

DSAC Stewardship Week

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Introduction

While more conventional agricultural research (such as crop field trials and livestock experiments) make up the bulk of the activities, Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC) is also known in Southern Illinois for hosting educational field days for students. Because of the location of DSAC in the Shawnee National Forest, it is better placed than many to host youth events and other types of alternative education events.

Stewardship Week has taken place every spring for more than 15 years. The event uses the DSAC facilities to provide elementary school students with exposure to natural resources issues and experiences. The organizer (Diane Murphy and others) bring in presenters from the local environmental and conservation agencies to teach students about various aspects of natural resources stewardship, from reptile recognition and management, to natural hydraulics, to geology. This paper is intended to illuminate perceived impacts that have come from these activities.

Methods

This research is built on basic information provided about Stewardship Week provided by DSAC staff. This information was then complimented by participant observation and interviews with teachers and trainers at Stewardship Week.

The researchers engaged in participant observation of one day during the Dixon Springs Stewardship Week. During the day, we carried out interviews with 16 teachers, representing 15 of the 18 schools which attended the days' events. We also interviewed presenters from various natural resources organizations in the area, including: one Soil and Water Conservation District employee, three Forest Service employees, and three employees of Southeastern Illinois Electric Cooperative. One of the Forest Service employees comes from Harrisburg and attended Stewardship Day as a first grader. Because of her unique perspective, we carried out a longer interview with this person.

Our interview protocol for the day involved a set of questions designed to illicit insights in a very short discussion (5-10 minutes). This was necessary as we were interviewing teachers responsible for classes of young children. We expected that they would have limited time to respond to questions. Our questions asked for their insights about the event, about its impact on the students that they brought to Stewardship Day, and about their knowledge of DSAC. We also asked for their general impressions of the Southern

Illinois region. Given answers that demonstrated general ignorance of DSAC beyond Stewardship Day itself, we began asking the occupation of the families of students in their classrooms. All the interviews were taped and then transcribed and analyzed by both researchers.

The researchers attended workshop sessions during the course of the day and asked to talk to teachers during the sessions for the children and trainers when they were on break. The researchers did this together at first and then split up, attending different events. Observations from the sessions were shared among the researchers during the ride back to Champaign. Below, we will mention the insights about the day based on these methods.

What is Stewardship Week?

Stewardship Week is a Week Long event at DSAC that exposes elementary school students to nature and natural processes and issues. It is now in its 18th year, and now serves hundreds of elementary schools and thousands of students from the region each year.

Scope:

The event is truly impressive in scope. There are 32 stations that students visit between 9-2pm. On the day we were there, there were between 15 and 18 schools that came with several classes each. These were mostly 3rd-4th graders.

The numbers of participants are also impressive. According to DSAC figures, over the last 18 years, more than 52,000 students have participated in the event. There were more than 2700 students involved in the 2007 Stewardship Week, a slight decrease from previous years, which averaged just over 3000 students. In 2007 students came under the tutelage of 150 teachers from 33 schools in 11 counties. Again, this was a decline from previous years, which had involved as many as 165 teachers from 41 schools and 16 counties. Table 1, below, provides the statistics for attendance since 1990.

Subjects:

Activities ranged from table top hydrology, to leaf identification, to reptiles, to power and utility safety, to geology and fossils. I witnessed the sessions that involved making paper butterflies, explanations of what to do about pets and safety, electric utility safety, reptiles, table top hydrology, wetland plants, forest fire safety.

Who were the presenters:

DSAC staff were largely not involved in serving as trainers. Trainers tended to come from other organizations, including SWCD staff – I met two, one doing a table top hydrology demonstration, and one doing a wetland plants demonstration; Illinois Department of Natural Resources employees; Illinois State Geologic Survey employees; and U.S. Forest Service employees.

