

AugustaSprings.Org

Project Lead: Dr. Jeff Kirwan

Contact Information: 540-231-7265;

Objectives

The purpose of this project was to meet the demands of increased visitation to the Augusta Springs Wetlands as personnel shortages continue. The Web site is meant to facilitate on-line scheduling and communication with school groups, lessening the time USFS and other agency personnel would otherwise spend on these tasks. It is also meant to enable school groups to prepare volunteers who lead groups through the site. The Web site has station descriptions, photographs, maps, simple lesson plans and other volunteer information that can be shared electronically with minimum time and effort. Potential volunteers are directed to the site to gain better understanding of what is expected and needed of them. Lastly, the Web site design was kept simple so that teachers and students could add content to the site based on their experiences.

The project's intended audience includes individuals interested in learning about Augusta Springs, such as conservation educators, teachers, volunteers, undergraduate students, and advanced K-12 students, to add their own content and research to the Web site. On the other hand, it is used as a communication tool to provide information about Augusta Springs Environmental Education to the nearby communities, visitors to the site, school groups, volunteers working the learning station, local agencies, etc.

Project Management

Planning for this project was a result of Dr. Kirwan's forethought. Although the Web site is serving as a tool to disseminate information about Augusta Springs, it has not fulfilled all the goals originally envisioned. Online registration is not available and content is edited mainly by the interns. Project team consists of Dr. Jeff Kirwan, Dr. Daniel Dunlap, the Augusta Springs Environmental Educator Sandy Greene, and interns Cristina Issem and Melanie Nichols.

Technology

Most Web technology represents one-way communication from Web content developers flowing to end-users. The proposed technology is collaborative, enabling cross-communication as users add, delete and edit content to the site as needed with minimal effort. Also, a new learning station is being developed to display alternative energies, like solar, wind, and man-powered activities. These technologies will complement, organize and enhance an already successful program. The web-based technology was known only to Dunlap and Kirwan and then passed down while the alternative energy items are known by Greene and Nichols.

The technology is easily sustainable as it serves as a main line of communication from facilitators to the volunteers to the school groups and teachers. The Web site allows volunteers to prepare with minimal guidance from personnel. Dr. Dunlap designed the Web site and assists Dr. Kirwan in training individuals how to use it.

Experience to Date

The largest success factor is that this Web site quickly became an excellent communication tool to the volunteer station leaders, largely credited to Mrs. Greene. She constantly steers everyone involved from the school groups, to the teachers and many more to the Web site. Another major benefit was the development of a larger Web site Forested.org. This site is a collection of various environmental education Web sites for this area of Virginia. Unfortunately, the project team has not been able to disseminate information to the teachers and school students that they can use the Web site to post their own materials. Although they use it to get background information they have not realized its potential just yet.

The technology used here is easy to reproduce. The concept of a place-based electronic commons can serve conservation education programs wherever they exist.

Advice to Others

"The environment you surround yourself in is key. You need to develop many partners to complement your skills. This was a key factor in the success of this project. With limited personnel resources available in the area, this program is still a huge success because of the partnerships in education which include the Headwaters Soil and Water Conservation District, US Forest Service North River Ranger District (Dry River R.D. at the start of the

project), Virginia Cooperative Extension, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and more. Each can offer some help and thus it is enough to maintain the Wetlands Environmental Education program.”

Cooperative Weed Management Area Training for the Eastern U.S.

Project Lead: Katherine Howe

Contact Information: 317-951-8818

Objectives

The objective of this project was to promote Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMA) as a strategy to combat invasive species by developing training materials and presenting them via WebEx technology to the Eastern U.S. where CWMAs have not been widely adopted. These workshops provide information on how and why to develop CWMAs, with information tailored specifically to the Eastern region, such as which government agencies have jurisdiction over invasive species, what noxious weed laws are on the books in each state, and which groups and agencies are likely to be key potential partners. The project's intended audience includes all individuals working to decrease the impact of invasive species – local municipalities, state, federal, NGO, and corporate entities.

Project Management

The starting point for this project was a very effective ‘cookbook’ on CWMAs developed for the western states edited to better address the eastern landscape and issues. This was then presented at four trial training sessions and the feedback received from it was used to fine-tune their final course. The project was a result of collaboration of many, including the Butler University, Wisconsin DNR, Center for Invasive Plant Management and the U.S. Forest Service. In addition to partnering with organizations experienced in the subject, they also sought input from several eastern CWMAs and used their success stories in their course materials.

The materials produced in this project were made available on the Midwest Invasive Plant Network Web site and they will be encouraging people who have attended their training sessions to use these materials to teach others to ensure continuous value of this project. In addition, they will also hold a conference in December 2006 to promote creation of CWMAs and to address issues that people have encountered in their efforts.

