

The Student Conservation Association's New York Adirondack Program:

Changing lives through service to nature

By JILL BAUM

The Student Conservation Association (SCA) mission: To build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of our environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land.

Armed with maps, notebooks, and sections from a proposed New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Unit Management Plan, four small groups of high school students spread themselves out around the classroom. Their task was to scrutinize a section of the plan in depth, selecting and reporting back to their classmates what they considered to be the key issues and possible points of contention addressed by their piece of the whole document. Although until a couple weeks before none of them had been familiar with the land use classification terminology, citizen participation process, or myriad of local, regional and statewide issues considered by the planners, all were very familiar with the area they were studying — literally their own back yards.

Now they spoke as if experts on sediment loading and economic revitalization. They were eager to learn about what might become of the area that bordered their hometown and



An SCA trail crew works on a bog bridge construction on the Owl's Head Trail.

started where their streets ended. Each student brought a variety of local perspectives to class discussions, influenced in part by relatives' opinions, neighbors' professions, and per-

sonal experiences as residents of the Adirondack Park. Gently prodded along by the SCA member who researched and planned these lessons as part of an existing Current Issues class, they debated possible alternatives to the proposed plan. The member invited a guest speaker to class and shared comments voiced by local citizens at a public open house she attended. Each day this group of students learned more about the place they called home and ways to serve as active stewards of the northern forest — two primary goals of the Student Conservation Association's New York Adirondack Program (SCA NYA).

Just completing its fourth year of operation, SCA NYA is a ten-month residential program administered by SCA and funded in part by the Corporation for National Service (AmeriCorps) and the DEC. Historically, periodic SCA volunteers have served in the Adirondack region and

SCA in the Northern Forest: NY Adirondack Program goals

- Construct and maintain trails, trail structures, and campground structures, and engage in conservation efforts on community and state public lands.
- Assist teaching environmental and outdoor education, tutoring, and running community service projects in schools; mentor local youth and provide positive role models in after-school settings.
- Involve and educate community members through development of learning resources and active participation in conservation-focused activities.
- Serve collaboratively with other AmeriCorps and community partners.
- Study natural and environmental sciences, ecology and conservation issues.
- Develop personal responsibility, interpersonal skills, and leadership effectiveness.

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throughout the Northern Forest. The Adirondack program was created in 1998 to more fully serve the conservation and environmental needs of the Adirondack Park. Our specific mission is to complete critical conservation service projects while engaging young people and community residents to become active and educated conservation stewards of the Adirondack region [see box on page 13].

In order to reach these goals, SCA NYA recruits twenty young adults from across the nation through a competitive application and interview process. Four staff members provide guidance and live on-site with the members at the DEC Whitney Area Headquarters on Little Tupper Lake. The members come from a wide array of backgrounds and receive a considerable amount of training — ranging from Wilderness First Responder certification to Project Wild and chainsaw safety — in exchange for their year of service. They are eligible to receive an AmeriCorps education award to help offset any school costs past, present or future. Community living is a big part of the experience, as is developing leadership skills, effective communication, and a strong service ethic. Members also become immersed in the natural and cultural history of the Park and its communities — so much so that some of them choose to stay in or eventually return to the Adirondacks upon completion of the program.

The members' commitment to Adirondack life and issues is reflected in much that they accomplish, beginning with the education season. The Unit Management Plan activity was just one of hundreds planned out and presented by the SCA members who served in eight local schools last December through March. Three days

each week, their task was to incorporate environmental and outdoor education topics into existing curricula, emphasizing regional natural history, conservation stewardship, and academic improvement. The 59 participating teachers who hosted members in their classrooms were impressed with the energetic creativity of these young adults. They were pleased with our emphasis on New York State learning standards which guide, in large part, what topics teachers ask us to address. This year the list included teaching about black bears during a 5th grade music class, introducing compact fluorescent bulbs during a 4th grade electricity unit, and building pretend loon nesting sites with a host of kindergartners who were mastering the letter L. Members also made recycled paper with 3rd graders, played acid rain tag with 6th graders (nobody wanted to be sulfur dioxide) and brought in a fully loaded backpack to help illustrate wilderness survival for a middle school class, many of whom had never hoisted one before.

