



SIU Carbondale Touch of Nature Environmental Center: A Long History of Environmental Education

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ABSTRACT

Based upon a presentation given at the 8th Winter Meeting of the International Consortium for Interdisciplinary Education about Health and the Environment, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany – December 6-7, 2014.

“... Here we have national forests, national and state bird and game refuges, beautiful state parks, magnificent scenery, an archeological treasure house, a rich and revealing natural geological laboratory, and a region favored with recreational possibilities in its lakes, its forests, its hills, its streams.” “It is obvious that we need to develop thorough, on-going instructional and research programs in such field as Forestry, Horticulture, Recreation, Geography, Geology, Sociology, Archaeology, Ichthyology, Ornithology, Flood Control, and Wildlife Studies.”

Quotes from Dr. Delyte Morris’ 1948 inaugural address as President of Southern Illinois University

The Journal of Health, Environment, & Education, 2018; 10, 42–48. doi: 10.18455/10001



Figure 1. President Delyte Morris, 1963

The Beginning and History of Touch of Nature (TON) until 1969

We will briefly describe some of the essential components of how TON was developed and some of the key persons leading to TON’s development.

TON is located along the edge of Little Grassy Lake, a 1,200-acre reservoir. Little Grassy Lake was built in 1940 and is designated by the US Congress designated as a “Youth Camp Lake.”

Little Grassy Lake Campus

At a national conference in Washington, D. C. in May 1948, outdoor education was recognized as an essential part of a national educational curriculum. As early as 1949, visionaries like SIU President Delyte Morris and recreation pioneer Dr. William Freeberg started developing environmental and experiential education facilities and programming. President Morris was known for carrying a hand written scrap of paper with him at all times which briefly indicated the 6 goals he had for SIU. One of them was experiential education. By 1950, the Board of Trustees had authorized options along the western shores of Little Grassy Lake and the University acquired 150 acres of land from the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

Educational Council of 100

One of the early groups to help SIU start an outdoor education facility was the Educational Council of 100, formed by President Morris. This organization was interested in the potential of outdoor education for public school children and what Little Grassy Lake had to offer. In 1954, a formal organization of various youth camping groups was authorized. A Master Plan for the development of the Little Grassy Lake site was approved by the Board of Trustees, and was accepted by the Fish and Wildlife



Figure 2. Little Grassy Lake showing Touch of Nature area



Figure 3. Little Grassy Lake



Figure 4. Dr. Freeberg



Figure 5. Dr. L.B. Sharp

Service in February 1954. In 1954, after SIU obtained its lease from the US Dept. of Interior, the Educational Council of 100 was able to lease 1500 acres of land adjacent to and south of Little Grassy Lake. This land was set aside for outdoor education purposes for the public schools in the southern 30 Illinois counties.

Department of Recreation and Outdoor Education

The development of the University's outdoor education program was sponsored jointly by the SIU and by the Educational Council of 100. In July of 1954, the Department of Recreation and Outdoor Education was established. Part of the new Department's responsibility included the supervision and development of a camping program at the Little Grassy Lake Campus. Dr. William Freeberg was appointed Chair of the Department.

Dr. L.B. Sharp

In the late 1959, Dr. L.B. Sharp who was head of Life Camps at New York University accepted a faculty position at SIU. He brought his entire outdoor education program equipment, library, and other learning resource materials with him from his Life Camp facility. Dr. Sharp primarily was responsible for working with the public schools in Southern Illinois and the Education Council of 100. He also influenced the establishment of the outdoor experiential education facility at TON. The philosophy of Dr. Sharp was that "what can best be learned in the classroom should be learned in the classroom and what can best be learned in the outdoors should be learned in the outdoors."



Figure 6. Some of the facilities in Camp 1



Figure 7. Some of the facilities in Camp 1

Outdoor Laboratory

In 1968, Little Grassy Facilities became the central campus for the larger surrounding Outdoor Laboratory. In 1973, the name of the Outdoor Laboratory was changed to Touch of Nature Environmental Center, getting its name from the William Shakespeare quote, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin!"

