

Education

Teaching the woods

Mohonk Preserve educator honored

The Mohonk Preserve's Director of Education Kathy Ambrosini has received the 2008 Leadership Award from the New York State Outdoor Education Association (NYSOEA) for her contributions to expanding outdoor education opportunities. The award recognizes Kathy's development of the Preserve's "NatureAccess" Field Studies and Outreach programs to accommodate children with disabilities.

"We started the program in 1994 after a special education teacher told me that children with disabilities were being left behind in school when their classmates visited the Preserve," says Kathy. "It's gratifying to help shift attitudes toward children with different needs. Providing kids with first-hand experiences in nature is vital for everyone, especially for these kids. Many studies show that access to the outdoors enhances children's concentration and physical and emotional well-being—which is what programs like NatureAccess help accomplish."

The Preserve's education programs give thousands of children region-wide the opportunity to discover the natural world and learn about a range of topics covered in school curricula (such as wildlife, cultural history, and geology) through both field programs at the Mohonk Preserve and classroom-based programs taught by Preserve educators at the schools. In 2007, NatureAccess served more than 300 children with disabilities through a combination of differentiated instruction, specialized equipment (such as overland

wheelchairs) and innovative classroom activities.

NatureAccess also offers training and technical expertise to outdoor professionals through workshops at parks, nature centers, camps, and residential outdoor education programs, to date in nearly 30 states. The NatureAccess training manual "Making Outdoor Programs Accessible" helps outdoor leaders tailor their own work to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness for all audiences. The program has become a model for inclusive outdoor programming and helps to implement Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act. With funding from Ulster Savings Bank and the Dorr Foundation, in 2009 the Preserve will hold a training workshop for educators from across the Hudson Valley region.

The Preserve's outdoor programs have been widely recognized for serving students with disabilities. In 1996, the Preserve was given the Statewide Accessibility Award from the Association of Independent Living Centers of New York State. In 2001, the New York State Conservation Council presented the Preserve with its Conservation Education Program Award. Kathy Ambrosini received the New York State Outdoor Education Association's Outdoor Educator Award in 2002 and the "Beyond the Letter of the Law Award" from the Resource Center for Accessible Living (RCAL) in 2006.