Members also ran 15 after school programs and tutored more than 70 students in countless one-on-one and small group sessions. In addition to natural history appreciation and academic improvement, a prime function of our program is to serve as positive role models and mentors in the school communities. This particular objective is one frequently highlighted by classroom teachers, who notice a marked improvement in the interest levels and responses of their students to school in general and to environmental topics in particular. The end result serves to strengthen school communities while simultaneously providing both students and teachers with new, outside perspectives and an environmental twist to existing curricula.

Education, Conservation, and Community partners 2001-2002

- Adirondack Museum
- Azure Mountain Friends
- Bloomingdale Elementary School
- Bouquet River Association
- Friends of Mt. Arab
- Getaway Youth Center
- Geoff-Nelson Memorial Library
- Indian Lake Central School
- Long Lake Central School
- Long Lake Department of Recreation
- L.P. Quinn Elementary School
- Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks
- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
- Newcomb Central School
- Newcomb Visitor Interpretive Center
- Olympic Regional Development Authority
- Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center
- Petrova Elementary School
- Saranac Lake Chamber of Commerce
- Saranac Lake Humane Society
- Saranac Lake Middle School
- The Nature Conservancy
- Town of Speculator
- Trailblazers
- Tupper Lake Chamber of Commerce

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A sampling of conservation season accomplishments 2001-2002

- Constructed 2619 feet of new trails
- Cleared 90 blowdowns
- Brushed 26 miles of trail
- Set 120 stepping stones
- Constructed or repaired 84 bridges
- Planted 8500 trees
- Raked 476 campsites
- Rehabilitated 2 lean-to's
- Stained 19 picnic tables
- Relocated 3 privies

Two members not assigned to schools served at the Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC) where they helped run the Snowshoe Patrol Program for school groups, planned weekend programs, and offered their own school outreach workshops. The latter included an introduction to map and compass skills and a conservation career exploration. Partnerships like this one with the VIC can be especially rewarding for all involved including the general public with whom the members got to interact on a daily basis. Next year we hope to have interns working with the Adirondack Museum and at the DEC office in Ray Brook. New community opportunities are always welcome.

Members provide service not only to schools, but to the local and natural communities as well. The idea of strengthening these communities is carried out on service Fridays when members assist with projects that benefit local groups and agencies [see box on page 14]. Many of these Fridays coincide with special regional events such as Winter Carnival, the national ski jumping championships, and Adirondack Trails Day. Members are also responsible for carrying out independent service projects which they arrange themselves, often through groups such as Habitat for Humanity, the Getaway Youth Center, and the Humane Society. In this way, members can explore personal

interests, build individual connections, and help fill community needs.

Our Leadership Team events initiated further community outreach opportunities. Consisting of two to four members, Leadership Teams orchestrate larger SCA-sponsored events throughout the year. This year these included Earth Day in Saranac Lake, Tupper Lake Green-Up/Clean Up, National Trails Day at Bloomingdale Elementary School, Open House here at our property, and our first ever Winter Whitney Days. Approximately 300 students attended the latter during one of three days in February and March, emerging from their winter hibernation to build snow shelters, play food chain tag, and experience a frozen winter wonderland walk. They huddled around campfires for lunch and left with rosy cheeks and smiles on their faces. Most of the students also gained a much clearer idea of who we are and why we live seemingly in the middle of nowhere, recycling our trash and composting our food waste.

