

10

(EXCITING, ENGAGING, EDUCATIONAL)

WAYS TO ATTRACT

YOUTH

TO YOUR CHAPTER

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This article is the third in a series on helping chapters build their membership and become more active conservationists in their communities. The first two articles, which focused on conservation projects and marketing ideas for chapters, appeared in the Winter and Spring 2008 issues of *Outdoor America*. Electronic reprints are available on our Web site at <http://www.iwla.org/chapters>.

1. OFFER ONGOING OUTDOOR RECREATION PROGRAMS

Many League chapters are equipped with outdoor recreation facilities. Some have found that offering youth fishing, archery, or air gun programs is a great way to attract kids. The Lincoln Chapter in Nebraska gives kids top priority at the chapter's catch-and-release lake. Other chapters hold annual fishing events for kids who are new to the sport, or workshops on everything from casting to fly-tying. For example, the League's Izaak Walton Cottage Chapter in England offers fly-fishing courses for youth.

Archery can also be a hit with kids. Hold youth archery workshops or classes at your chapter. See if neighboring schools would like any chapter members to teach archery as part of the physical education program. Air gun programs are also increasingly popular. Several chapters across the country have large air gun programs that allow youth to compete against teams from all over the country.

Two groups that can help you set up youth recreation programs are the Future Fisherman Foundation, www.futurefisherman.org, and the National Shooting Sports Foundation, www.nssf.org. These groups can even help you find funding.



2. TEAM UP WITH SCHOOLS

There's a nationwide movement to get kids outside and teach them more about the environment. The time is ripe to link the efforts of League chapters with their local schools. Teachers and principals are often eager to find a place for a field trip, or a volunteer speaker for their classroom, or a nature project to engage their students. Some school systems have an environmental education unit built into the curriculum, so it helps to find out which grades in particular need to fulfill certain requirements.

Chapters are often perfect sites for a field trip, where kids can spend a couple hours learning about trees or insects or birds. The Mountaineer Chapter in West Virginia has boosted its youth membership and family participation substantially by hosting year-round youth activities, including some in conjunction with the schools. Seventh graders take a field trip to the chapter to learn about stream monitoring techniques and water quality issues. Fifth graders come for a full conservation day, moving through a mix of nature-based workshops and activities.

One way to build a connection with the schools is to find a receptive teacher. Science teachers are often a good bet. Also, look into whether there is someone with the local school district who oversees science programs, environmental activities, or outdoor education.

Another way to hook school students is through mandatory community service requirements. Most middle- and high-school students are required to perform a certain number of service hours before they graduate. Contact the person in charge of this for your school district and offer your chapter as a site for volunteers. Students can help with existing activities like litter cleanups, or you can work with them to initiate new projects.



3. HOST CONSERVATION-RELATED EVENTS

Make your chapter the conservation hub for the community by hosting youth-oriented events that promote environmental awareness.

Start simple. When the Brown County Chapter in Wisconsin wanted to make an effort to attract families, it organized a creative Earth Day festival and invited the community. The theme was a “teddy bear hunt,” where participants had to search for stuffed bears hidden around the chapter grounds in order to win prizes donated by area businesses. The concept was simple, but they wound up with lots of kids exploring the outdoors on their property—and some new members as well.

Another simple approach: Take kids for a nature walk. One member of the Southern Maryland Chapter—a retired park ranger—took kids out for a nature walk on the chapter’s property every week, identifying trees and sharing wildlife facts.

An effective way to ensure the success of your conservation event is to align your chapter with an established educational program. Each year, the York #67 Chapter in Pennsylvania mobilizes members to host an Envirothon. The national Envirothon program, sponsored by Canon, holds competitions across the country to test students’ knowledge of natural resources, from forestry to wildlife. The York Chapter has been a longtime site for the Pennsylvania Envirothon, which lasts for several weeks in the spring. Ikes help with everything from competition judging to handling refreshments to parking.



4. CELEBRATE WITH SEASONAL FESTIVALS

From hayrides to holiday parties, there are fun ways to bring families to your chapter for every season of the year. A few League chapters host annual Halloween events that make good use of their grounds—and bring in substantial numbers of families and funds. At the Berkeley Chapter in West Virginia, the annual Haunted Halloween trail offers scary surprises to visitors each weekend in October, drawing 500 people each night. A similar month-long Haunted Hayride is a popular community tradition at the Hamilton Chapter in Ohio, with members and Boy Scouts helping with the spooky exhibits.

Fall festivals can entice visitors to your chapter for outdoor fun, with simple activities like bobbing for apples or gathering around a bonfire. A festival in the spring could feature a nature walk, birdhouse building, or a wildlife show.

At the Fremont Chapter in Nebraska, kids look forward to the chapter’s annual Easter egg hunt.

