

## **“No Child Left Inside”: A MEEC 2007 Recap**

*Many kids today are the first generation to grow up with virtually little or no contact with nature.*

A packed house of nearly 800 people listened as Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, eloquently explained this troubling phenomenon in his kickoff speech to the 2007 Midwest Environmental Education Conference (MEEC) in Stevens Point. Louv related the societal trends that are competing for our children’s’ time – a plethora of organized activities, parents’ desires to offer their kids a competitive jumpstart on you-name-it, fears about our children’s’ safety, and the mesmerizing pull of video games and computers. Louv pointed out that for most of the attendees, unstructured play in the outdoors played a key role in their childhood development. He offered numerous research findings that prove time and again - *free time in the outdoors significantly contributes to kids’ creativity, problem solving abilities, and mental health.* Time spent in the outdoors is one of the most critical experiences necessary for developing outdoor interests and a caring for the environment.



Following Louv’s keynote presentation, nearly 600 MEEC registrants participated in 3 days of engaging sessions and workshops jam-packed with ideas on how to get our children into the outdoors again. Participants attending from 14 states had wonderful networking opportunities and even shared some of their most fond memories of just being outside and playing. One participant wrote of childhood: “In my youth... [I remember] hopping on bikes with pals, riding to nearby woods, playing for hours in backyards: No rules, no adults to “structure” our plans, just pure, free fun and discovery in the outdoors!”

### **Conference**

The conference theme was “No Child Left Inside.” The entire conference focused on this theme. The theme was used to narrow the content of field trips, workshops, sessions, and plenary speakers. Sticking to the theme is highly advisable and helpful. Additionally, conference sessions were organized into the tracks of:

- Living Laboratories: school grounds and outdoor classrooms
- Family, Community, and Nature
- Looking Out from Within ... Teaching About the Outdoors Inside
- Promoting Wellness Through Outdoor Recreation

The conference was held October 18-20 (Thursday – Saturday). Pre-conference workshops and field trips were held Thursday morning. The conference officially began with a welcome and Richard Louv’s keynote at 1:00 on Thursday. In addition to the keynote, plenary sessions were held Thursday evening, Friday morning, Friday lunch, Saturday morning, and Saturday dinner. Concurrent sessions were held Thursday afternoon through Saturday afternoon. Workshops and field trips were also offered on Saturday.

### **Registration/Attendance**

A total of 576 people registered for the conference. This included:

- 468 who registered for the full conference
- 27 registered for Thursday and Friday
- 72 who registered for just one day (41 Thur; 16 Fri; 10 Sat; remainder not identified by day)
- 9 who registered just for the school forest summit or just the Friday banquet

#### Affiliations

- 201 schools (teachers, administrators, school board)
- 173 non-profits (non-formal education programs, environmental organizations)
- 76 agencies (federal, state, county, city agencies, extension)
- 73 students (~35 received a registration scholarship)
- 30 higher education (universities, community colleges, technical colleges)
- 17 no affiliation listed
- 6 business

#### Geographic representation

Attendees came from 14 states and Washington, D.C. Breakdown by state is:

CA=1	IN=5	OH=2
CO=1	KS=1	PA=1
DC=1	MI=6	VA=1
IA=27	MN=44	WA=1
IL=46	NE=2	WI=438

Presenters needed to register for the conference if attending beyond their workshop/session. Sponsors above \$500 were provided a free registration. Exhibitors were also provided access the conference.

#### Committee

A committee of nearly 20 members planned and orchestrated the conference. Each committee member participated in at least one subcommittee. Sub-committees included:

- Program Committee: responsible for concurrent sessions, field trips, workshops, journaling theme integration, and the story wall.
- Site Committee: responsible for all facility arrangements.
- Publicity Committee: responsible for distributing call for presenters, publicity of the conference, and recognizing conference contributors.
- Entertainment: responsible for music during the conference.
- Special events: responsible for other conference enhancing events including the auction, bake-off, and t-shirt swap.
- Exhibits: responsible for soliciting exhibitors and coordination of exhibits at the conference.
- Volunteer Coordinator: responsible for soliciting and coordinating volunteers.

Responsibilities and timelines are provided in the conference planning guide.

#### Sessions

Over one hundred session proposals were received. The conference theme and tracks, diversity of topics, diversity of presenters, and variety of presenter affiliations were used as the criteria to select the 54 sessions offered. Sessions ran Thursday afternoon through Saturday afternoon.

### **Field Trips**

A total of 6 field trips were offered. One evening and two morning field trips were offered pre-conference. One all-day and two half-day field trips were offered on Saturday. All field trips except one filled to capacity. A total of 94 field trips spaces were filled (some participants did multiple field trips).

