Voices of the Future

Illinois' youth speak out on natural resource topics at premier Youth Conservation Congress event.

Story and Photos By Kathy Andrews

A participant in the October 2009 Conservation Congress, Kirsten Blackford went on to play a key role in the development of Illinois' premier Youth Conservation Congress.

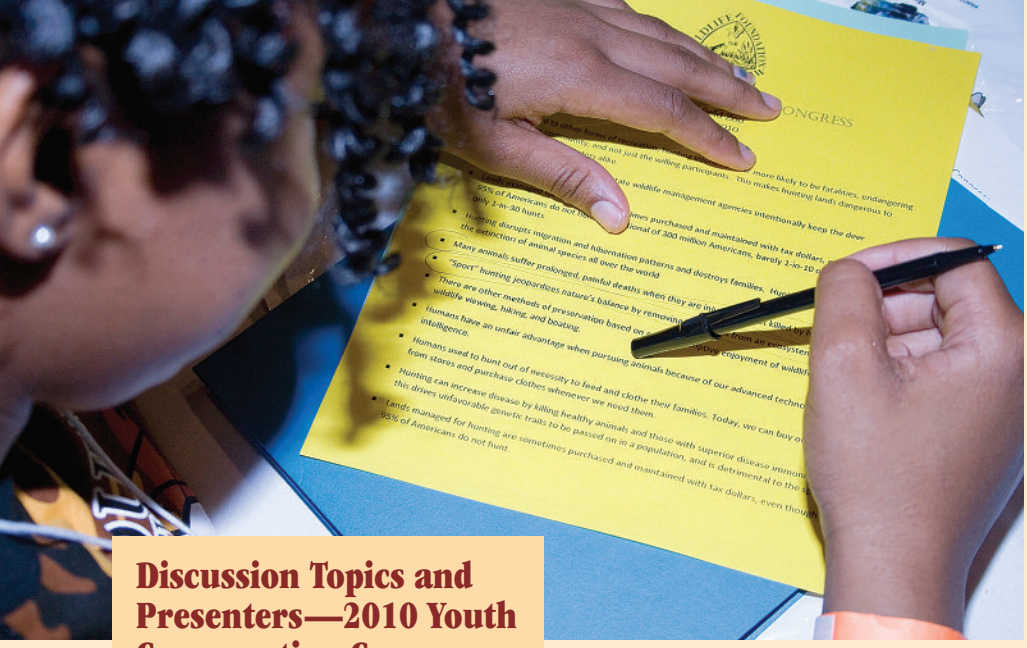
The message at the October 2009 Conservation Congress session was clear: Regardless of their mission, natural resource constituent organizations agree that the development of mentoring programs to pass on the safe and ethical outdoor traditions in Illinois—building the next generation of conservation and outdoor enthusiasts—is critical.

One of those constituents helped design Illinois' premier Youth Conservation Congress—a day-long program where high school students could learn about conservation issues and careers.

Kirsten Blackford was one of two youth registering for the October Conservation Congress. Representing the Pheasants Forever Youth Leadership Council, Blackford saw the potential for developing a similar process with a younger audience.

"In the Youth Recruitment and Retention breakout group I participated in, the idea evolved that this type of constituent input process easily could be replicated to involve Illinois youth," Blackford said. "The idea was presented at the wrap-up session, took off and became a reality within a few short months."

Blackford, a 2010 graduate of Paxton-Buckely-Loda High School, is a freshman at Parkland College and the University of Illinois majoring in agriculture education with a minor in agriculture communications. A member of the YCC



Discussion Topics and Presenters—2010 Youth Conservation Congress

- **Community Conservation** by Michael Howard, Eden Place Nature Center
- **Illinois Endangered Species** by Mike Redmer
- **Wildlife Management in Illinois and the U.S.** by Marie Benas, Max McGraw Wildlife Education Center
- **Invasive Species** by John Rogner, DNR
- **Development of a Personal Action Plan** by Olivia Dorothy, DNR

Youth Conservation Congress participants gained a greater understanding of a number of natural resource issues.

planning committee, Blackford MCed the event, introducing speakers and interacting with participants to make sure everyone was having a good time.

"In my eyes, the congress was very successful, and a dream-come-true," Blackford recalled. "It was cool to see that people value youth input on our natural resources, and that it is something they want to continue as planning the next YCC will start in a couple of months."

Olivia Dorothy, Department of Natural Resources youth programs coordinator, summarized the purpose of the congress: "Youth today are increasingly disengaged in outdoor activities and distanced from nature. DNR is committed to fostering the next generation of conservation leaders, and the Youth Conservation Congress forum can introduce and educate young people on the conservation issues facing Illinois."

Observing the interactions between participants, speaker Marie Benas was struck by the level of tolerance for differing viewpoints.

"Participants brought to the table a broad mix of urban and rural backgrounds, and I think each one walked away with a broader understanding of how lifestyles can result in differing opinions," Benas, an education intern at Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation Center, remarked. "With a few hours of open, structured conversation, a broader understanding of the natural world developed, and participants gained an appreciation for different perspectives."

Case in point: Benas' presentation on ethical hunting stimulated lively conversations during the subsequent break-out session.

"Several participants approached me after the debate, telling me what they had learned," said Benas. "Whether they were for or against hunting, an hour actively discussing viewpoints did a lot to merge opinions on a widely debated topic."

"The Chicago Zoological Society proudly partnered with the Department of Natural Resources to ensure that the conservation movement speaks to and hears from every income level, community, person and ability," Matthew Mayer, vice president of public affairs for the Chicago Zoological Society, commented. "In hosting the Youth Conservation Congress at Brookfield Zoo, participants engaged in meaningful wildlife-human interactions designed to promote personal conservation behaviors as well as advocacy throughout Illinois. For these youth, experiences such as looking into the eyes of a polar bear and observing the intelligent behaviors of bottlenose dolphins are potentially life-altering, encouraging long-term conservation advocacy and action."

In her summary remarks, Dorothy said: "We hope the activities and education DNR has provided in today's forum has helped facilitate a two-way communication with you so that DNR can better serve you—both in pursing your future career goals and, even more broadly, as our future leaders."

Partnering with the Department of Natural Resources for the 2010 Youth Conservation Congress were Brookfield Zoo, Eden Place Nature Center, Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, and the Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever Youth Leadership Council. Lunch was provided courtesy of the Illinois Sportsmen's Caucus.

Youth interested in participating in future Youth Conservation Congresses should stay tuned to DNR's calendar of events at www.dnr.illinois.gov.