Application for
Outstanding County Conservation Board EE Program (pop. >35,000)

The **mission** of the Marshall County Environmental Education program is to help the citizens of Marshall County to be more aware of their natural environment, increase their appreciation of the natural environment, and guide them toward wise use and actions in harmony with nature. In simple terms, to create environmentally literate citizens. Our major **goal** is to have EE contact with pre-school through senior citizen ages on a variety of environmental topics utilizing either indoor or outdoor settings. From the new GrimesFarm & Conservation Center to our strong volunteer network to innovative programming, the MCCB EE program is making a difference in the lives of Marshall County's 39,000 residents.

In early October 2003, the **GrimesFarm & Conservation Center** opened its doors to the public. In the 2004-2005 fiscal year, **nearly 3,650 visitors** from 32 states and seven countries signed the guest book. This interpretive facility has been a goal of the MCCB for many years and it is exciting to see it come to fruition. The center is just one of our EE tools to promote environmentally literate citizens. It is a complement to MCCB's natural areas which are also sites for EE programming. From native plantings and a bird feeding station around the nature center to animal tracks and leaf prints stamped in the sidewalk, a visitor's discovery and learning begins.

Inside the center, visitors make a connection to the seasons, wildlife and land through **habitat dioramas-** spring woodland, summer/fall prairie, and fall wetland. Standing under an **interactive replica oak tree**, visitors can view the woodland diorama and get a sense of being a part of the habitat as forest sounds drift through the air. The tree also offers visitors a pullout drawer to count tree rings and doors to open to discover wildlife tenants. **Other interactive exhibits** which help visitors become more aware and connected with their natural environment include: a prairie/soil column unit, sensory awareness table, land stewardship unit with touch screen computer photo gallery of MCCB areas, and a touch table/discovery drawer unit. The "Lions in Iowa!" **traveling exhibit** was also featured. **Over 200 taxidermy mounts** are utilized in the building to give visitors the opportunity to study wildlife up close. **Wainscoting** in the exhibit and classroom uniquely tell the story of using local natural resources. Utilizing a variety of wood from trees in county areas which were blown down in a major windstorm, the MCCB turned tragedy into a testimony and unique interpretive tool. In addition, a **geothermal** system and access to the Grimes Farm via a bike path provide unique interpretive tools to promote environmentally conscious citizens.

To **promote public ownership** of displays in the nature center several approaches were taken. An **Adopt a Drawer Community Service Project** was conducted. Schools, scouts, and local groups could feel ownership by sponsoring drawers in the Discovery Table for $lOO/drawer. All 18 drawers were sponsored and interpretation is complete in nine drawers. Many area residents and groups also helped sponsor larger displays. **Local talents** were utilized through painting of background murals, taxidermy and diorama work. **Volunteers** share of their time by staffing the reception desk, helping with programs, developing displays, maintaining flower beds, and collating the quarterly newsletter to name a few activities. We are privileged to have over 100 volunteers involved in our EE program. The nature center is a dream come true for the MCCB staff and county residents. We are all very proud of this accomplishment and the teamwork involved. We will continue to develop this jewel in Marshall County.

Our EE program began in 1981 and the present naturalist began in 1986. The program has expanded in both depth and breadth. Initial programs focused on awareness and knowledge of nature and later programs begin to reach for issues and actions. Our audience has expanded to include preschool and afterschool programs. We now have one full time and one part time naturalist.

The annual EE budget is about 25 percent of the total conservation board budget. This amount includes staff salaries and supplies. Support is also given to attend training and workshops. This support has allowed Diane Pixler, the full-time naturalist to achieve IAN's professional development certification every year since the award began in 1992. The positive backing of the EE program by the director, staff, and board helps make our EE program effective and efficient.

Marshall County's K-12 enrollment is 7,029. Approximately 3,850 students were served during the last fiscal year. EE programming was presented at **100 percent of the elementaries in the county and 71 percent of the secondary buildings**. Presentations have been developed which match the curriculum maps of the school district. The total number of public and school programs presented during the last year was 236. **Nearly 7,400 people in the county attended EE programs/field trips in addition to the nearly 3,650 visitors** to the nature center. A 25-year plan survey was completed by 629 people in the county and will be used to give us direction in the coming years.

The MCCB has **created several programs initially unique to Marshall County which has spread to other counties,** such as the award-winning Uncle Ike Nature Program, Nature Friends, and Junior Conservationists.

The **Uncle Ike Nature Program**, which was awarded the first Chris Holt Youth EE Award in 1997, began here in 1983 and has been adopted as an official program by the Izaak Walton League of America. Uncle Ikes was developed as a team effort by the MCCB and the local Ikes to get local youth grades 1-5 more involved in conservation. The program has grown from monthly Saturday programs to include a very popular **summer** day camp and an **after school** program. Many children who have passed our grade 5 age limit ask to be junior leaders so they can come back to camp. Sara Rees, previous Uncle Ike participant and now a college graduate, reflects on her experiences: "I have greatly treasured my involvement... The creative and ingenious activities leave deep impressions... The enthusiasm of the parents is another tribute to the effectiveness and importance of the Uncle Ike program...I have seen no other program that has so effectively combined learning and fun, teaching and laughing, to such a degree of excellence." What a wonderful tribute to this 21 year old program.

Not only is the Uncle Ike program itself creative, but the individual monthly programs and summer day camps are presented in creative, innovative ways. Some themes include: Climb the Stewardship Mountain, Exciting Cycles of Nature, Woodland Wanderers, Close Encounters Underfoot, and Iowa's Own Tropical Zone. Last year's theme "Following Famous Footsteps" used IAN's Natural Resources booklets to bring alive famous conservationists and environmental issues.