### **Workshops**

Workshops were solicited in the call for presenters. Proposals were received for about twice the number of workshops offered. Again, workshops were selected based on the theme, tracks, and diversity of presenters and affiliations. A total of eleven workshops were offered. Five half-day workshops were held pre-conference. Four half-day and two full-day workshops were held on Saturday. All workshop required pre-registration. All workshops offered received enough registrations to run. 202 people registered for workshops filling 281 workshop spaces.

### **School Forest Summit**

The School Forest Summit was held the evening prior to MEEC. Fifty educators attended the event held at Boston School Forest. About 25 people took advantage of lodging at the school forest on Wednesday evening.

### **Special Events**

- A bake-off was held on the first afternoon in the exhibit hall. Response was strong and it was considered a successful event to attract people to the exhibit hall.
- A t-shirt swap was also held in the exhibit hall. Many people brought shirts. Fewer people took shirts. Left-over shirts were donated to a local charity.
- A nature journaling table was set up in the exhibit hall for two days that allowed people to design their own nature journal. A volunteer provided materials and support. This was a very popular activity.
- A “story wall” was set up near registration. People were encouraged to document their stories and observations of being in nature. The story wall was a very popular and inspiring attraction.

### **Entertainment**

In association with the conference facility, entertainment was provided for conference participants. The bar at the conference site hosts a weekly comedy night on Wednesday. Bands were scheduled for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evening. The bands were free for conference attendees and open to the public for an entry fee.

### **Auction**

A live and silent auction were held. All items were donated by conference attendees and exhibitors. The auction generated nearly \$4000. One special feature of the auction was the state baskets. Each MEEC state was requested to put together a basket to be auctioned. The auction went exceptionally well.

### **Awards**

The awards banquet was held Friday evening. Both WAEE and School Forest awards were presented. Awardees from other states were named. The combination of the awards program worked well. Meals and registration for school forest awardees was covered by the LEAF program. WAEE covered meal costs for WAEE awardees.

### **Hospitality room**

A hospitality room was available for social gatherings in which alcohol and food could be provided by the host. Beer was donated for the events. Three hospitality hours were offered. Two were audience specific and one was for all conference attendees (the micro/homebrew hospitality room). These were very popular networking opportunities.

### **Meals**

Participants had the opportunity to purchase meal packages as part of registration. Meals could be purchased by the day or at a savings for the whole conference. Over 300 people ate meals at the conference. Locally grown foods were featured at the conference. The committee worked with the conference site to source the food and select meals based on availability of local foods. Options were limited due to time of the year and the hotel was somewhat resistant to get too involved with sourcing food. Therefore, only meats (chicken, bison, beef), potatoes, and apples were local.

### **Sponsorship**

Approximately \$50,000 was provided by sponsors for the conference. \$25,000 of this was allocated to teacher scholarships for the conference. These scholarships provided a reimbursement for registration and substitute reimbursement. This was an essential component in attracting teachers to the conference.

#### **Conference Partner (\$5000 and Above)**

- Wisconsin River Academy
- The Wisconsin Environmental Education Board

#### **Conference Sponsors (\$500 and Above)**

- Central Wisconsin Environmental Station
- EarthWonders
- Environmental Resources Center
- Global Environmental Management Education Center (GEM)
- GEM Rural Leadership and Community Development Program
- Izaak Walton League of America - Wisconsin Division
- KEEP - K-12 Energy Education Program
- Learning, Experiences, & Activities in Forestry (LEAF) Program
- The Natural Resources Foundation's C.D. Besadny Conservation Grant Program
- The Nature Conservancy - Wisconsin Chapter

- Plum Creek
- Quality Deer Management Association, North Central Wisconsin Branch
- Riverworks Discovery
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
- Safari Club International, Wisconsin Chapter
- Travelwisconsin.com
- University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, College of Natural Resources
- Whitetails Unlimited
- The Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education
- Wisconsin John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club
- Wisconsin Society of American Foresters

#### **Conference Supporters (up to \$500)**

- Acorn Designs
- Acorn Naturalists
- Solin Bros Forest Products
- University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, School of Health, Exercise Science, and Athletics

**Volunteers**

Volunteers were organized by a volunteer coordinator. Because of the size of the committee, most of the volunteers were committee members. However, other participants expressing interest in volunteering were given assignments as well. Individual session hosts were not provided

**Environmental Efforts**

In addition to local foods, many efforts were made to reduce the environmental impact of the conference. Through the NatureWise program from the local utility, an equivalent amount of alternative energy was purchased for the conference. The UW-SP student Environmental Council provided recycling containers for glass and plastic (paper wasn't provided, but should have been). Carpooling was encouraged (mostly unsuccessfully) through a listserv.