You can also link events to the season, such as the annual Christmas bird count organized by the Owatonna Chapter in Minnesota. This national opportunity to participate in citizen science has always been held during the winter holiday. Similarly, an annual butterfly count—an easy activity for kids—is timed each year for the July 4th holiday by the North American Butterfly Association (see page XX for more details about this program).

Earth Day and Arbor Day, of course, are natural occasions to celebrate at your chapter. The Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chapter in Maryland has started an annual tradition of inviting the community to its grounds for an Earth Day festival, which includes birdhouse building, beekeeping demonstrations, and seedling giveaways.



5. BUDDY UP WITH YOUTH GROUPS

Numerous groups make great partners for League chapter projects, including Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, Cub Scouts, 4-H, Future Farmers of America, and Big Brothers or Big Sisters.

The Champaign Chapter in Illinois decided to revitalize its membership by teaming up with a local Boy Scout troop. The Scouts help members build fish cribs to improve habitat in local lakes, and they pitch in with recycling aluminum cans and batteries. The chapter will soon be putting their youthful energy to use in an effort to help the Forest Preserve District remove invasive plants.

"Our members have gotten older and can't do as much with volunteer activities," says chapter president George Kieffer. "The Scouts can provide the brawn, and we'll provide some leadership."

League chapters can also join with other like-minded non-profits that have their own youth programs, such as the National Wild Turkey Federation's JAKES and Ducks Unlimited's Greenwings. If you haven't already established a relationship with these groups in your area, consider hosting a youth-oriented event together.

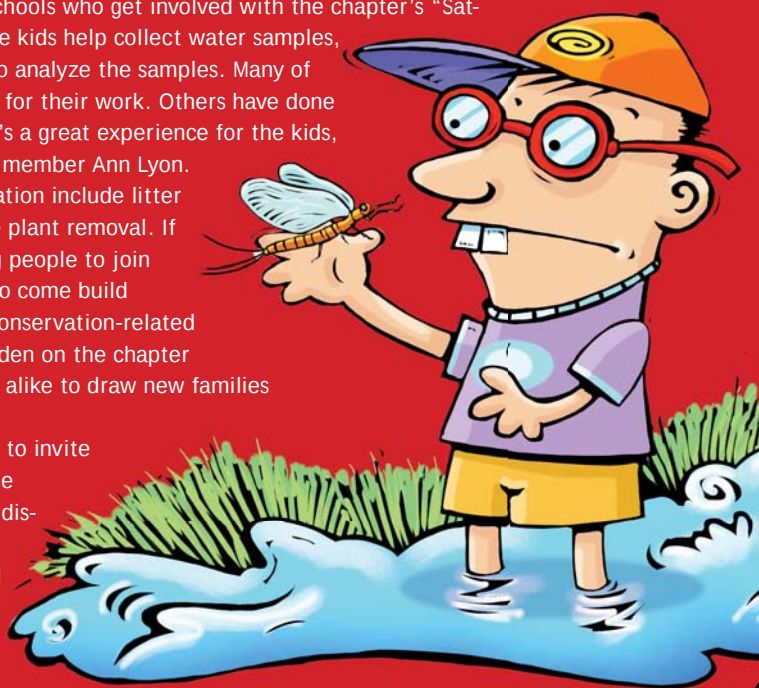


6. GET INTO CONSERVATION PROJECTS

If your chapter is involved with conservation projects, be sure to find ways to include youth—and put them to work. Many projects are particularly suited to kids. For example, the League's Save Our Streams stream monitoring program puts people in the water, collecting and studying bugs—a technique that naturally appeals to kids. The Cincinnati Chapter in Ohio has a steady stream of students from surrounding schools who get involved with the chapter's "Saturday Stream Snapshots" stream monitoring program. The kids help collect water samples, record data, and even work in the chapter's laboratory to analyze the samples. Many of the students get school credit or volunteer service hours for their work. Others have done school projects based on their work with the League. "It's a great experience for the kids, and it's kind of a party when they're here," says chapter member Ann Lyon.

Other projects that lend themselves to youth participation include litter cleanups, recycling programs, tree planting, and invasive plant removal. If your chapter is active in these efforts, invite more young people to join in. Your chapter can even hold workshops or invite kids to come build things like birdhouses, bat boxes, rain barrels, or other conservation-related creations. Get families together to help create a rain garden on the chapter grounds. Open the events to members and non-members alike to draw new families to your chapter.

An easy way to reduce the costs of these workshops is to invite help from other groups, agencies, or businesses like Home Depot. They will typically offer a volunteer instructor or discounted (or even free) materials. Another good source of expertise is your own membership. Ask around and you'll probably find people with know-how or materials that they're willing to share with young folks.



7. TEACH HUNTER SAFETY

Offering hunter education to young people is a wonderful way for chapters to bring kids to the chapter, and to set them on the right path as ethical sportsmen. Many chapters offer state-sanctioned hunter safety training to local youth either on the chapter grounds or at a community site. Instructors are usually League volunteers who have taken courses in hunter safety education.