Touch of Nature (TON) Facilities

Currently TON has 3100 acres and is bordered by Little Grassy Lake, Giant City State Park, Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge, and the Shawnee National Forest. TON includes beaches, forests, challenge courses, fitness and nature trails, unique natural areas, and year around residential facilities. SIU, via TON, was the first university in the USA to use nature and the outdoors as extensions of the classroom, and stays strong to this day as one of a handful of outdoor education centers affiliated with a major research university.

Touch of Nature, with its outdoor spaces, indoor facilities, and lodging hosts many types of events, including business and board meetings, outdoor education and other conferences and events, staff, church and family retreats or reunions, field trips, and weddings. Depending on a group's interest, TON offers many additional learning opportunities and activities (including team courses, canoeing and kayaking, high ropes course, two zip lines, rock climbing, and hiking) for a group's outdoor experience on TON grounds and at nearby locations.

Camp 1

The facilities in Camp 1 including a dining hall, pavilion, dispensary, 16 residential cabins, 2 washhouses, Amphitheatre, play field, beach and small craft, and volleyball/basketball court.



Figure 8. Some of the facilities in Camp 2

Camp 2

Facilities in Camp 2 include the Freeberg Hall/Sledgefoot Lounge (dining and general purpose space), Little Grassy Lodge/The Friends Room, Indian Building, Learning Center Area with classroom, L.B. Sharp Lodge, Morris Lodge, Shawnee Lodge, dispensary, 3 pavilions, Amphitheatre, Friends Gazebo, 3 washhouses, small crafts, beach, and 19 residential cabins.

Camp Little Giant

Camp Little Giant has served campers with disabilities since 1952. TON was one of the first camps for people with disabilities in the USA. With a strong focus on creating awareness, programs are provided to youth and adults with disabilities. Camp Little Giant is more than just an outdoor experience; it is an adventure in learning and growth with an opportunity to establish lasting friendships. Each camper is encouraged to be as independent as possible while still following routines with staff providing assistance where necessary. Specialized therapeutic recreation programs are designed for individuals with physical and developmental disabili-



Figure 9. Some of the facilities in Camp 2



Figure 10. Some of the buildings in Camp Little Giant

ties, visual and hearing impairments, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, autism, ADD/ADHD, traumatic brain injuries and special needs individuals. Four to eight campers and a minimum of two counselors share a rustic cabin located near a washhouse and dispensary. Activity staff, nurses, volunteers and other support staff assist with the 24-hour supervision provided for each camper. Nurses staff the camp dispensary 24 hours a day. They administer medications, handle routine first aid and respond to illness and medical emergencies. Prompt medical service, if necessary, is provided in nearby Carbondale. Therapeutic recreation programming continues to be a vital opportunity at TON.

Because of the successful programming of Camp Little Giant, in 1962 Dr. William Freeberg started working with Eunice Shriver of the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation in regards to conducting a one-week workshop at TON to train camp directors and city recreation department staff members on recreation activities for those with developmental disabilities. From 1962 until the beginning of the Special Olympics in 1968, Dr. Freeberg chaired a recreation advisory group for Eunice Shriver which led to the first Special Olympics held at Soldier Field



Figure 11. Some of the buildings in Camp Little Giant

in Chicago. Dr. Freeberg played a pivotal role in the creation of the Special Olympics.

Academic Units involvement with TON

The Illinois Aquaculture Center is a prime example of cooperation between the universities' research entities and the experiential learning conducted at TON. The aquaculture center and its 90 pond facility is one of the many academic research initiatives sponsored at TON. Entities such as the College of Agriculture, College of Science, College of Education, and College of Liberal Arts have conducted or are currently conducting research at TON.

TON Programming

TON throughout its almost 70 years has continued to emphasize on traditionally successful programs and services (Therapeutic Recreational, Environmental and Experiential Education, and Wilderness Adventure) as well as academic relationships with many departments and units on the SIU main campus.

Environmental Education Programs

Since the beginning of TON, environmental and experiential workshops have been an important program. Programming is designed to enhance one's understanding of the complex, interrelated environment around us while simply having a great time in the outdoors. Workshops are designed to provide participants an understanding of the fragile environment around them and their impact upon it, while at the same time engaging in stimulating outdoor activities such as caving, canoeing and camping, among others. This approach allows participants to develop both individual and sensory skills.



