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Implementing a 4-H Aquatic Resources Education Program in New York City Through Collaborations

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Abstract

The New York State 4-H Sportfishing and Aquatic Resources Education Program (SAREP) has enjoyed relatively high participation rates in upstate New York, but until 1998, had experienced little success in New York City. This was due to the Cornell staff's inexperience in working with the Extension program in NYC, which does not use the traditional rural volunteer-led 4-H club model. Rather than create a traditional club system in NYC, it was decided to build collaborations with existing youth-serving organizations. The approach resulted in 17 different youth-serving organizations conducting SAREP programming reaching approximately 40,000 youth annually.

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New York State's Success and Challenges with Aquatic Resources Education

In 1989, Cornell University Cooperative Extension and the New York State (NYS) Department of Environmental Conservation developed an aquatic resources education program for youth known as the "NYS 4-H Sportfishing and Aquatic Resources Education Program" (SAREP). The purpose of SAREP is to instill in youth an appreciation and understanding of the state's aquatic resources. Most commonly this is achieved by teaching youth angling skills and water-related 4-H projects.

The program works by recruiting volunteers from across NYS to participate in weekend-long training programs. Once trained, these Extension volunteers then work with youth in local counties by forming "SAREP clubs" that follow the traditional rural 4-H club model. Since 1989, approximately 35,000 youth a year have been involved in SAREP clubs or activities throughout NYS.

However, in New York City (NYC) only a handful of SAREP clubs had been formed by 1997. NYC enjoys an extensive 4-H program, but it is not based upon the traditional 4-H club scenario.

Consequently, there are very few traditional 4-H club leaders in New York City from which to recruit SAREP volunteers. Additionally, 4-H in NYC does not benefit from the recognition and informal communication networks often found in rural communities (Christenson & Warner, 1985; Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). This makes volunteer recruitment even more difficult.

As a result, the Cornell SAREP leadership did not see how the program could be implemented on a large scale citywide. For SAREP in NYC to attain participation levels equivalent to upstate New York, a non-traditional approach was needed.

SAREP in the City: A Collaborative Approach

Many organizations in NYC have well-established youth-serving programs with similar goals as 4-H's, including teaching youth to understand and appreciate the environment. Rather than trying to implement a "new" organizational structure in NYC (the traditional 4-H club system), Cornell Cooperative Extension -- New York City (CCE-NYC) and SAREP decided to collaborate with existing youth serving organizations.

Organizations that did or might have an interest in aquatic education were identified as potential collaborators. Identified collaborators were then invited to an organizational meeting where we discussed how collaborating with SAREP could further their own organizational goals as well as those of SAREP.

In the summer of 1998 at Prospect Park, Brooklyn, SAREP conducted a 2-day instructor training. Twenty-five representatives from eight partnering organizations attended the training, including: Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Prospect Park Alliance, Urban Park Rangers, Police Athletic League, Girls Club, Boys Club, and the YMCA/Environmental Service Corps. Following the training, the 25 participating instructors then conducted SAREP programs through their collaborating organizations and reached more than 15,000 youth and 4,000 adults between June and December 1998.

An example program includes one with the Girl Scouts where over 1,000 girls completed the 4-H project "Pond and Stream Safari" (Edelstein, 1993) in pursuit of Girl Scout badges. The Prospect Park Alliance in Brooklyn successfully conducted a weeklong catch-and-release fishing contest reaching over 2,500 youth. Participating youth were given SAREP educational materials and attended workshops on aquatic ecology and ethical fishing behavior as part of the contest.

By 2002, more than 100 staff and volunteers from 17 NYC organizations were collaborating with SAREP and CCE-NYC, and attending SAREP trainings. It is conservatively estimated that more than 40,000 NYC youth a year are now involved in SAREP programs conducted by the collaborating organizations.

Benefits and Drawbacks of a Collaborative Approach to 4-H and SAREP

In contrast to the traditional 4-H Club model, benefits of a multi-agency collaborative approach to SAREP in NYC include:

- Greater participant numbers,
- Establishment of a local SAREP-NYC network,
- Decreased program costs,
- Increased program publicity, and
- Greater acceptance of the SAREP program by its primary public funding partner, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.

Such collaborations are more likely to achieve program objectives, access diverse resources, and provide the opportunity for greater expansion in the urban environment. Because of the diversity of organizations that collaborate with SAREP for conducting urban programs, CCE-NYC is also more competitive when applying for additional grant monies to enhance its program.

A less positive aspect of this collaboration, however, is that Cornell Cooperative Extension's identity as the lead agency could become diluted. Collaborations also require a considerable investment in time to manage, maintain, and expand.

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