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State: Missouri

Program Category – Human Resources/ Education and Natural Resources

Program Name: State Parks Youth Corps

Administering Agency: Department of Natural Resources, Division of State Parks

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1. How long has the program been operated?

Governor Jeremiah W. (“Jay”) Nixon challenged youth to “Think Outside” by announcing the State Parks Youth Corps, more familiarly known as SPYC (“spi-see”), during his State of the State Address to the Missouri Legislature on January 20, 2010. Youth began working at Missouri State Parks and Historic Sites in May of 2010. Building off of SPYC’s first-year success, it returned in 2011 with expanded opportunities and an extended season.

2. Describe the program:

- SPYC was created with four major goals in mind – (1) to employ young people in a productive way, (2) to provide these young people with valuable work experience, (3) to allow them the opportunity to enjoy the beauty, grandeur and cultural heritage of Missouri’s state parks and historic sites, and (4) to maintain, improve and enrich those state parks and historic sites.
- SPYC is a new and creative approach because it is a unique alliance of public, private and not-for-profit partners addressing economic challenges that confront every state – addressing youth unemployment and managing park improvements, stewardship and maintenance. The public piece of SPYC funding comes from a portion of the dedicated parks sales tax that the state constitution affords the Department of Natural Resources’ Division of State Parks (“Parks”), and from Parks’ collaboration with the Department of Economic Development’s Division of Workforce Development, which allowed SPYC to tap in to funding from such sources as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Federal Workforce Investment Act and tax credit vouchers through the Neighborhood Assistance Program. The private piece of SPYC funding comes from the strong connections that Parks has forged with companies like Bass Pro Shops, which provided boots to SPYC participants at cost. And the not-for-profit piece of SPYC funding arises out of Parks’ connection to organizations like the Conservation Federation of Missouri, which sponsored the tax credit vouchers to raise funds for equipment to ready the SPYC for work.
- Specific activities and operations of the first two years of SPYC consist of employing almost 1700 youth (ages 17 to 25); providing those youth with specific job skills and training while encouraging general good work habits; supervising participants in the completion of numerous conservation stewardship and historic property restorations, and assisting in the operation of all 85 state parks & historic sites.
- SPYC has proved to be very effective. Not only has SPYC given young people the opportunity to work in the parks and historic sites while acquiring skills that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives, it has also given Parks the chance to complete projects that otherwise would have been deferred. Here are examples of the tangible results of work done by SPYC participants are:
  - Painting buildings, repairing roofs and windows, including repairing and reroofing several Civilian Conservation Corps-era buildings at Lake of the Ozarks State Park; painting and reroofing buildings at Camp Smokey (the camp used by Civilian Conservation Corps Company 1713 from 1933-
1939) at Roaring River State Park; and painting 10 cabins at Thousand Hills State Park.

- Planting trees and maintaining landscapes, including planting an urban garden at the Scott Joplin State Historic Site; planting flowers, mulching and adding rock to flower beds at Bennett Spring State Park; planting and maintaining native plants in the wildflower garden at Prairie State Park; extensively repairing and clearing landscaping at the Creole House at Felix Vallé House State Historic Site; and landscaping a new bicycle/walking trail overlook at Watkins Woolen Mill State Park and State Historic Site.

- Building, clearing and signing trails, including building the first designated mountain biking trail at Finger Lake State Park; assisting in the construction of the White River Valley Trail at Table Rock State Park; rebuilding Sheppard Point Trail at Trail of Tears State Park; maintaining 18 miles of trail at Knob Noster State Park; maintaining more than 15 miles of trail at Castlewood State Park; performing trail work on approximately 17 miles of trail at Crowder State Park; constructing six miles of trail at Cuivre River State Park; maintaining trails in the Gans Creek Wild Area at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park using hand tools such as scythes to cut the grass and cross-cut saws to remove downed trees; and performing erosion work on two trails at Van Meter State Park.

- Making inventories of historic artifacts and entering them into a database, including uncovering and cataloging historically significant archaeological finds at Nathan Boone Homestead State Historic Site; assisting with the restoration of a historic boat at Lewis and Clark State Park; photographing artifacts and storing them with proper archival-storage materials at Arrow Rock State Historic Site; photographing more than 700 artifacts to be included in the PastPerfect catalog program at Hunter-Dawson State Historic Site; and re-bagging hundreds of artifacts into archival-quality storage bags at Felix Vallé State Historic Site.

- Preparing for re-enactment of the 150th anniversary of a civil war battle at Battle of Lexington State Historic Site.

- Assisting with stewardship activities, including constructing a new stairway to access the shelter at Thousand Hills State Park; installing split rail fence at the beach parking lots at Table Rock State Park; preparing inventories of native plant species at various state parks; assisting with exotic plant eradication at several state parks; planting hundreds of grasses and shrubs as part of a confluence restoration project at Edward “Ted” and Pat Jones Confluence Point State Park; preparing for historic Missouri River flooding at Big Lake State Park; completing natural resource surveys on amphibians, reptiles and fish at Bollinger Mill State Historic Site; completing an erosion control project on the interpretative trail at Grand Gulf State Park; participating in prescribed burns at Taum Sauk Mountain State Park; and establishing a stream team at Montauk State Park.

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o Providing seasonal interpretation, including conducting more than 100 interpretive programs and activities at Lake Wappapello State Park; opening the Wilhite Store at Dillard Mill State Historic Site for the first time in nine years and providing interpretation of the store; and conducting interpretive tours of the Watkins family home, woolen mill, outbuildings and grounds at Watkins Woolen Mill State Park and State Historic Site.

o Assisting in offices and visitor centers at state parks and historic sites throughout the state.

o Developing and implementing social media efforts to promote state parks, including developing 145 videos for the state parks website and taking photographs at all 85 state parks and historic sites.

o Documenting and marketing the SPYC program.

And then there are the intangible results of the SPYC program—passing on to the participants Missourian’s rich history of appreciating our outdoor heritage and cultural treasures while also teaching them the value of public service.

3. The SPYC program originated in Missouri with Bill Bryan and Julie Gibson. Bill is the Director of Missouri State Parks. Bill’s address is P.O. Box 176, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0176, his telephone number is (573) 751-9392 and his e-mail address is bill.bryan@dnr.mo.gov. Julie is the Director of Workforce Development. Julie’s address is P.O. Box 1087, Jefferson City, MO 65102-1087, her telephone number is (573) 751-3999 and her e-mail address is julie.gibson@ded.mo.gov.

4. Other states—Alaska, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming—have programs that employ youth in their state parks, or have had them in the past, but none of these programs have fostered the partnerships, collaborations and funding innovations that SPYC has.

5. The limitations or obstacles that other states may encounter when attempting to adopt an innovative program like SPYC is the challenge of moving agencies, private companies and non-for-profits away from a narrow view of how to accomplish their missions and moving them toward working as a team to cooperatively and collaboratively find new ways to use traditional funding sources to employ and educate young people while at the same time maintaining, improving and enriching their state parks and historic sites.