

Public Lands Partner Award Nomination
Corps of Engineers Natural Resources Education Foundation

This award recognizes an exemplary partnership for a stunning achievement to protect and preserve our public lands and enhance the experiences of their visitors and users. The award is presented in tandem to both the nonprofit(s) and agency partner(s) for their shared achievements in the 2016 and/or 2017 calendar year.

Describe the structure and duration of this public-nonprofit partnership

The Corps of Engineers Natural Resources Education Foundation, doing business as The Corps Foundation (CF), is a 501(c)(3) foundation incorporated on September 13, 2006. A Memorandum of Understanding signed October 30, 2007 between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Corps Foundation established a cooperative relationship to foster contributions and partnerships that support environmental and recreation projects at USACE lakes and waterways. Under the terms of the agreement, the Foundation agreed to undertake and encourage education, technical and other assistance activities in support of the USACE Natural Resource Management (NRM) Program. The Corps Foundation is the only nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated exclusively to supporting our nation's lakes, rivers and their many resources operated by the USACE. Their goals are to have a well-informed and involved public, build strong partnerships, and maintain healthy, sustainable, and accessible natural resources.

The Corps Foundation was modeled after the National Park Foundation, National Forest Foundation, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and has been working hard over the last decade to build their organization. To accomplish their goals, the Foundation established a membership organization consisting of private individuals with a desire to contribute or volunteer in support of the CF's mission. Initially the membership consisted largely of USACE retirees; later, active USACE employees and USACE cooperating associations were included.

As an all-volunteer organization directed and managed by nine dedicated board members, the Corps Foundation has evolved gradually since its inception. They now have a diverse board consisting of retired USACE employees, non-profit specialists, and representatives from key constituencies including marine, corporate and business leaders with an interest and passion in connecting the public with their USACE lakes. The initial CF business plan focused on assisting the USACE to complete unfunded work by soliciting donations from private sector stakeholders such as equipment manufacturers/retailers, tourism industry, marina industry, etc. Since then, the CF has expanded its priorities to include facilitating partnerships and growing local friends groups, serving as a connection for partner organizations, increasing education and public awareness, and serving as an advocate for USACE lakes and programs to reduce legislative and policy barriers.

In 2016, the CF formed an Advisory Council (AC) to provide advice and support to the Foundation Board of Directors to develop and validate the strategic plan. The AC provides feedback, ideas, and opinions that reflect the views of stakeholders and constituents. It plays an instrumental public relations role and provides the Board with a fresh perspective on program issues. It helps the Board brainstorm, discuss and determine organizational directions and execute action items. The AC consists of members from private sector corporations, universities, non-profit organizations, state agencies, government consultants, and retired USACE staff.

What measurable and meaningful impacts on America's public lands and their visitors were accomplished in calendar year 2016 or 2017 partnership?

2016 and 2017 were banner years for the Corps Foundation. During this time, they not only continued serving as an umbrella organization for cooperating associations, providing funding for the Excellence in Partnerships, Volunteer of the Year Award and Volunteer Excellence Coin program, assisting in partnership and volunteer training for USACE NRM staff, but also successfully sought out and received grant funding and donations, created a new award program, developed a toolkit, and amplified their focus on advocacy for the USACE NRM program.

In 2016, the Corps Foundation partnered with Bass Pro Shops to create the Enduring Service Volunteer Award to annually recognize and honor long term service and outstanding accomplishments by volunteers at USACE lakes who have achieved results in such areas as conservation, education, recreation, safety and community engagement. This provided a third tier of awards available to volunteers, with a plaque, \$250 cash award and \$250 Bass Pro gift certificate provided to the recipients. This is a great way to encourage long term volunteer service at USACE lakes in a manner that the USACE cannot do on their own since they have no legal authority to spend appropriated funds on awards. Now in its second year, award recipients so far have provided a total of 80 years and 51,000 hours of exemplary service.

When the USACE encountered internal hurdles in 2016 to develop a guide to assist NRM staff in engaging the public to create new friends groups and cooperating associations, the CF stepped in and took over the task to author the "Tool Kit for Developing a Cooperating Association Partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." This step by step reference guide has been something NRM staff have been seeking for many years. Since the document was released, five new cooperating associations have been formed, helping the USACE to strengthen relationships between the agency and the public it serves.

Building on \$175,000 of grant funding received in 2015 from the U.S. Coast Guard for water safety education, the CF was awarded another \$350,000 in grants in 2016 and 2017 to expand the program. In support of Every Kid in a Park, the CF also successfully applied for and received \$10,000 in transportation grants to bring 4th graders to two USACE lakes to learn firsthand about the many things that USACE does in their area.

Other notable achievements in the past two years include facilitation of two NAI Certified Interpretive Guide classes for USACE NRM staff, co-sponsorship with NAI of an Interpreter's Pocket Guide, a water safety partnership with 39 Burgerville restaurants in the Northwest to use Bobber the Water Safety Dog tray liners that can also be used as a template at any fast food chain, fundraising efforts at Chittenden Locks resulting in donation of a \$1 million master interpretive plan and \$400,000 to revitalize visitor facilities at a century-old resource, and a new partnership with the Great Outdoors Fund to develop public-private partnerships.