Technology

Originally the project team planned to use Purdue University extension satellite system; however, it became apparent that doing so would require participants to travel to an extension satellite class office, which negated the goal of offering a class without the need to travel. As a result, they decided to use Nature Conservancy's WebEx system, which enabled them to present their lesson over the internet. Prior to using WebEx they have also used a simpler method, where each participant received a PowerPoint presentation on a CD and the presentation itself was conducted over a conference call with each participant moving through the presentation by him/herself.

Prior to the beginning of this project, none of the project leaders were very familiar with this kind of technology with only two of them having taken classes via WebEx technology. Although overall the technology has worked well, the presenters pointed out some issues that they encountered, such as people not able to connect because of technical problems and inability to establish a personal rapport with the participants. Overall, their experience with the technology has been positive, with WebEx being relatively simple and fairly effective for training. However, they had to do more extensive research into the capabilities of different media than originally expected. They also emphasized that sometimes a less expensive and less technically sophisticated option serves just as well.

Experience to Date

Overall, their experience to date has been very positive. They were able to develop a network of CWMA coordinators across the eastern US and at the same time promote their own organization, the MIPN. This project has also had the unintended benefit of allowing the project team to network and make connections between different groups trying to accomplish the same things.

The key to their overall success was the partnership they established that decreased the burden on MIPN staff. Having a variety of people develop and edit the materials also enabled them to include a wide variety of examples and different viewpoints. Having two trainers also made the class more interesting for students, and decreased the work for each trainer. Although face-to-face training is still the preferred method, this solution is excellent for

situation where travel simply is not possible.

Advice to Others

"When planning a project involving technology, make sure to try it out before committing to it - that's the only way to assure it is the right technology for your project."

Northeast Minnesota Forest Industry Action Team: Demonstration of a Community of Practice to Enhance Economic Development

Project Lead: Brian Brashaw

Contact Information: 218-720-7248

Objectives

The objective of this project was to develop a community of practice through web-based information technologies to support sustainable economic development of the forest products industry in the communities of northeast (NE) Minnesota. The focus of this project is to use this advanced communication technology as a tool for NE Minnesota Forest Industry Action Team that will concentrate on strengthening and growing existing wood products businesses.

The project is aimed at two audiences. The first is the membership of the NE MN Forest Industry Action Team including the Superior National Forest, Cook, Lake and St. Louis Counties, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Iron Range Resources Agency, Minnesota Power, the Arrowhead Regional Development Council, and the University of Minnesota's Extension Service and the Natural Resources Research Institute. The second audience includes wood product industry businesses in NE Minnesota such as logging companies, primary and secondary wood products manufacturers.

Planning

The project team consulted with technology specialists at Bemidji State University's Northern Tier High Technology Corridor to identify appropriate Web-based communication packages that would help them meet their project goals. They also conducted face-to-face planning meetings with the membership of the NE MN Forest Action Team to develop the goals and objectives of the original project. Throughout the last 4 months, the project team has conducted monthly meetings between the majority of the project collaborators using the web-based meetings and plan to continue them into the future.

Technology

A secure interactive collaborative based Web platform provided by the Northern Tier High Technology includes instant messaging, team meetings, discussion forums, team calendar, task manager, and a virtual library which allows for the uploading documents, images, graphics, spreadsheets and more. The project team also used Adobe Breeze for on-line meetings and Webinars.

Experience to Date

The primary barrier experienced by the project team were the competing project priorities of its key members. The project lead also had to spent significant amount of time trying to organize and utilize the members of the Action Team. Because it is a newly created entity, it required time to find the best manner for them to interact. Originally the project started with a potential membership of 20+ members from a dozen or so organizations. However, as they struggled to develop a platform for convenient and effective interaction, they scaled down to having 6 organizations as the core group. Going back to a smaller core group proved to be effective and allowed the project team to get back on track and proved easier to manage.

In addition to scaling down the core membership, the project team also decided that their target audience was somewhat small and often lacked access to high speed internet. For that reason, they changed their Webinar concept from live to recorded, on-demand type Webinars. This way, people could access them from various locations at their convenience. They are also exploring the potential for pod casting.

Advice to Others

"It is important for a group to have good functioning dynamics prior to an effort to make the communication

electronic. We focused down on just a core group of organizations and individuals who for the most part had a long term cooperative relationship. This helped smooth the transition to electronic meetings.”

