefit emphasized by the participants was that the Master Naturalist program could become a consistent science-based source of reliable information. A participant emphasized that in this information age, "having unbiased information versus an environmental group with an agenda" is important.

Many participants mentioned that partnerships and collaboration with other programs would help build a successful program; for example, "I think it's really important that this program works with other similar programs" and "joint promotion of programs, volunteers from different programs can/should team-up on projects."

2. Activities

The first half of the focus group also covered specific activities that could be supported by a Master Naturalist program.

Generally, participants identified activities centering on interpretation, restoration, research, and policy participation. Interpretation included a variety of activities ranging in size from one-on-one conversations to large-group presentations and a range of venues, including K-12 schools, community centers, camps, nature centers, nursing homes, parks, fairs, and public events.

The participants also identified other potential audiences, including scouts, historical societies, tourism businesses, and conservation groups. Specific examples from participants included "In forestry, there's a lot of interest now in plant identification for ecosystem classification--help with these programs would be great;" "[State] Parks used to have a strong post secondary [education] role. This might help fulfill that goal;" and Master Naturalists could "help create signage and brochure content around the state."

Interpretation was not regarded as the only area that could benefit from a Master Naturalist program. Participants also emphasized land stewardship. They thought that restoration projects, development of species lists, inventories, monitoring programs, and citizen-science projects all would benefit from trained volunteers. Additionally, they thought Master Naturalists could become involved in local land-use decision-making by attending city, county, and state public meetings on local environmental issues. One participant mentioned that Master Naturalists could "assist in long-range, open-space policy direction." Another mentioned the program could result in "connecting [local] communities to their [local] natural resources."

3. Training

The third topic in the focus groups centered on the training that would be necessary for a Master Naturalist.

In-depth Training: More Training or More Volunteers?

Participants emphasized the need for volunteers with in-depth training. On the questionnaire, participants were asked if their program would benefit from more volunteers with less training or fewer volunteers with more training. Eleven of 13 respondents preferred fewer volunteers with more training, and two preferred more volunteers with less training.

During the focus group session, participants again emphasized in-depth training. "The need we have is for people who actually know what they are talking about and can interact with the public (school and civic groups) in a professional manner." We need "a few, highly committed [volunteers] that could do high-quality programming."

Training Emphasis: Interpretation or Natural History?

We asked participants to rank the importance of three training areas: "interpretative skills," "natural history knowledge," and "other (please list)," with a percentage emphasis summing to 100. The percent apportionments for natural history knowledge ranged from 15 - 50%, interpretative skills from 20 - 60%, and the "other" from 0 - 40%. "Other" included current environmental issues, environmental education theory, and applied skills.

Participants' views on the training priorities varied considerably. The difference of opinion in this area led to the suggestion that a Master Naturalist program should develop two different tracks: 1) teaching and 2) stewardship. This would allow different Master Naturalist volunteers to pursue their individual interests and would attract more people to the program. One participant indicated that some people would be more suited for working on restoration projects, while others would prefer teaching.

4. Challenges

The fourth objective of the focus-group sessions was to identify challenges in bringing a statewide Master Naturalist program to fruition.

Defining a Master Naturalist

Many participants suggested it will be a challenge to define the depth and breadth of the program from the broad spectrum of topics that could be included as natural history/environmental education. Some were afraid that the training program would be too long or contain too much content for "volunteers," whereas others were worried about insufficient coverage of any topic.

Statewide Logistics and Finances

A few participants pointed out that developing an efficient infrastructure to manage a statewide program would be an enormous task. They stated that maintenance of a statewide infrastructure would be expensive and stressed that the program would need to be financially self-sufficient. Many participants emphasized that the support structure for the program should be established before the program begins. One participant shared, "Don't do the training until the support network is in place." Another participant noted it is "important to have a strong level of support for your volunteers so they have a dependable resource when complex questions or situations arise."

Consistent, High-Quality, Research-Based Programs

Ensuring that the Master Naturalists provide consistent, high-quality programming is challenging. Overcoming personal bias of volunteers is difficult. One participant emphasized that "quality is key here--if you are expecting people to accept your program, you have to assure quality of the volunteers and what they can deliver."

Potential Public Misperception of the Name "Master Naturalist"

Several participants were concerned that the public would not realize "Master" Naturalists were volunteers and may think Master Naturalists have more training and experience than a "professional" naturalist working at an interpretive facility. If the quality of programs delivered by Master Naturalists is low, it may negatively impact the environmental education profession as a whole.

One participant explained this by stating, "The real concern comes with the label of 'Master Naturalist' being bestowed on a person who may have taken classes but may not be able to teach and thereby work against the public's view of professional naturalists." Another participant commented, "This name implies that these people actually hold some sort of degree or are better then just a regular old naturalist (who typically has at least an undergraduate degree in the field if not a Masters degree)." "Please consider changing the name to 'Volunteer Naturalists' if you are going to do this program--call these people what they really are." Another participant said, "The word 'Master' has unintended implications. How about 'Community Naturalist'?" Another remarked, "Please consider changing the name or I cannot endorse this program."

Suggestions to minimize or eliminate potential public misperceptions included clarifying the volunteer role. Also, several participants emphasized that volunteers should be linked to professional programs and the volunteer role was to "enhance an existing professional program" or "assist" professionals rather than lead programs. Alternative program names included Master Conservationist, Master Volunteer Nature Educator, and Master Nature Advisor. A final suggestion was to always refer to the people in the program as "Master Naturalist Volunteers."