Figure 12. Some of the early experiential activities at TON



Figure 13. Some of the early experiential activities at TON

The various environmental programs help participants learn problem solving skills that enable them to become aware of their interdependency and effect upon the environment. Participants attain better understanding of our major environmental problems and possible solutions, along with obtaining valuable knowledge in ecological principles and value clarification. In addition, field investigations are conducted in outlying sites that explore topics such as swampland, field biology, and natural history.

Day Programs for school children, grades K-12 include hands-on activities focusing on ecological concepts, nature center exhibits, and interpretive hikes. Summer Sessions for grades 6-12 students include canoe trips, a natural resource program, and sessions on forestry, fisheries, and wildlife management. Each session is an integrated combination of field activities and on-site tours.

Wilderness Adventure Programming

The Underway Outdoor Adventure program emphasizes learning through shared adventure and is meant to challenge the physical and mental capabilities of every participant.

Spectrum Wilderness started as the Youth Advocacy Program in 1980, with the cooperation and contracts with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Department of Corrections. The program later took the name Spectrum Wilderness Therapy. This program is a holistic approach to learning is designed for individuals on verge of serious trouble in school, at home, or in the community, or for those in need of a bridge from institutional care to independent living. Both the Underway Outdoor Adventure and Spectrum Wilderness programs were modeled somewhat after Outward Bound™ programs.

The Southern Outdoor Adventure Recreation (SOAR) program offers challenging outdoor trips for adults for a chance to develop outdoor living skills and explore local and remote wilderness areas.

Wilderness Workshops are designed for school and agency professionals who lead wilderness trips, summer camp staff who conduct wilderness activities, and individuals seeking to strengthen their own wilderness and technical skills.

National Recognition

In 1972, TON (at the time called SIU Outdoor Laboratory) received designation as a National Environmental Education Landmark by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The designation indicated that TON possessed distinctive



Figure 14. Some of the activities from the SOAR program



Figure 15. Some of the activities from the SOAR program



Figure 16

values in revealing significant natural and cultural processes through effective environmental education programs.

In 1980, TON received the Eleanor P. Eells Award which is given each year by the American Camp Association. The award recognized TON for its programming which developed effective, creative responses to the needs of people and/or societal problems using the camp environment and encourage continued development of such ideas, stimulate the exchange of creative ideas, and presented to the public examples of positive contributions the camp had made.

TON Leadership over the past 50 years

Over the years, TON has had many directors who have guided the programming and facilities, starting with Dr. William Freeberg to the current director, J.D. Tanner. During these years the leadership of TON have reported directly to the President of SIU to currently reporting to the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs.

The Future

In the future, TON plans on expanding the use of the facility to accommodate research and programming interests of SIU Carbondale faculty and to make new and exciting uses of the facility. One such example, TON through the efforts of the SIU Department of Forestry is developing a Forest Management Plan which will aid both units in forest use and in developing new research opportunities for the Department of Forestry. Faculty and students in wildlife biology are continuing and expanding research on the deer, beaver, turtle, and bat populations at Touch of Nature facility. TON will be working with the SIU School of Architecture in regards to potential new building construction.

In conjunction with the International Mountain Biking Association, TON is developing a 30 mile

multi-use trail plan which will provide opportunities for biking, hiking, and running trail. The trail will include sections which are easy, more difficult, very difficult, and extremely difficult. Once build, this facility will draw people from around the world to ride/hike/run on this trail. TON is working on clearing and redeveloping older trails with the help members of the American Hiking Association.

TON is developing grants with AmeriCorps (a civil society program engaging adults in public service work with a goal of "helping others and meeting critical needs in the community and Youth Conservation Corps (where young people work on historic structures, restore, native species, disappearing trails, and the eradication of invasive species). All in all, more than 140 million Americans make outdoor recreation a priority in their daily lives, proving it with their wallets by putting \$646 billion of their hard-earned dollars right back into the local economy. Even better, this spending directly results in highly sought-after jobs for 6.1 million Americans. TON wants to continue to tap into this priority.

Epilog

“The Touch of Nature Environmental Center has never been and never will be simply a place on a map. It is an idea forged from the dreams of visionaries and maintained by an unsurpassed commitment to those it serves. The Center has survived and will continue to survive because of flexibility, innovation, and unerring commitment to serve.” Dr. William Freeberg.

Note: All of the pictures were either provided by Mark “Skip” Cosgrove or were taken by Dale O. Ritzel.

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