

2012 NANFA GERALD C. CORCORAN EDUCATION GRANT FINAL REPORT



BRUKNER NATURE CENTER'S SNORKELING THE STILLWATER RIVER PROJECT

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Brokner Nature Center (BNC) in Ohio is known for its vision of wildlife conservation through environmental education, providing unforgettable wildlife encounters to educate, inspire, and encourage outdoor exploration. We are driven to provide unique wildlife experiences for children of all ages. Thanks to NANFA's support, we were able to purchase the necessary equipment and to increase the scope of our educational offerings with an innovative new program, Snorkeling the Stillwater River!

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the project was to develop an innovative and hands-on wildlife program that is unique to the area, is appealing to teens and young adults, and educates the public about the native fishes of the Scenic Stillwater River.

Working with our local dive shop, Aquatic Realm, we researched the most appropriate snorkels and masks for our intended junior high to adult audience. They were extremely helpful, providing a group discount, and advice on storage and use. We decided to get 13 sets best utilized with smaller

faces (women and teens) and one set for our Wildlife Educator, Brian Ayres, the coordinator of the program. In May, Brian and his wife attended a snorkeling class at Aquatic Realm to learn the basics of equipment use, tips to instruct others, and gear care.

In June, we held our first trial “Snorkeling the Stillwater River” with our Junior Volunteers, local 12–18-year-olds who work closely with our staff to care for BNC’s Wildlife Ambassadors and assist with special events and educational programs as needed. Several of them have been participating in our programs since they were preschoolers! These young adults are interested in nature and conservation and were excited to be included in this new adventure! We had nine eager participants and were able to work out the best way to teach them:

1. how to use the equipment: we demonstrated putting the equipment on another staff member, showing the students how to adjust the straps, and attach the snorkels. Then individual help was given as each student put on the equipment.
2. how to keep them in a designated area: Brian then demonstrated how the students were supposed to look for fishes and other creatures underwater by lying flat and using their hands to pull themselves upstream, careful to look under rocks, and around vegetation. He tied orange tape to overhanging trees in the designated area, asking each student to occasionally look up and make sure they stayed in sight.
3. how to communicate with them while they were snorkeling: Brian used a whistle to get the students’ attention when he wanted them to gather together.

Students worked in teams of two to explore different areas of the river within the designated area. They used the dip nets to try to capture any fish they saw (we only captured one—a Western Blacknose Dace, *Rhinichthys obtusus*). I think seeing below the surface was a revelation for many of them. We had a hard time getting them to stop when the time was up! We put our Blacknose Dace in a bucket for the trip back up the trail to the Center where we added it to the aquarium we had set up previously.

In July, we held our first official Snorkeling the Stillwater program for our Wednesdays with Wildlife Summer Camp adventure for 6th–12th graders. This has historically been a difficult age group for us to entice into our programs but Brian had developed such an engaging set of topics and lessons we had 16 students attend at least one of the sessions. The most popular session was the Snorkeling the Stillwater with 11 students signed up. Final evaluations of the camp showed that 10 of the 11 students who attended the snorkel-

ing programs listed it as their favorite activity of the month! The only negative was that it was only about 60 degrees that day and it was a pretty chilly experience!

EVALUATION


We couldn’t be more pleased with the way this project developed! It gave our staff a chance to be trained in a new skill, was an exciting way to engage staff family members and provided an adventure to an underserved population that was unique for our area! One downfall that we have as a staff is the habit of not taking pictures of our programs. Staff will often forget the BNC camera and instead take photos on their phones. However, with this program all cell phones were left at the center for fear of getting water-logged!

One of the coolest outcomes of this project is that not only did it engage our clientele, but it inspired our staff to learn more and challenge themselves professionally. We have already begun creating a plan to market the program to the public in 2016. We plan to develop a partnership with area Junior and Senior High School clubs, further challenge and engage our Junior Volunteers, and provide training and opportunities to area naturalists and BNC Volunteer Trail Guides.

We can’t thank you enough for this opportunity to engage the next generation with a hands-on program focusing on native fishes, their habitat, and the conservation of both. These students live in the Miami Valley, an area rich with water resources and this program really opened their eyes to what lies beneath the surface of the water! (The Ohio Department of Natural Resources recently published a free guide to native fishes that we were able to pass out to all participants.)


FINANCIAL REPORT

We made slight changes to the proposed budget we submitted. Snorkel sets prices had gone up and we needed extra sets for staff. After transporting fish in a 5-gallon bucket during our relatively long hike back to the center, we decided to purchase a battery-powered aerator bait bucket so future catches could be kept alive until we put them in the aquarium. Due to these added expenses, we did not purchase a kick net.



GLASSWORMS
(aka Phantom Midge Larvae)

- **Excellent and irresistible live or frozen food for native fish.**
- **Swims throughout water column (does not sink).**
- **Last for months at 35 - 45 F with weekly water changes.**


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