

## **Best Management Practice: UW-Parkside/City of Racine Root River Environmental Education Center**

### Description

The Root River Environmental Education Community Center (REC) was developed through a partnership of the University of Wisconsin–Parkside Center for Community Partners and the City of Racine Department of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Services. The focus of the center is to develop environmental education opportunities, and increase access to and appreciation of the natural assets within an urban setting. The initial development of the REC was begun with a one year \$30,000 grant (with in-kind match) from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program. Now in the second year of activity, the REC has been supported by numerous other partners (<http://www.uwp.edu/departments/community.partnerships/environmentalcenterspartners.cfm>).

### Background

The mission of the REC is to provide community members with opportunities to explore the Great Lakes and connected ecosystems through recreation, education, demonstration, and research. The goals of the REC are to a) increase and improve environmental education opportunities available to the general public, educators, and elementary, secondary, and post-secondary students; b) foster and support interdisciplinary environmental research opportunities for students, university faculty and environmental organizations; c) demonstrate innovative, ecologically sound residential, recreational, and commercial products and business practices, d) build awareness and appreciation for the Great Lakes ecosystem and connected watersheds.

While several high quality experiential environmental opportunities existed in the Racine area prior to the development of the REC– notably River Bend Nature Center, Pringle Nature Center, the Kenosha Museum, Hawthorne Hollow, and the Racine Dominican’s Eco-Justice Center – staff that operated these programs reported that there were few experiential Great Lakes environmental education opportunities for middle and high school students. Many of the existing programs were also located at prohibitive distances from urban schools, and remain inaccessible to our target group because of time and/or financial constraints. Of the existing experiential environmental programs that focused on providing opportunities to elementary school age youth, none had an exclusive focus on Great Lakes ecology. The REC was developed to address some of these issues.

Science and math scores among middle and high school students in Racine remain relatively low. Experiential activities have been shown to be an effective means of increasing both interest and achievement in math and science. The REC offers visitors opportunities to participate in experiential education programs, but focuses on middle and high school age students. The pooling of resources from community groups, area schools, universities, and conservation groups to provide affordable, high-quality environmental education programs at REC has helped to address low science and math achievement, and bring attention to the Great Lakes Watershed and related ecosystems located within an urban setting.

## Results

During the fall of 2007 and 2008 season, the REC was host to the Safe Water Is My Responsibility (SWIMR) program that introduces 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from the Racine Unified School District to the Root River and a water quality field course. Through this program, over 2800 students now have a new appreciation for river ecology. Over this same period of time, Make-A-Difference Day activities at the REC have attracted over 500 people who participate in on-going invasive plant species removal and riparian restoration projects. The summer bike and canoe/kayak rental program has provided 2,800 citizens with a recreational experience on the river. UW-Parkside faculty has developed 10 environmental education modules that will be assembled into kits made available on a “library loan” system to area educators and the general public.

## Pictures



Welcome to the REC!



First-time paddlers float the Root River near the REC.



Students learn about pH during the SWIM'R program.



Students learn about buffer zones at REC.



Volunteers remove invasive plant species at the REC.

### Contacts

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