Why is 2018 the ideal time to honor these nominees?

Since the inception of the Corps Foundation in 2006, the organization has been steadily increasing its capacity and successes during a decade of dedicated service. As with any new organization, the first few years required substantial time to set strategic goals and objectives, develop relationships to work cohesively as a unit, and simply figure out what worked and what didn't. The achievements over the past three years in particular exhibit a marked rise in the CF's abilities to gain new funding sources, create products for the public, tools for USACE NRM staff to help them engage partners, and an enhanced role in advocacy efforts.

In 2015, the CF added a grant writer to their team and supported the USACE National Water Safety Program by applying to the U.S Coast Guard for a \$175,000 grant to create an adult focused boating and water safety educational campaign. The primary purpose of the "Life Jackets Worn... Nobody Mourns" (LJWNM) campaign is to provoke adult men to wear life jackets. This target audience was chosen based on drowning data at USACE lakes where 88% of all water-related fatalities were men, with 84% not wearing a life jacket.

The Life Jackets Worn...Nobody Mourns campaign was so successful that the USCG awarded another \$350,000 total in funds for 2016 and 2017 to significantly expand the campaign. Over the course of three years, the grant funds have been used to create six audio PSAs, fifteen video PSAs, eight poster, banner and billboard designs, the Lake Guard mobile game app, 26 social media ad designs, purchase 125 vinyl tailgate wraps, and 1,400 vinyl banners. The materials are being utilized nationwide by the USACE, other Federal, state and non-profit organizations, businesses, and internationally in Japan. Breakout sessions about the campaign were presented at the National Drowning Prevention Alliance Conference, International Boating and Water Safety Summit (IBWSS), and the USACE NRM Workshop. Without the grants received by the CF, development of the LJWNM campaign would not have been possible.

At the IBWSS, the CF received several awards for the LJWNM campaign, including first place for its PSAs and in the electronic education category for the mobile game app. The CF was also the recipient of the USACE National Water Safety Program Lifeline Team Award in 2017 for their contributions to the national water safety program.

In addition to augmented financial support for the USACE, the CF has recently increased their role in advocating with key leaders on issues affecting the USACE NRM program. The CF presented during an interagency session at the 2017 Outdoor Retailer Show, advocating for support of USACE programs, engaged the Outdoor Recreation Industry Roundtable and the American Recreation Coalition to emphasize the economic value of USACE lakes to their surrounding communities, and has written letters to Congress regarding the impacts of a government shutdown on communities and businesses that rely on access to USACE lands and waters, and on behalf of cooperating associations to support legislation for cooperative joint management of USACE parks.

Please provide any additional examples that illustrate the nominee's success in supporting public lands and their visitors.

While the Corps Foundation has made huge leaps in their programs the past few years, this should not overshadow all that they have accomplished since their origin. From the very start, the CF has found sponsors to partner with USACE lakes. They supported the Friends of Barren River Lake with the development of a website for the Friends water safety, volunteer, environmental stewardship and cultural resources activities at Barren River. They helped find sponsors to fund Niobrara High School students' attendance to the Annual National Service-Learning Conference, where the class was awarded the Most Outstanding Project by the National Youth Leadership Council for their work in controlling Purple Loosestrife along the Missouri River. The CF also sought partners and grants to acquire sufficient funds to complete design and initiate construction of an expansion to the Caesar Creek Visitor Center.

Since 2011, the CF has funded the annual Excellence in Partnerships and National Volunteer Awards, providing plaques and certificates for the recipients and paying for award ceremony supplies. These awards recognize outstanding partnerships and service to the USACE, with ceremonies held in the recipient's communities where they are recognized in front of their peers.

In 2012, the CF partnered with the American Park Network and the Allstate Boat division to produce and place water safety interpretive panels at 100 USACE lakes throughout the nation. In 2013, they began sponsoring grant writing classes for USACE NRM staff and assisting in teaching biannual Partnerships in Natural Resources USACE training sessions.

In 2014, the CF created a survey of their membership and USACE NRM staff which revealed a deficiency in keeping open lines of communication from the CF to its constituents. As a result, they updated their membership brochure and website, created a quarterly newsletter and annual report, provide presentations at USACE NRM ranger workshops and other classes, and post regular announcements on Facebook to keep everyone informed.

In 2015, the CF created the Volunteer Excellence coin to recognize the vital daily role that volunteers play in sustaining lakes and waterways, identify exceptional volunteers, and draw attention to their vast skills and contributions. Volunteers play an invaluable role in helping the USACE implement its programs. The service of more than 48,000 volunteers annually equates to approximately 27% augmentation to the USACE NRM workforce. The CF will be expanding the coin program in 2018 with additional funding from Bass Pro Shops to provide yet another level of volunteer recognition.

When you cumulatively add up all that the Corps Foundation has done in 10 years for the public lands and waters managed by the USACE and for our visitors, it is even more astounding to note that everything accomplished has been done through a 100% volunteer, unpaid board and advisory council. Their passion for providing healthy, sustainable natural resources for the public is paramount to the success of the Corps Foundation. Each of these dedicated individuals are truly deserving of the Public Lands Partner Award and so much more.