In Maryland, the Frederick #1 Chapter has established itself as a model for hunter safety instruction in the state. With 10 hunter safety courses taught by about 14 experienced volunteer Ikes, the chapter helps prepare more than 500 students each year for their hunting licenses. Program leader Ben Kelkye says the key to teaching is knowing your audience. "We tell stories, put them through scenarios, and give funny examples. You don't want their eyes glazing over when you're teaching them about safety." He also encourages mothers to attend the classes and learn about gun safety with their children.

Other chapters have also found ways to promote youth hunter safety. The Linn County Chapter in Iowa sponsors the state's hunter education program. As an incentive to successfully complete the 14 hours of instruction, the chapter offers kids a chance to shoot a muzzleloader on the chapter's range. "Every year we have people lined up out the door to register," says program leader Dale Braun. "The classes do a real good job of spreading the League's name."

Added twists to hunter education make it more fun for kids. The Martin L. Davey Chapter in Ohio holds a youth hunt for those who pass the county's hunter safety program. And the Medina Chapter in Ohio started a father-son program for kids getting started with shooting. Actually, mothers and daughter are encouraged to come as well, and the program has brought in several new members.



8. SUPPORT YOUNG SCHOLARS

Each year, League chapters fund more than \$125,000 collectively to students pursuing studies in conservation-related fields. These scholarships not only serve to encourage more young people to consider careers in natural resource areas, they also give youth an added reason to hook up with the League. Many of these students feel a greater connection to the League thanks to receiving a scholarship, and they come back and stay involved at their chapters even after graduation.

For Jessica Burns of the Clinton Chapter in Indiana, staying in touch with the Ikes played a central role even in her choice of where to attend college. She was awarded the chapter's first scholarship in 2007 during her last year in high school. Now a freshman at Indiana State University, she is still active in the Clinton Chapter. In fact, she's the youngest member of their board of directors, and she also helps with the Indiana Division's summer youth camp. "The people at the chapter have been like family to me," she says. "It's pretty much what has kept me around."

Chapters can offer as little as \$100 in scholarship money, although more common amounts are \$500 or \$1,000 per school year. Some find creative ways to extend the scholarships. The Charles E. Piersall Chapter in Wyoming recently decided to focus its scholarship funds on students interested in studying clean-coal technology. Working with nearby Casper College, the chapter was able to secure matching funds to create a \$15,000 scholarship fund.



9. HOLD AN OUTDOOR RECREATION EVENT

Whether it's a youth field day or fishing day or an outdoor expo, large-scale events at your chapter are guaranteed to draw families.

The Oil City Chapter in Pennsylvania holds a popular Venango County Youth Field Day in conjunction with the state game commission each year. It's an action-packed day of canoeing, fishing, archery, trap shooting, and more, including lunch and door prizes. Some 200 children participate, and about 45 members help run the activity stations and refreshments. "There are so many new things for the kids to try—they really enjoy it," says chapter president Dan Sparks.

Some chapters orchestrate large-scale outdoor shows or expos on their grounds, featuring booths, demonstrations, and activities that draw thousands from the community. For events of this magnitude, chapters can find help from organizations like the Weatherby Foundation, which offers funding and support to non-profits or other groups willing to host an outdoor expo aimed at youth (learn more at www.weatherby-foundation.org).

Fishing events are also an easy way to hook in young people. But make it more than just a fishing derby. Use the event to build connections with other conservation groups or agencies. The Wayne County Chapter in Ohio invites kids to a day of fishing each year in collaboration with other local groups such as the Wayne National Forest, Lawrence County Bass Club, and Ohio University's Southern Nature Center. The event includes educational activities to build the children's awareness of their environment.

Other chapters plan events around dates that have been set aside to promote outdoor recreation, such as National Fishing and Boating Week in June, and National Hunting and Fishing Day in September.



10. CREATE YOUTH CLUBS AT YOUR CHAPTER

Keep the young folks busy and happy all year by linking them to the League through youth memberships. In the past, the League has promoted youth activities through its Uncle Ikes or Young Ikes programs, which some chapters continue to do. Whatever name you use, make youth feel they are an important part of your chapter.

Many chapters offer low-priced youth and student memberships to encourage youth participation. Youth memberships are for ages 17 and under, while student memberships can be offered to ages 18 to 21, or those still pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Even without an official membership, kids should be made to feel welcome. The Davenport Chapter in Iowa started a Nature Kids club for some of the younger children at their chapter by planting a butterfly garden to teach the little ones about nature. They've also built bluebird houses and planted wildflowers.

For slightly older kids who are able to handle projects in the community, forming a youth chapter might be a good way to keep them involved. The Northwest Ohio Yikes are a small but enthusiastic group of members who help with recycling at the Delta Chapter and in the community. College-aged members of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Student Chapter stay very active in the community, often collaborating with the Ikes at the Bill Cook Chapter on promoting outdoor recreation as well as teaching conservation to younger kids.

