



# YCC

## AT 30

CONSERVATION CAMPERS HAVE BRUSHED TRAILS, BUILT STREAMBANKS AND LEARNED ABOUT NATURE SINCE 1962. AS THE YOUTH CONSERVATION CAMP SALUTES ITS THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY, THE PROGRAM IS CHANGING WITH THE TIMES AND MELLOWING OUT.

*Rob Drieslein*

It's midday for a Wisconsin Youth Conservation Camp work crew. For hours, they've tried to riprap a trout stream with very little luck. The streambanks are muddy and slippery. It's impossible to wheel rocks close enough to the water's edge. Everyone is tired, covered with mud and ready to give up.

Then one worker suggests building a small raft to float rocks downstream to the riprap site. Young faces light up and set to work. Before nightfall, rocks are in place to keep the streambank from eroding. The crew heads back to camp feeling good about a job well done.

Time can tarnish or polish traditions. The Youth Conservation Camps operated by the Department of Natural Resources have their own colorful

history and heritage of tackling tough hands-on work. Yet, the high school students who participate have kept the camps vibrant and current since the program started in 1962.

This summer, staff and directors of the four camps will once again face high school teenagers exploding with energy and ready to build some callouses improving the outdoors. Peg Rasch, YCC Coordinator, is positive that the YCC experience has improved with age.

"The kids at our camps are just marvelous," Rasch says. "They're happy to be at the camps. Their interest in the outdoors and in what's going on around them is just overwhelming."

This year more than 1,500 Wisconsin adolescents applied for 800 work-learn summer positions. A few just



Foot by foot, YCC crews sandbag shallow streambanks to stem erosion, increase water flow and build better fishing habitat.

ALL STORY PHOTOS FROM DNR YCC PROGRAM, BUREAU OF COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE



wanted a summer job, some wanted to see if they liked working outdoors, many already had an interest in natural resource careers.

"The diversity of campers gets better every year," Rasch notes. "The program was traditionally popular with 15- to 16-year-old boys, but now girls, Asians, African Americans and students with disabilities are equally enjoying YCC as long as they are physically capable of participating in all activities."

Campers work 32 hours a week for four weeks on tasks like maintaining parks, brushing trails, improving streams and planting trees. Each week also includes 20 hours of environmental education and some free time for recreation.

Then-Governor Gaylord Nelson supported the Youth Conservation Camp idea more than 30 years ago to create a summer Civilian Conservation Corps for unemployed teenage boys. Nature appreciation was a part of the original picture, but right from



The youth camps aim to attract a mix of boys and girls from diverse cultures to learn about the environment while they work side-by-side learning about each other.

good work ethics," Brismaster said. "It was the first time away from home for most of those boys. In those days, the structured military component built camaraderie among the kids."

they're not expected to swallow gristle. The clean plate rule is dead!

"We're not trying to eliminate structure from the program," says Rasch, "but we are changing how we treat



A flag ceremony in the old days.

the beginning the camps adopted a no-nonsense attitude about hard work. For most of the camps' history, a military-like structure prevailed complete with Reveille and Taps. For many years, discipline followed the military theme — push-ups and stump-pulling were standard punishment for misbehavior.

Robert Brismaster, the first director of the Statehouse Lake Camp, stressed that the original intent was to get work done in an outdoor atmosphere. "We went out there to work on forest and stream improvements, and teach kids

YCC philosophy still values conservation and hard work, but an insistence on strict discipline has tempered in recent years. For instance, Jim Surdick, a 1987 camper, now a wildlife ecology major at UW-Madison, particularly loathed the clean-your-plate rule. "We had to eat everything, from the meat scraps to the juice in the fruit cocktail," Surdick said. "Even if we took a little too much ketchup, we had to eat it."

Camps still take a waste-not attitude and campers are discouraged from taking more than they can eat, but

people. Our campers learn self-discipline based on respect for themselves and their community, not based on power and control by YCC camp staff."

Rasch said increased state urbanization and other changes in society have influenced camp changes.

"Today's teenagers are more knowledgeable on a wider range of topics, and they want answers on why they're doing something wrong or right," she said. "We have to maintain some structure to avoid chaos, but we also want to encourage more self-discipline and participation."





YCC takes a hands-on approach to nature. Jobs and talks are designed to teach teens the techniques resource professionals use to improve streams, create habitat, bushwhack trails and manage forests.

Current campers have grown up with the environmental movement, and Rasch feels this interest in the outdoors inspires as many applications as the growing need for summer employment.

Mary Weddig, a Merrill school teacher who directed the Mekan River Camp last summer, noted improved problem-solving skills in her campers.

"I see more camaraderie among the kids now that they take part in deciding how to do a task," Weddig said.

One day last summer, a YCC work crew found a colony of endangered Karner blue butterflies near the Mekan River Camp. The Karner blue thrives

in prairie-like habitat, so crews had to cut down several trees to open the shady surroundings. According to Weddig, campers determined how to open up the most canopy while cutting down as few trees as possible.

"They realized how important the project was, and they decided how to go about their job," she said. "It was great because their group decision accomplished our goal."

Counselors also benefit from the more open atmosphere between leaders and campers. Before, when campers misbehaved they were often singled out in front of others. Now, counselors take campers aside to avoid tense and embarrassing situations in

front of the whole camp.

"Counselors need to think more about what they're doing and how they do it," said Melissa Wright, a past counselor. "You have to talk to the campers and explain why a job needs doing as well as explaining how to get it done," Wright said. "I went to the camp before they mellowed out," she added, "and I really feel such changes are positive."

"In a society where kids face drugs, violence and other added pressures, they don't need that kind of discipline and tension to command attention," Wright said. "Things aren't cut-and-dried. So why should the camps have a strict 'this way or no way' mentality?"

Times change, indeed. High school girls were first admitted in 1974 and work crews mix young men and women. Last year, according to Wright, campers were allowed to hold hands — something unheard of a few years ago. "It's part of being a teenager," Wright said. "They're away from home and full of hormones. We just make sure that it's nothing too blatant."

Camp life is still structured. Reveille sounds at 6:30 a.m. Campers eat breakfast early for the strenuous day ahead. The work day might include clearing state ski trails, thinning and

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Campers get equipment and training during their four-week stay. Crews generally work within 50 miles of the four base camps.



