

By Denise Wagner

Conservationists for Tomorrow

Improving science literacy through outreach



Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery biologist, Greg Landry, teaches students of R.J. Richey Elementary from nearby Burnet, Texas, about the value of clean water to fish and to people.

In today's world, fisheries conservation is as much about people as it is about the fish. It's about good public relations, education, and awareness—and that creates future stewards—be they constituents or future employees. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries Program is evolving in a way to better serve the people we work with through outreach, by engaging people of all ages.

Outdoor education areas or "Outdoor Discovery Zones" on National Fish Hatcheries are a great way to connect the public in many ways. Educational experiences conducted at these sites are coordinated among U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees, volunteers, Friends groups, students, youth organizations, and the community. They can be used as a tool for public relations, and a means to deliver a variety of

formal and non-formal education programs. These curricula educate about the conservation work of the Fisheries Program, and inform the people we serve about fisheries and aquatic species conservation. An informed public leads to increased support. An educated public leads to greater science literacy. Conservation education facilitates the recruitment of youth into eventual fisheries conservation careers.

Many of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries facilities have done an excellent job of optimizing their properties into an educational resource, and have fully engaged their communities. A great example that started from scratch and has come a long way in just a couple of years is at Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery.

Located in Burnet, Texas, Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery has been around since the late 1930s. With tremendous potential, it sits on 170 riverside acres, where biologists raise channel catfish, Clear Creek gambusia, largemouth bass, paddlefish, and rainbow trout. The Colorado River flows by many historic structures built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

It is an amazing place but Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery has had an identity problem. Even their own community had overlooked the federal facility. Many local people did not know about the work done, let alone that the hatchery existed. Marc Jackson, the hatchery manager at the time, and administrative tech, Cindy Fronk, recognized the need for change and took action. As they began planning the future of the facility and the surrounding property, they wanted a name for their new conservation education plan, one that would let others know in few words what they were up to. The outcome: *Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery Restoration Project*.

The restoration of the hatchery's landscape happened quickly with Fronk pushing the work along. Fronk

and Jackson inventoried all available resources. From there followed visits to school teachers and principals, meetings with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, community leaders, and local organizations like the Highland Lakes Master Naturalists, and scout troops. These meetings yielded ideas on what could be created to help meet the needs of all interested in using the outdoor education area. The list created included things from curriculum extension activities that would benefit the school kids, to hiking and wildlife viewing trails, all the way to major refurbishing of the old Lower Colorado River Authority building to use as an interpretative center. Also from these meetings, a Friend's group came to fruition. In fact the Friends of Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery, non-existent two years ago, now has 30 members who volunteer to help at the hatchery. Last year they put in 9,000 volunteer hours. It doesn't hurt, too, that the hatchery is also frequently in the local news.

The Outdoor Discovery Zones at Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery serve many purposes, and have done a great deal to reinvigorate the facility and the community. First and foremost this outdoor classroom meets the educational needs of the local teachers. For example, the Discovery Zone on the Overlook Trail showcases vernal pools where people learn about the vital importance that food, water, space, and cover play in habitats. Open space and trails provide an opportunity for local citizens to share their love of all things in nature. The Highland Lakes Master Naturalists use the outdoor classroom to share their love of

birds, fish, conservation, and outdoor recreation.

People who visit the hatchery gain a heightened awareness of how to make minimal impacts to fish and wildlife habitats. Hatchery employees have greater opportunities to talk to visitors about the hatchery's role in conservation, the economy, and about the wide array of career opportunities within the Fisheries Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Creating awareness and increasing science literacy, telling our story, helping to create stewards for conservation is what we must do for the future of fisheries conservation. ♦

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