Potential Job or Revenue Competition

During our initial contacts with potential focus-group participants, it became apparent that many professionals in the interpretive field were worried about competition from Master Naturalist volunteers. Consequently, we asked each participant to rank on the written questionnaires their concern that trained volunteers may compete for jobs and/or replace professional naturalists and environmental educators.

Of 18 responses, three had "low concern," seven "medium concern," and eight "high concern." One participant mentioned that this concern would vary in different regions of the state. "There are hot spots in the state where this issue is of high concern," while in other regions the program "would be very welcome." Some participants shared that their concern was low because "there's a need for professional staff," "volunteers can't do it all," and "volunteers are not 'free.'"

Participants emphasized that adequate resources must be devoted to coordinating volunteers and that there is no substitute for professional staff. In addition, one participant commented that "we can't get staff, so they don't replace anyone [consequently we need the extra help]." We speculate that the difference in responses depended on a participant's location in Minnesota and whether Master Naturalist volunteers could be viewed as a threat to job security in that location.

Those with high concern mentioned job and revenue competition. One participant emphasized:

> This is a HIGH concern. We have lost 21.85 (65%) of our professional interpretive

positions in Minnesota State Parks since Fiscal Year 2001. This represents a significant impact to what was considered by many to be one of the better interpretive naturalist program efforts in the state and country. We are also concerned about the political discussions on the national and state level about replacing park interpretive naturalist with volunteers. There is potential that Master Naturalist programs could hasten the demise of the profession.

Others were concerned that free services provided by volunteers to school groups would be a source of competition for revenue because school programs currently help support several fee-based nature centers. One suggestion to reduce revenue competition was to allow Master Naturalists to charge for certain programs that they were doing for interpretive facilities, thus providing a revenue source for their sponsoring institution.

Recommendations

1. Pursue Development of the Program

Overall there was enthusiasm for the Master Naturalist program and its niche in the environmental education structure of Minnesota. The list of potential benefits is exciting, and the potential challenges do not appear insurmountable. Program development and conceptualization should be done through a group containing broad representation of potential collaborators and concerned parties.

2. Coordinate with Other Programs

A Master Naturalist program should seek out opportunities to partner and collaborate with other programs in its state. It should investigate opportunities to link training, advertising, and marketing efforts with similar programs. It should also develop its own niche to reduce concerns of competition and focus on how it can add value to existing educational programs.

3. Communicate with Environmental Education Leaders

The program should provide opportunities for communication with local and statewide environmental education leaders. It should provide a forum to review the effectiveness of the program and collect and process ideas for improvement.

4. Establish Financial Self-Sufficiency

A Master Naturalist program should be financially stable after its initial development costs are covered through a grant. The program should involve as many partners as possible to aid this financial goal, especially in writing grant requests.

5. Provide Accurate, Research-Based, High-Quality Programming

The information provided to participants and the public should be non-biased, consistent, and scientifically accurate. It will be important to train Master Naturalists on how to obtain and present this information.

6. Consider Alternatives to the Name "Master Naturalist"

Because several focus group participants were concerned about the connotations of the name "Master Naturalist," we need to evaluate options to address these concerns. An advantage of keeping the name is recognition of the well-known Master Gardener program and the well-established "Master Naturalist" programs in Texas and Florida. Changing the name is an option, but another alternative would be to continue to use the name "Master Naturalist" while communicating the purpose of the program clearly and consistently referring to participants as "Master Naturalist Volunteers."

7. Be Aware of Possible Job Competition

The program should be sensitive to the concern that a Master Naturalist program could create job competition and reduce the number of professional positions in natural history interpretation and environmental education. We should investigate methods to avoid loss of jobs or revenue in the field. Ideally, the Master Naturalist program should to assist professionals and raise awareness of the need for additional professional naturalists and environmental educators.

Conclusions

The focus-group approach was successful in defining the benefits, concerns, and potential niche for a Master Naturalist program in our state. The sessions generated enthusiasm by discussing potential benefits and identified potential partners for the program. Some opinions shared by participants were surprising to others in the group, and the discussion format allowed for a more complete understanding of these differing viewpoints. The focus group format efficiently gathered

diverse opinions and allowed environmental leaders to engage in a broad discussion of the idea. We look forward to utilizing the insights gained in the focus groups to develop a dynamic, collaborative, and effective program in our state.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people for coordinating, conducting, and participating in this project: Jane Greenberg, John Vickery, Chris Goodwin, Gordan Murdock, Cathan Solseth, Kevin Williams, Sue Cairn, Stephan Carlson, Dave Cathcart, Peter Cleary, Erica Davis, Laura Duffey, Dawn Flinn, Pat Huelman, Amy Kay Kerber, Lee Ann Landstrom, Stephanie LeGros, Jim Malkowski, Nate Meyer, John Moriraty, Karen Ostlie, Linda Radimecky, Dana Raines, Eli Sagor, Karen Sheper Rohs, Joel Stedman, Jane Stubblefield, Renee Vail, and Jan Welch. We particularly thank Erica Fleishman, Charlie Blinn, Barb Liukkonen, and two anonymous reviewers for their editorial assistance.

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