Forest Resources and Ecology: A Distance Education Network Model

Project Lead: Michele Nickels

Contact Information: 715-365-4685

Objective

The objective of this project was to build upon an existing distance education ITV network to provide students, teachers, and their communities with knowledge about current issues facing the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, as well as provide them with hands-on experiences to enhance their learning. The project was designed to reach approximately 880 students, teachers and community members in Crandon, Elcho, Goodman, Laona, and Mercer Tomahawk school districts who are members of the Nicolet Distance Education Network (NDEN) as well as other schools whose participation did not include hands-on experiences. Additionally, the information presented was made available to members of the Wisconsin Association of Distance Education Networks (WADEN) through the 40 Wisconsin Interactive Television Networks located in over 500 schools and communities throughout the state.

Project Management

This project was an extension of an already existing program, thus enabling the project manager to draw upon previous experiences and existing partnerships. Because the project had a large number of stakeholders with each having their own objectives they were trying to achieve, the project manager organized a meeting at the beginning of the project to collect input and create a shared vision among the project stakeholders. In addition they discussed the project's organization and oversight to ensure transparency throughout its duration. In the following months, the project manager facilitated communication and face-to-face meetings between project partners and participating students and teachers to ensure on-going understanding of the objectives as well as making adjustments as needed due to unanticipated changes in personnel. In addition, the project manager maintained involvement with the school administrators whose support for the project was key to its success.

Technology

The project used Interactive Television (ITV) network already available throughout the region. ITV technology allows for real time transmission of audio, video and data between all participant sites and helps to bridge the geographical distance between communities of learners. The technology was used by project participants to obtain necessary background information and to disseminate project results to other project participants and other interested parties statewide. In addition to the ITV network, the NDEN Web site further disseminates project information along with contact information so communities within the northern hardwood regions can implement similar programs on their National Forests.

Experience to Date

The overall experience of the project team and of the participants has been very positive. The teachers and forest personnel were able to build relationships that will enable them to continue with their projects and gained knowledge not only about forestry but also about the ITV network and its potential. Similarly, the hands-on projects gave students unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of their communities and its surroundings.

The project also reaffirmed the value of existing partnerships and the necessity of on-going communication. As mentioned above, changes in personnel required the project manager to negotiate new objectives and to make changes necessary to accommodate the new expectations. The project also required unexpected amount of materials and time and cost associated with getting them into the correct hands for various projects.

Advice to Others

“Embarking on a project of this scope that involves numerous school districts and resource organizations requires rigorous planning meetings to allow for open dialogue between all participants. This will ensure that the participants have a clear understanding of the project, there is sufficient support to carry out all components of the project and that the project is designed to meet the goals, mission and curricular needs of all parties involved.”

Native plants learning network: Propagating restoration through technology

Project Lead: Lisa Niemi and Lisa Brush

Contact Information: Lisa Niemi

Objectives

The overarching goal of this project was to promote restoration/protection of native plant sites through information exchange facilitated via a multimedia online learning network. The network's purpose is to facilitate communication and to make information sharing easy by utilizing tools and technology to accommodate different learning styles. The intended audience includes conservation practitioners, academics, conservation volunteers, and general public interested in the topic.

Project Management

Before embarking on this project, the project team reviewed the latest Web technology as well as existing Web tools/networks regarding native plant restoration. In addition, they initiated discussions with target audiences regarding topics and tools of interest through informal Stewardship Network partner conversations and through four community-wide brainstorming sessions at the Stewardship Network's local cluster kick-offs. There are three primary partners with whom the project manager communicated via a conference call once a month and more frequent email exchanges.

The tools developed and implemented through this project will continue to be available via the Network's Web site. The calendar and the online searchable restoration database will also continue to be maintained, publicized and populated. The Web casts were received very positively and it is the intention of the project team to continue to offer these, contingent upon securing funding.

Technology

The project encompassed a variety of technologies, including virtual field trips, Web casts, a searchable project database and a calendar. The Web casts were facilitated via Instantly Global which enables the presenters to upload a PowerPoint presentation that can then be viewed and heard, through audio stream, by participants. There is a live text chat component as well. The searchable project database is hosted on the Stewardship Network's Web site provided by Kintera. It is searchable by a number of parameters and provides a location on the Web where conservation practitioners can share information. The stewardship calendar offers a central location on the web to post volunteer workdays, workshops, and other conservation events for dispersal.

The initial project lead has had previous experience with alternative modes for information sharing due to his remote physical location from his colleagues; however it was the whole core team that came up with the practical suite of technology to be used in this project.

