

Conservation and Community Education Strand

ICF's Annual Midwest Crane Count: Counting Beyond Cranes
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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to develop a Program Plan for the Crane Count. The Program Plan establishes a mission, goals, and objectives for the Crane Count, with specific recommendations for future improvements and direction. This plan was created through a variety of sequential steps including: a) review and content analysis of historic program documents, b) assessment of current program status through the North American Association for Environmental Education's (NAAEE) publication Nonformal Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence (NEEPGE), c) stakeholder input through questionnaires and a focus group, d) development of a logic model of displaying current program components, and e) evaluation of current program educational materials with another NAAEE publication, Environmental Education Materials: Guidelines for Excellence (EEMGE). Through use of the Program Plan, ICF can a) determine program direction in the context of strategic planning outcomes, b) better justify the Crane Count and its resource needs, c) begin measuring program effectiveness with established objectives, d) improve the program for volunteer participants, and e) more effectively work to support ICF's mission and Conservation Education Department efforts.

MAJOR FINDINGS

A mission, seven goals, and twenty objectives were developed for the Crane Count based on historic program documents. While they are ambitious in scope, they are consistent with ICF's mission, and hold commonalities with EE. Their first order of importance is that they explicitly state the scope of the Crane Count and what it is intended to do. Furthermore, by associating the objectives with existing program resources a significant gap is revealed: only 30% of the program's objectives are currently being addressed. The potential now exists to measure the degree to which the Crane Count is in meeting its mission, goals, and objectives. It is now possible to create or adapt resources to specifically address the majority of objectives.

The North American Association for Environmental Education helps to set well-founded standards and best practices in the field of EE through their Guidelines for Excellence series. Through use of NEEPGE, the Crane Count's current status as an EE program was evaluated. While these guidelines are not an absolute, the results point out several things about the Crane Count worth consideration. That the Crane Count is by some measure a success is evidenced by its age (it began in 1976), however, NEEPGE reveals that the program could be far more successful than it currently is. The two strongest Key Characteristics for the Crane Count were Organizational Needs and Capacities (at 55.3%) and Program Delivery Resources (at 61%). The remaining four Characteristics were all below 36%. The weakest score was for Evaluation, rating at 3.67%. For the Crane Count to continue, and build upon its past success, the results of this evaluation should be closely examined, and used as a guide in determining the

program's future. Continued incorporation of existing EE research and resources can further enrich the Crane Count.

Evaluation of the Crane Count's resources through EEMGE revealed a similar picture – the resources are functional, but are largely overwhelmed by a variety of weaknesses. On a relative rating scale from 1-5, with 1 corresponding to Indicators Not Met, and 5 to Indicators Met, the Crane Count's resources as whole rated 3 (Indicators Moderately Met) or less. At the "Moderately Met" level were the following three Key Characteristics: Fairness and Accuracy, Depth, and Usability. The two Characteristics for which the indicators were not met were Emphasis on Skills Building and Action Orientation. Examining the Crane Count's resources, and associating them with the program's objectives, this rating is further confirmed. The Crane Count currently has little in place to address skills building and action, despite objectives that seek such ends.

Previously unknown information about the Crane Count's primary target audiences was revealed. The demographics of both County Coordinators (volunteer facilitators working at the county level in the Count's five-state area) and participants are heavily skewed towards a 45 years of age and older bracket – the Coordinators at 77%, and participants at 87%. This points out concerns for the program's future as these audiences depreciate, as the Crane Count's success is largely dependent on these people. These individuals evidence a strong commitment to the Crane Count. Fifty-seven percent of Coordinators have facilitated 6 times or more, and 76% of participants have participated 6 times or more. For most of these individuals, it appears that once they

become involved, they stay involved. When presented with a list of potential improvements, both audiences indicated a wide variety of items that would improve the Crane Count experience for them, ranging from access to historic Count data to youth-centered Crane Count materials. Audiences indicate several motivations for their involvement, amongst which the strongest are: as a contribution to a conservation organization, to improve understanding of crane populations, to introduce others to or to experience the natural world, and perhaps not surprisingly, to see cranes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before any other actions are taken, with the information the Program Plan provides, the Crane Count should be examined in the context of ICF's strategic planning outcomes, and the desired vision of the future that it describes. Decisions on the next step should be made accordingly, whether it means contemplating the total elimination of the program, building internal capacities of the CED, or looking outside of ICF for means to institute program improvements and recommendations.