Table 1: Stewardship Week Attendance, 1990-2007

<i>Year</i>	<i>Students (#)</i>	<i>Teachers (#)</i>	<i>Schools (#)</i>	<i>Counties (#)</i>
2007	2,923	150	33	11
2006	3,176	165	36	16
2005	3,049	162	39	14
2004	3,277	157	37	14
2003	3,194	163	41	14
2002	3,269	157	36	14
2001	3,392	165	42	14
2000	3,079	149	38	13
1999	3,174	164	42	13
1998	3,120	149	36	13
1997	3,074	145	40	14
1996	3,136	151	41	14
1995	2,994	134	35	12
1994	2,667	118	33	13
1993	2,584	113	28	11
1992	2,384	105		
1991	2,272	100		
1990	1,313	57		
Total	52,077	2,504		

Observations and Insights

The day was impressively organized. All the events were timed for 20 minutes, except for a fisheries event which ran for 2 concurrent sessions. The staff (Diane) gave teachers explicit instructions about where they were to go and at what time. Additionally, Diane showed us how she would sort event by school and class and student to ensure that students never had repeat stations, even when coming for multiple years. Likewise, the presenters were provided with a schedule sheet that showed which classes were to arrive when.

Stewardship Week was really well received. The school children were having a blast—and in the sessions that I witnessed they were fully engaged. The session presenters were great with the children. With that many third and fourth graders in one place, there was potential for chaos, but things were really well organized and orderly—with a buzz of excited and engaged students.

Presenters seemed to really enjoy presenting as well. This is partially because they were selected on the basis of enthusiasm for their chosen topic. Many of the sessions I witnessed engaged the students through questions, asking for volunteers to help with

demonstrations. In all cases, the presenters showed enthusiasm in what they were talking about—and the child audience responded in kind.

Other more specific observations based on interviews

- 1) All of the teachers we interviewed spoke in glowing terms about the day. They said that the activities were great experience for the children, but many also said that the days' activities complimented the earth-science curriculum. Several talked about attending a similar event elsewhere in the region in the Fall and then attending for a day at Stewardship Week in the Spring. I spoke to teachers from Cobden (Union County), Carbondale, Vienna, West Frankfort (2 schools), Gallatin County, Marion (3 schools), Lick Creek (Johnson County), New Simpson (Johnson County).
- 2) Several teachers said that Stewardship Day was important because students didn't get out to the country and didn't get a chance to interact with nature. A couple said this is because students come from families without cars (one was from Jackson County, the other was from Marion).
- 3) Teachers generally knew little about DSAC except for Stewardship Week. When I said that the center was primarily an agricultural research center, some responded that this sounded important. A few argued that the center should work to help farmers produce more food for the local market. Many of the teachers argued that DSAC should carry out "more programs like this."
- 4) Because all teachers said they really didn't know about DSAC, I began asking about the kinds of employment their students' families were involved in. Only one teacher had a sizable percent of her class who come from families involved with agriculture (30%). Most of the teachers I talked to had students with families in coal mining and prisons.
- 5) Many of the teachers argued that DSAC should expand this program and should consider taking Stewardship week type programs into the schools as well as having this week's events. As one teacher put: "Programs like this are really important because it helps these students learn about the environment and what we have to do to live with it. People our age never had programs like these. This kind of program will lead to a better world."

Conclusion

Stewardship Week is having a positive impact on environmental awareness among students and teachers in Southern Illinois. The scope of the event over the week is impressive and important—involving between 100-200 schools, and 2000 and 4000 students. That the weeklong event has now taken place over the last 18 years is equally impressive in its longevity.

Teachers we spoke to were effusive in their enthusiasm about the event and its impact on their students. Not only did they say it was a good chance for students to get out of the

classroom and have a good experience, but it also reinforced science curriculum. This was true regardless of whether teachers came from private or public schools, whether their students came from rural or urban locations, of the proximity of the school to DSAC, and of how many times they had brought students to Stewardship Day.

The researchers' observations of students indicated that they were both engaged and happy to be there. We only have one data point, but the interview with the young woman who attended Stewardship Week as a student and is now a Forest Ranger and a trainer at the event indicates that it did have a lasting impact. In our interview, she states that her experience as a student influenced her interest in working for the Forest Service. She stated that she comes from a family involved in coal mining, and implied in her comment that going into a profession devoted to natural resources stewardship was hardly a given.

Those involved in conducting the presentations at the work stations stated that Stewardship Week constituted an important opportunity to reach out and share their knowledge with students. They clearly enjoyed getting to work with young people.

All interviewed at the event, teachers, students, presenters, spoke with praise about Stewardship Week and its impacts. Most, said they would like to see more events like this. Some argued that the audience could also be expanded, so that it wasn't just grade school students who had this experience—but the Stewardship message could be part of the opportunities for older students and young adults.