Experience to Date

Although the project overall has been successful, some of the specific outreach components could not be completely fulfilled because of the loss of the two main collaborators due to job advancements. The original project planned for the virtual field trips to be developed by a range of partners throughout the Eastern U.S. but due to the limited resources and the tight timeframe of the grant period, the virtual tours are being developed by the Stewardship Network and have a Michigan geographic focus. In addition, the virtual field trips are proving to more involved both technologically (PC and Mac incompatibility) and inter-organizationally (the coordination of very busy partners to develop learning objectives, meet their organizational needs, capture footage, etc.).

In addition, the project team faced the task of finding a niche and turning potential competition or repetition into an opportunity to reach a greater audience. For example, the Global Restoration Network is in the process of launching a restoration database. The challenge will be to identify how the searchable project database developed through this project fits within the global network. The project has also fostered some unanticipated benefits, such as increased levels of collaboration among the partners on future projects, and the added benefit of exposing the project team to new IT tools that are likely to be utilized in their future endeavors.

Advice to Others

Planning is critical – It is worth spending a great deal of time upfront planning, developing a schedule in advance. Publicity and marketing of the tools and resources are important components. Be open and flexible - you will not

always be able to achieve exactly what you would have liked given the complexity of the desired outcome. Build a solid network of technical advisors to guide the process

Promise of Place (POP) Web site

Project Lead: Megan Camp

Contact Information: 802-985-8686

Objectives

The objective of this project was to develop a Web site that would promote place-based education through sharing stories, exemplars and facilitating dialogue with formal and non-formal educators, administrators, government agencies, and interested citizens. The organizations that are partners in this project can either move their place-based education pages onto the new site or, if they do not currently have a Web site, can create a new page on the Promise of Place Web site. In addition, the Web site is meant to advertise and document the bi-annual Promise of Place Conference.

Project management

After the selection of a project leader and an assistant, a team of people was contacted to identify what they would want in a POP Web site. The members of this team represented several place-based education groups in Vermont and New Hampshire, plus the Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative research group. They developed a list of criteria through sharing favorite Web sites over the e-mail and met five times to develop a final listing of criteria to use to seek Web site designers. Although the final product includes majority of the elements identified by the project team, its design has been kept relatively simple because of unexpectedly high costs. The project team hopes to revisit the design in the future to move it closer to the type of Web site envisioned at the beginning of the project.

Technology:

The design of the Web site was contracted out to a private web-design company and the site itself is administered by a group of registered users, each of whom is responsible for a particular part of the site that corresponds to their own area of expertise. The Web site also has both public areas and private, password-only areas. This makes it possible for the POP Web site to function not only as a means of communicating with place-based education contributors from all over New England (and the world), but it also can function as a channel for internal communication as well (an Intranet).

Experience to Date:

The Web site was launched slightly behind schedule because of delays in hiring an IT Administrator for the Sherburne Farms. The decision to delay the decision about the Web site development company was informed by previous experience where a technology was purchased that was later not compatible with future IT plans of the organization. The training of all the project members is still underway.

Throughout the project they have realized the value of on-going communication and the difficulty of combining various objectives and goals of a large group into a common vision.

Advice to Others

"If someone else was to consider setting up a Web site with partners, I would advise them to become as familiar with Web sites, Web hosting, and working with non-profits as possible. A good resource is the Foundation Center—the tech-soup software for non-profits, and good advice on the differences between "for profit" and "non-profit" partners."

Sustaining White-tailed Deer & Forests: An Electronic Resource Center

Project Lead: Dr. William Hubbard

Contact Information: 706-542-7813

Objectives

The project goal is to develop and market a Web site that will help eastern United States communities (i.e., all states east of the Mississippi) around national forests and other locations have informed dialogue about and develop solutions for deer and forest interactions. Web resources are accessible to all stakeholders and synthesize in images and lay language our knowledge about deer habitat quality, deer impacts, and management strategies. To the extent possible, the Web site provides public domain or permission-granted literature about deer-forest interactions or provides links to such literature.

While eastern United States communities around national forests are the initial target audience, the Web site is accessible to a broader audience including students, hunters, landowners, extension educators, and researchers.

Project management

Bill Hubbard, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, in collaboration with Dr. Susan Stout, USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station, and Dr. Jim Finley, the Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension, developed the project. Project collaborators (i.e., white-tailed deer and forestry experts) were enlarged through sub-regional conference calls. These conference calls with mid-western, northeastern, and southern technical experts covered key white-tailed deer and forest interactions issues, existing resources to include in the Web site, framing the Web site to engage the public, and Web site format.

Based on input from 30 regional technical experts, the Web site focus shifted from deer overabundance to identifying and creating healthy forest landscapes for deer. The Web site target audience also expanded from communities around national forests to all individuals interested in learning about the eastern US forest and deer interaction. A companion PowerPoint presentation for the Web site will be developed with the intent of educating the public and landowners through extension education programs.