Further research should be conducted, with the Crane Count as its subject. Additional research could assist in making determinations about the program's future, but has other benefits as well. Much of ICF's work is unique. ICF has successfully bred all fifteen of the world's crane species. Its Field Ecology department has conducted research on ecological restoration that has revealed unexpected results. Further research on the Crane Count would assist ICF in continuing its reputation for excellence in a new way. The Crane Count would benefit, ICF would benefit, and the Environmental Education

and Citizen Science communities would benefit from further exploration into this unique program.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Demographics:

One of the striking pieces of information that came to light through Questionnaires was the skewed demographic that the Crane Count currently serves. Most individuals are 45 years of age or older. While this is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, it does pose a potential threat to the Crane Count's future, and provides some unique opportunities for further research.

Key questions that deserve further exploration arise. Does this match with the demographics of other citizen science programs? Apart from age, what are the differences between the 45 and older demographic, and the 44 and younger? What are the similarities of these crane counters? Do their motivations differ significantly? As societal demographics shift, do people simply begin involvement when they reach a certain age bracket? Does participation in the Crane Count serve as an indicator of environmental sensitivity? What would attract a younger demographic to participate in the Crane Count?

One way to address the potential threat of demographics to the future of Crane Count would be to not only involve a younger audience, but youth specifically. ICF already has existing activity packets for K-12 youth, but these are not linked to the Crane

Count. Research into the development and implementation of youth-centered Crane Count curriculum for classrooms could help address this threat, while at the same time helping to address the program's objectives.

Evaluation:

The weakest overall aspect of the Crane Count as a program is a lack of evaluation. The effectiveness of the program in meeting its mission, goals, and objectives is not currently assessed. Developing an evaluation plan for the Crane Count, and integrating evaluation into the current framework was beyond the scope of Program Plan development. Research into an evaluation plan, its integration, and implementation could make significant headway into this major weakness of the Crane Count.

Other research opportunities for the Crane Count exist. How exactly does the Crane Count support the environmental literacy of its audiences? Does the Crane Count promote environmentally responsible behaviors, and if so, what behaviors and how do they correlate with the program? To what extent does the Crane Count support a sense of place in its participants? Does it require participating a minimum number of times? Do these individuals develop a sense of place at the site-level, or the county level?

Inquiry into the research possibilities of the Crane Count is by no means exhausted – indeed only the surface has been touched. The above topics and questions deal primarily with the “citizen” end of the Crane Count, and there is further room for as-yet unexplored avenues in the “science” end.

CONCLUSION:

The crane may be “the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men” (Leopold, 1966). For some people, the magic of such symbology may be enough to get them out experiencing the natural world and counting cranes. But such symbology is not enough to run the Annual Midwest Crane Count alone.

Development of the Program Plan has revealed not only the mission, goals, and objectives for the Crane Count. It has pointed out various strengths and weaknesses in the program, opportunities and threats, and made a variety of recommendations for its future.

A relatively unplanned approach to the Crane Count for the past thirty years has led to its evident success. Just imagine where the Crane Count can go, and what it can do in the future, with a focused, planned approach, taking advantage of the multitudinous opportunities and existing resources that are available. ICF’s work and mission are about cranes, and just as much about people. The Crane Count, as a citizen science program tied closely to ICF’s mission, has a vast untapped potential. The challenge is for a renewed commitment to the program. With renewed commitment, the Crane Count can continue to inspire future generations. Fanning this spark of inspiration, ICF can take the

Crane Count into unexplored territory, and with it, the thousands of committed individuals who help to shape the face of our earth.

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