The opportunities for our members to teach about and model stewardship did not end in the classroom or at Winter Whitney Days. Service learning is a growing component of the Adirondack Program. This year we worked with three schools to get more than 400 students out building and maintaining their own school nature trails. Ranging in age from sec-

ond grade on up, these students invested their own time and energy into visible improvements that they can now hike, study, run, and ski with pride. SCA members in the past have also worked with teachers and students to develop interpretive brochures, outdoor classrooms, and even trail-related art projects. The goal is for both students and members to learn through doing — hands-on service to the land.

An emphasis on trail work is perhaps not unique to but certainly representative of SCA. The Student Conservation Association is the oldest and largest conservation service organization in the United States. Founded in 1957, SCA is headquartered in Charlestown, NH and annually provides more than 1,000,000 hours of conservation service nationwide. Many of these hours directly benefit the Northern Forest, in the form of interpretive interns at Acadia National Park, high school trail crews in the White Mountains, and National Corps programs such as the New York Adirondack program. Originally inspired by the graduate thesis idea that unstaffed National Park projects could benefit from the efforts of willing young volunteers (and vice versa), SCA seeks to place conservation volunteers where they are most needed. The Adirondack trails, historic structures, and recreation infrastructure are all high on this list and given the full attention of the Adirondack Program throughout the spring and summer.

Once the education season comes to a close, members prepare to hit the ground running for conservation season. Members start the season with a wide range of backcountry skills, from never having slept in a tent to previously having served on

trail crews around the country. They all receive technical training in rock and timber construction, tread and drainage issues, carpentry, and general trail maintenance. They also learn the minimum impact skills necessary to maintain backcountry basecamps from which many projects are carried out. Due to the vastness of the Adirondack Park, many of our projects are far from home and require that crews spend five to ten days out at the project sites. Members are responsible for overseeing the logistics of accomplishing their projects including packing all food and equipment. A designated crew leader serves as the agency contact person and runs the project day to day.

What types of conservation service do the SCA members carry out? Not surprisingly to anyone familiar with hiking in the Adirondacks, drainage and erosion issues throughout the Park make up the bulk of our trail projects. A hefty share of the projects address numerous other conservation, preservation and recreation issues, too [see box on page 15]. These range from fire tower restoration to historic building stabilization and preservation at Great Camp Santanoni, boardwalk construction, pre-season campground preparation, blowdown clearing, and invasive species removal. The latter is a collaborative effort with the DEC, Department of Transportation, Adirondack Park Agency and The Nature Conservancy that recognizes the critical intervention necessary to stopping exotic invasive species before they get a foothold in the heart of the Park. In the name of protecting sustainable natural communities, two crews therefore spent a week removing garlic mustard (*Allaria petiolata*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).



Among the SCA-sponsored events are Winter Whitney Days during which area students get the chance to enjoy hiking, games, and lunch around a campfire in a winter wonderland.

In conjunction with the garlic mustard project, two of our members additionally developed a brochure intended to educate the public about the growing problem of invasive species and what's being done to halt them in the Adirondack Park. Twenty thousand copies were printed by the DEC for distribution at two major campgrounds. Specific infestations will continue to be monitored and revisited year after year, while possible new interpretive programs and public education materials are in the planning stages. Our education and conservation missions are blending together to make the strongest possible impact on a problem facing Northern Forest ecosystems.

Other new SCA initiatives hold similar potential for significantly impacting the future of the Adirondack Park. This summer half of our members received specialized training in Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and land management field survey methods. Several crews then hit the

trails, documenting trail conditions, structure locations, and human use data along the entire Northville-Placid Trail and within selected remote areas. Four new interns were added for the summer to gather the field data for several other unit management plans currently under consideration by the DEC. These include some of the largest and more rugged areas in the Park which otherwise might not be visited by a staff already stretched thin by the intensive process. The data gathered by SCA will be incorporated into proposed new management plans — perhaps to be studied by the next group of high school students who have a Student Conservation Association member in their classroom. These students too will experience firsthand the citizen participation process and the responsibility of living sustainably in the Northern Forest. Perhaps someday they'll volunteer their time and energy to conservation service, as well.