The Uncle Ike After school activity kits are user friendly and fun. The most recent titles are "Eyes & Ears & Feet are Neat" (animal adaptation), "Earth Savers" (environmental stewardship), "Alive & Wild" (wildlife survival), "Going Buggy" (insects), and "Water Wonders". Each kit contains a children's book to be read aloud, game/activity, craft, and an evaluation sheet.

To increase nature awareness and appreciation in young children with parent interaction **Nature Friends** was created in 1987. Each group session involves a series of four sensory awareness and hands on activities. The parent/guardian share in activities so learning and nature discovery can continue at home. Sessions rotate to four different county parks so parents become mote familiar with county areas. Titles in this year's cycle included: "Creepy Crawler Race Track", "Beat a Leaf', "Teeny Tiny Tweezer Trek", and "Warble, Cheep, or Tweet." Evaluations indicate high marks for the current program and high desire to attend the program next year. Comments included: "I loved the exploring", Nice outings", "Can we stay longer?" We will continue to offer this opportunity to families.

Through a REAP grant and in cooperation with the Marshall County Extension Office, the Junior Conservationists program begin in March 2004. Patterned after the Master Conservationist program, this service learning opportunity is geared for middle schoolers. We designed a three day Adventure Camp which was held at the State 4-H camp in August. Monthly after school sessions included wildlife observation, sustainable ag, urban ecology, environmental issues, and public relations. These students have given back to the community through educational presentations and service projects.

For a second time, we conducted a series of **Master Conservationist** Classes. Field exploration and hands-on learning were the main focus. Indoor presentations supplemented the sessions after sunset. Using various natural areas in the county, participants became more familiar with the county parks ecosystems and the interrelationships in nature. Based on personal comments and completed evaluation forms, the class was very beneficial to the participants: "It was enriching, enlightening, and exciting." "A well-rounded program condensed into a few short weeks." "I gained a wealth of new knowledge and a

deeper appreciation for our wild places and Iowa's natural heritage." "My interests have increased. I plan to keep learning more." We plan to continue this valuable program.

Our **Brown Bag Bunch Series** was one of the initial sources of volunteers. We continue to offer this series of informal weekday, daytime programs at various county parks during lunch. Topics vary, but involve exploration and observation. Bird watching is one of the favorite interests of participants. The scheduling of this series attracts those who have daytime hours available, thus potential volunteers.

During the past years we have offered diverse programming. **Basic ecology**: Nature Mapping training, prairie walk, monarch tagging, owl prowl, plant a tree night, Master Conservationist series, woodcock watch, hawk watch, waterfowl watch, shorebird watch, breeding bird survey, African wildlife, Mountain Lion Update, Wolf Center bus tour, DeSoto bend bus tour, Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge trip, Earth Day "Plug-in to E-Cycling", winter wildlife, wildflower walk, Uncle Ike Nature Program; **Resource management**: backyard wildlife habitat, Earth Day "Help a Habitat", wood duck and goose banding, woodworking for wildlife, turkey hunting tips, hunter safety, fish management, deer antler measuring, Master Conservationist series, snow geese in peril, simplifying, Uncle Ike Nature Program; Arts: Halloween Hike, Prairie Heritage Day, Conservation Poster Contest; **Historical/Cultural**: Prairie Heritage Day, Explore with Lewis and Clark, Artifact Road Show, Wildlife in Iowa, archaeology in Iowa, Mormon Ridge Log Cabin, Rockford fossils, Solar System Impacts; **Recreation**: Winterfest, fly-fishing, turkey hunting tips, sport fishing, canoe float, stargazing, deer antler measuring, astrophotography, nut-picking party, Dutch oven cooking.

To spread the word about our programs we publish a **quarterly newsletter**, "Seasons". It is mailed to just over 1,500 people. A **teacher newsletter**, "Nature Notes" is prepared and sent every other month to about 380 teachers. We utilize the local radio stations and newspapers as well through radio spots and a weekly column written by the director with contributions from the staff.

Passive interpretation occurs at several locations. Interpretive signs are in place at the Marietta Sand Prairie (plant identification), Green Castle Recreation Area (Trumpeter Swans, prairie ecosystem), and Timmons Grove (tree identification). An interpretive trail "From the Ground Up" is in place at the Grimes Farm. Severe weather damaged two of our interpretive trails at other parks so they will be adjusted in the future. Additional signs are also planned at the bison exhibit and log cabin historical site. Brochures of various county parks are available at our office.

We coordinated a "Plug-in to E-Cycling" **Earth Day display** and celebration which was held at the local mall. We arranged assistance from volunteers, local businesses and agencies. We handed out over 200 free tree seedlings and literature to about 400 visitors. The display was also bi-lingual.

We also created **several temporary EE displays** in the courthouse and in the nature center. We feature a monthly showing of nature art in one of the display cases at the nature center.

Cooperation with other agencies and organizations creates synergy for EE in Marshall County. Team efforts include: Izaak Walton League (Uncle Ikes, poster contest), Soil & Water Conservation District (poster contest, supplies), Central Iowa Ornithologists (poster contest, supplies), Iowa Valley Continuing Education (Earth Day display, programming, program space), Fisher Community Center (program space), Marshall Town Center (display space), local businesses (Earth Day), 4-H & Scout groups, ISU Extension! America Reads, Marshall County Landfill, area public libraries, Marshalltown Park & Rec., Marshalltown Community School District, Marshalltown Garden Club, Amateur Astronomers of Central Iowa, Iowa DNR, and Story and Hardin County Conservation Boards.

In conclusion, the Marshall County Conservation Board EE program strives for quality and creativity to meet its goals. The positive atmosphere in the office and county toward EE is a great asset to the effectiveness of our program.