Technology

The site was developed using an open source content management system (CMS) entitled, Plone. Dr. Hubbard has previously been involved with numerous projects developed with Plone. Due to his previous experiences, he knew Plone CMS could easily meet the project requirements. Other than Dr. Hubbard's experiences, Matt Howell, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, has almost three years of experience developing projects using Plone and was the only other member of the team who has previous experience with the software. Examples of Plone's features were presented to the project team who agreed to use the software's built-in features to create a user-friendly site.

Experience to Date

The project team has encountered both barriers and benefits in this project. Input from the regional technical experts is an important factor in the project's success as well as a project benefit. The technical experts provided breadth and depth to the deer forest interface allowing the team to see new nuances. For example, the initial Web site focus was deer overpopulation. The technical experts noted there are eastern sub-regions where low deer populations are a concern and explained the current focus may alienate some target audiences. As a result of their input, the site focuses on quality deer management. The revised site assists visitors in recognizing and fostering healthy forests and deer herds, and can easily be replicated for other topics.

The most important project barrier is copyright laws for non-public literature. The project team intended to post all relevant literature in PDF format, making it easily accessible to the public. Copyright laws make it impossible to post journal articles. The team will post public-domain and permission granted literature on the deer-forest interface on the site and will link to copyrighted literature.

Advice to Others

"Based on our experience, we highly recommend forming technical committees to ground truth and provide expertise during initial project development. Their input was invaluable to this project and they are an important component of the product evaluation and its dissemination to the public."

Web-based Learning and Technology Transfer of Inspection Methods for Historic Wood Structures

Project Lead: Brian Brashaw

Contact Information: 218-720-7248

Objectives

The objective of this project was to demonstrate the use of communities of practice through Web-based information technologies to share and transfer information related to inspection of historic wood structures. The project's aim is to develop a community of practice for the historic inspection of wood structures and to provide direct assistance to owners (federal, state, county, private or non-profit) of historic wood structures enabling better inspections, maintenance and safety of these structures through the community of practice portal. Throughout the project's duration the team conducted several inspections of historic structures in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan for use in their Web casts. In addition, they have conducted a Web-based seminar for building inspectors in the New Orleans area after hurricane Katrina.

Project Management

The project team members have extensive knowledge in the area of condition assessment of wood structures gained through the past decade spent researching this subject. Throughout the years the team members have organized and conducted numerous workshops and short courses. This project served as an extension of their ongoing activities and was meant to expand their ability to transfer knowledge using Web-based communication like Webinars and interactive Web portals. At the outset of the project, the project team reviewed various web-based technologies for use in their Web casts and drew on their previous experiences with these tools. The primary partner was the USDA Forest Products Laboratory with whom the project lead had regular bi-weekly contact. The project team also cooperated with the Northern Tier High Technology Corridor at Bemidji State University who is hosting the Web portal and the on-line meeting platform used at the start of the project.

Technology

After a review of the different options available to the project team, they opted for an interactive collaborative-based Web platform managed by the Northern Tier High Technology Corridor (www.ntht.org) and for Adobe Breeze for on-line meetings and Webinars. The collaborative suite includes instant messaging, team meetings, discussion forums, team calendar, task manager, and a virtual library, which allows for the uploading of documents, images, graphics, spreadsheets and more. Breeze allows for use of Microsoft PowerPoint for the PC to create multi-media content for the Web as well as communicate, collaborate, and teach over the Web in real-time through Web conferences and Web casts. Although the project team has participated in Webinars, they did not have a previous experience with conducting one.

Experience to Date

Throughout their project the team has gained a lot of experience with the use of Breeze as both a presenter tool and a meeting tool. Although teaching via a Webinar had its weaknesses it has proven to be a useful tool that the project members will continue to use to facilitate project planning, collaboration and interaction for many of their projects, not just the two funded in the **Electronic Commons Program** Project. They were also able to generate two fee-based inspections as the result of their Webinar on WAPAMA, a historic wooden schooner in the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park.

The key to the project's success was a project team that had extensive knowledge of the topic area and experience with conducting short courses. Also, Breeze proved to be an effective tool that was very user friendly for both, the moderator and the Web cast participants, which allowed the instructors to concentrate on the delivery of their course rather than the nuts and bolts of the technology. The biggest barrier encountered by the project team were the competing priorities experienced by some of the key members.

Advice to Others

"Don't be afraid to step out and try web-based communication. You may not know exactly how to do it, but most all options are possible based on new technology and software development. Find good cooperators and let them help you with the technology component of the project. Go with your research or discipline strengths first, then reach out for the technology component."