November 30, 2006

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IAN / ICEC Awards Committee
Polk County Conservation
11407 NW Jester Drive
Granger, IA 50109

RE: Ding Darling EE Award

Thank you for the opportunity to nominate Dallas County Conservation Board's Prairie Awakening for this prestigious award. This year marks the ninth year of the celebration and its future is bright as the event continues to grow and evolve.

Description of Program

The core of the **Prairie Awakening Celebration** is an all day public event held in an arena carved out of a reconstructed tall-grass prairie at the Kuehn Conservation Area, in Dallas County. The activities of the celebration include Native American dance, drumming, storytelling, and flute music used as environmental education tools to help our citizens recognize that humankind and our cultural traditions are a part of the native landscape.

Drums representing Nations in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota and Canada participate. The celebration includes a number of traditional dances featuring performances by Native dancers, intertribal songs which invite the attending public to dance, and ceremonial dances connected to the spiritual traditions of the attending First Peoples. Throughout the day, the arena director, interprets the role of the drum in native cultures and explains the origins and stories of the various dances. The audience is encouraged to immerse themselves and experience the drum, song and dance firsthand by joining with the dancers in the arena. Often, traditional ceremonies, such as the "Wiping of the Tears", are conducted within the context of the celebration, to honor elders or members of the community that have begun their spirit journeys. The evening portion of the celebration features flute music interspersed with the legends and lore associated with the flute and its songs.

Throughout the day, satellite educational events occur outside the celebration arena that extend and enrich the participants experience and facilitate a more personal level of interaction between the attending public and the native presenters. These events include presentations on traditional children's games, ethno botanical walks through the prairie and woodlands, storytelling, demonstrations of traditional skills such as flint knapping, bow-drill, and atlatl demonstrations.

The celebration concludes at nightfall with the retirement of the flags and staffs in the arena, a closing ceremony and an evening song. The final event of the celebration is a story telling session around a bonfire which challenges the participants to carry the lessons of the day with them throughout the year in their personal lives. A challenge is extended to continue the awakening process of the day by participating in the numerous environmental education offering and volunteer opportunities offered by our department.

Inipis, often called sweat lodges, have been constructed on site to allow the traditional people of the Native communities to conduct their ceremonies necessary for their preparation for the celebrations.

The key-note Native American performers at the Celebration include: Jerome Kills Small, Professor of Languages at South Dakota University and traditional storyteller, Ogallala Lakota– Dallas Chief Eagle, 4 time World Champion Hoop Dancer, Rosebud Lakota– Brian Akipa, nationally recognized recording artist, renown native flute player and builder, Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota– Thunderbird Drum, Anisnabe First Peoples Nation, Ontario.

There are two major components of the Prairie Awakening which precede the Celebration. The first of these is an **Educator's Workshop, titled " A Journey into Indigenous Learning**, which occurs each year on the day before the Awakening. The target audience for this workshop has varied through the years to include the educators of Dallas County's school districts, the educators of the school districts served by AEA 11, homeschoolers and non-traditional educators and the membership of the Iowa Association of Naturalists. Each year an average of 30 educators participate in the workshop.

Regardless of the audience, the format of the workshop has remained constant. There is no syllabus for the day's events. Participants are told that they will learn what they come ready to learn and this will be a very personal set of outcomes. The day begins with a ceremony and song to recognize the sunrise and a ceremony to prepare the learners for the day's journey. The classroom for the day will be the Middle Raccoon River with the seats and rows arranged by the current's influence on the canoes and kayaks carrying the participants.

As the participants navigate their way down the Raccoon they stage up at designated rock bars to interact with the workshop's presenters. A typical roster of the presenters includes the drum and singers of the Anisnabe nation from Lac Suel Ontario, Dallas Chief Eagle, Jerome Kills Small, Howard Crow Eagle and Bryan Akipa.

At these stations the learners are encouraged to explore the role of the drum, song, oral history, dance, story telling and music in the traditional teaching practices of indigenous elders. The participants are allowed an opportunity to immerse themselves in a classroom as they pursue a curriculum that is self-directed and experiential. The goal of the workshop is to provide the educators with first-person-sourced information on which to base their teachings of native peoples and cultures. Additionally, we encourage the educators to experience for themselves the methods of indigenous learning with the hope that they will then afford their students, back in their classrooms, an opportunity to take this same experiential journey. Changing the teacher's role to that of a learner, in a wild place, has served to be one of our environmental education program's most effective lessons.

The second component preceding the celebration is the **Educational Outreach Program**. This program involves all of the school districts in our county: Adel-Desoto-Minburn, Dallas Center-Grimes, Earlham, Perry, Van Meter, Waukee, West Central Valley and the Woodward Academy. On various years, either the drum, dancers, singers and storytellers of the Anisnabe people or Dallas Chief Eagle have visited these schools to present interactive programs to the age levels, ranging from K through 12, with curriculum goals and local standards related to Native Americans and environmental education. These half day programs begin with a large group presentation and then divide into small group sessions to engage the students at a personal level. Other outreach programs have presented to local Care Centers, programs hosted by corporate sponsors in the Des Moines area for their employees and a presentation at the State Historical Building open to the general public. These outreach programs not only enrich the educational experiences of the targeted students, but also serve as pre-trip experiences for field days that are part of our department's environmental education program throughout the school year. They also serve as our best promotional activity, as inevitably the students will bring their parents to the Celebration for a more extensive experience following this cultural inoculation.

Creative and Effective Nature of the Prairie Awakening Celebration

How do you awaken a prairie? Across the board in Iowa, conservation agencies are charged with the protection, preservation and reconstruction of native landscapes. Is it enough to gather local ecotype seeds, utilize the best science in seedbed preparation– seed mixtures– planting schedules, incorporate fire regimes and patiently work towards the restoration of Iowa's native communities? In Dallas County we felt the prairie was not awakening. An important constituent of the prairie community was absent, kept at a distance, separate, isolated and disconnected. All the science in the growing field of ecosystem restoration could not awaken this prairie.

To "AWAKEN" a prairie, humans must be returned! We can not view nature from afar. We must step once again inside the circle and remember our connections, renew our relationships. To awaken a prairie, and to have an effective environmental education program, we needed to remind the current inhabitants of our county of their prairie heritage. The wildness that resides within the prairie and within the beasts, humans included, of the prairie must be returned. Our answer, at Dallas County, to the awakening of a prairie, took us to the reservations of the former First Peoples of this place. It was our hope that if we could return the song, the dance, the stories, and the music of these first peoples of the prairie that they could serve as a cultural bridge to help return the contemporary culture to the prairie. Guided by the help of traditional peoples, we learned the respectful ways to ask the help of these first people of our prairies to return to their ancestral homelands to assist us in our project. We have found that their participation in our celebration serves also to preserve and promote their cultural heritages on the reservations. Together we invite the current residents to join us in recognizing their place here in Dallas County.

After participating in the celebration for 3 years, Jerome Kills Small, a Lakota elder and professor of the Lakota Languages at the University of South Dakota, presented the idea to us that what we were offering the participants of our celebration was termed "*Maka Ochante*" in his language. The best translation is a knowledge or awareness of the heartbeat of the place– a sense of your place. This heartbeat, present in the voice of the native drum, had been silent in our place to many for more than a century. The Prairie Awakening Celebration has returned this heartbeat and provided an awakened *"Maka Ochante"* for the thousands of Celebration participants over the last nine years.

This unique awakening approach is definitely creative. Ecosystem management and environmental education in the form of an invitation to dance, sing and share stories of the place. Educating educators not with the newest bright and shiny curriculum program to come down the pike but by going old school to reflect on the educational traditions of indigenous peoples. The recognition that humankind and our cultural traditions are part of the native landscape is not only creative, it has proven essential to meeting our goals at Dallas County Conservation.

A final note on creativity. We frame our environmental education efforts now around the objective of helping our populace to grow native. Understand, this is not some new age fad for "want-to-be" Indians. Instead, as we have learned from the elders, the quality of native is not a birthright. A native has been redefined for us and our environmental program as an individual that possess *"Maka Ochante"*. This connection of cultural heritage, wildness and humankind has created for us a platform on which to forward our department's goals.

Is it effective? Dallas County Conservation is the only governmental agency that we can identify that has been presented a eagle staff by the Native community, to commemorate a site and event. This is a huge honor in native traditions and speaks volume to the Native community's view of our Prairie Awakening. Many of the presenters have been involved in the Celebration for the nine years of its history. The participation by new members of the Native community continues to grow with each year as we attempt to balance the inclusion and traditions of the past performers with the growth and extension presented by the new participants. Perhaps the strongest testimony comes in the form of the pilgrimage made each year by the Anisnabe people of Ontario. It is a 32 hour round trip van ride for their contingency each year and they have awakened the prairie with us all nine years.

The participation of thirty plus volunteers on the Prairie Awakening Advisory Council which serves to direct the continued evolution of the awakening also demonstrates its effectiveness. Dallas County Conservation originated this awakening, but it has now taken on its own life. These volunteers invest hundreds of hours working with our staff to facilitate the success of each year's Celebration. Without their continued dedication to this awakening it would have long ago outstripped our department's resources.

The educators that join our journey into indigenous learning illustrate its effectiveness by their return year after year. A delegation of three teachers from the Nevada school district have stated that it would be impossible for them to begin a new year of teaching each fall if they could not rekindle their spirits annually on this journey. Each year participants share how this journey has changed them personally and changed the way they help their students to learn.

The outreach programs are a highly sought after element in our environmental education program. We rotate these programs through the various districts of our county and never fail to fill the days of the week before the Celebration with school based presentations. Administrators opt to expend their scarce financial resources to bring these programs to their students.

The truest measure of the effectiveness of this program would come in the responds of one of the students of our environmental education programs to the question– Do you have *"Maka Ochante"*? The educational landscape of our environmental education program has been altered by the awakening. Every program we present has embedded in it the goal to share this sense of place with our learners. Not only do these learners know this Lakota phrase, but they understand the importance of its presence in their lives.

Finally, a more pragmatic view of creativeness and effectiveness. This event exists on the back of grant monies awarded on criteria that include these same descriptors. Continued support through grant monies by the Humanities Iowa, Iowa Arts Council, National Endowment for the Humanities and the Bock Family reflect their opinions on this matter.

Evaluation

The method of evaluation we employ for this event has been somewhat driven by our funding mechanisms and their requirement for an assessment device. We have employed Jean Eells, of E Resources Group- Environment and Design, to produce for the Celebration a evaluation survey. The results of this survey, completed on site by the Celebration's participants, were reviewed by Jean, and then shared with our staff and the volunteer Advisory Council. Based on these annual evaluations we attempt to be responsive to the public's perceptions. A core group of elders from the Native community also works with our staff and the Advisory Council to direct the evolution of the Celebration based both on feedback from the survey and input from the Native community.

Number of Individuals Reached

The typical audience for the Prairie Awakening Celebration over its nine year history has been 800 to1000 participants. Average participation for the Journey into Indigenous Learning Educators' Workshop would be 30 educators. The Educational Outreach programming in county school reaches between 900 to 1200 students each year.

Thank you for this opportunity to nominate the Dallas County Conservation Department's Prairie Awakening Celebration for your prestigious award. Please feel free to contact me if I can further assist you in your selection process.

Chris Adkins, Environmental Education Coordinator / Naturalist

Chris Adkins

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