



THE HUDSON VALLEY GREEN TIMES

Volume 28, No. 3
AUTUMN 2008

A publication of Hudson Valley Grass Roots Energy & Environmental Network

Frost Valley YMCA A Nearby Environmental Destination

BY JOHN ROCCANOVA

Mention the YMCA and many people think about a building to go to for a swim, a game of basketball or a workout in the weight room. A YMCA camp conjures up a place to send the kids for a few weeks in the summer for swimming, boating and songs around the campfire. The Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, New York, however, has pioneered an even richer agenda, providing environmental education and recreation programs along with its summer camp, Elderhostel and other specialty activities.

One project unique to this YMCA is its Model Forest Program, a 240-acre parcel in the Neversink River watershed (part of New York City's water supply system) set aside for education, outreach and environmental research. Watershed landowners, foresters, timber harvesters, students and the general public can visit the forest on a guided or self-guided tour to see examples of forestry that balance forest production, wildlife management, recreational use and water quality protection.

Frost Valley's Model Forest, which was started in 2003, is one of four throughout the region established by the Watershed Forestry Program for the New York City Watershed. Partnering with the "Y" in this research are the USDA Forest Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Geologic Survey, the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and SUNY Cortland.

Take a Virtual Tour or Do the Real Thing

A trip to the Model Forest can start at the computer with a virtual tour on the Watershed Agricultural Council's website: www.nycwatershed.org/index.html. The tour has photos and information to guide the virtual hiker along the trail. Topics covered are silviculture, invasive species, clean water, erosion control and some general information ranging from what a forest is to biodiversity to the history of the Catskill Mountains.

Educational panels along the actual Model Forest trail convey much of this same information. Kiosks at the trailheads have additional instructional boards on topics including the nitrogen cycle in the forested ecosystem, calcium availability, research in the Model Forest and the partnership between the U.S. Geologic Survey and Frost Valley.

The trail starts and finishes on Ulster County Route 47. One end is about a half mile north of the entrance to Frost Valley and the other end about a mile south of the entrance. (Route 47 starts at NYS Route 28 in Big Indian, 8 miles west of Phoenicia and becomes Route 19 in Sullivan County. It can be reached from NYS Route 55 in Grahamsville.) The 2.5-mile trail is part maintenance road and part logging road. It's a moderate hike with a number of hills—most not too steep or long, but rocky

Sustainable Frost Valley

Frost Valley YMCA was one of the first institutions in the Hudson Valley to model sustainable building and renewable energy practices. For example, the well-insulated Quirk Lodge and many other buildings on the site are heated with highly efficient radiant heat systems. The lodge's southern exposure also allows for passive solar gain, which reduces heating needs.

An active roof-mounted photovoltaic solar array, connected to a battery storage system in the basement, provides 24-hour service to power its energy efficient interior and exterior lighting. The upstairs toilets at the lodge are Clivus Multrum composting toilets, which use no water. The downstairs conference room is outfitted with a soapstone fireplace, which can provide efficient wood-fired heat.

much of the way and overgrown in the summer because few hikers traverse the trail.

Frost Valley provides guided tours on the trail for schools and other groups. Individual visitors are asked to check in at the Administration Building at Frost Valley before hiking.

Model Institutional Compost Center

Those who eat a meal at Frost Valley experience another of Frost Valley's long-standing environmental efforts: the composting of kitchen and dining hall waste. Started in 1990, the Resource Management Compost Center was the first institutional-sized composting facility built in New York State and has been a model for dozens of other camps, colleges, schools and prisons.

Diners deposit food waste along with napkins in a barrel separate from other waste. It goes to the resource management center where it is shredded, mixed with woodchips, and piled indoors to be aerated from below by fans to assist decomposition. After this initial phase, the compost is screened to remove large pieces that have not broken down, then moved outside to windrows to complete decomposition. The organically rich finished product is used to fertilize plants in the greenhouse and gardens.

Combining Education with Fun

Education programs at Frost Valley have been held for the past 35 years and are of ever greater importance and higher demand as environmental awareness grows. Designed to fit into a school's curriculum and aligned

with N.Y. State standards, topics include acid rain studies, forest ecology, freshwater ecology, geology of the Catskills, organic gardening, and orienteering. Many of the programs are available for grades 3-12; others are for a more limited range of grades. After sundown there are night awareness hikes, naked-eye astronomy and viewing the skies through the observatory's 12-inch reflecting telescope.

Many of the students who visit Frost Valley are from New York City, New Jersey and suburban areas. Building an appreciation, understanding and respect for the outdoors and an awareness of the ecology and natural resources of the Catskill region are important themes in the program.

It's not just academics, however. There are plenty of the usual fun camp activities to do as well. Reid Bauer, Interim Director of the Environmental Education Programs and a "city guy from Washington, DC" with a degree from Grinnell College attests, "Frost Valley allowed me to combine some of the things I like most, such as canoeing, climbing and hiking, with my interests in biology."

Some of the activities available to campers, school and family groups and others are hiking, archery, climbing the Y-shaped outdoor tower, low and high ropes courses, arts and crafts, fly-fishing, horseback riding and cross-country skiing. There's a residential summer camp which has a specialty farm camp (campers and staff sleep in yurts and tend farm animals and gardens as well as participate in recreational activities) and teen adventure trips offering rock climbing, kayaking off the coast of Maine, mountain boarding, surfing in the Pacific near San Diego, backpacking and service learning.

The service learning trips seek to give participants something more than a vacation, like traveling to Costa Rica to learn about the rainforest and getting hands-on conservation experience by helping scientists protect sea turtles or helping in the U.S. with the Katrina recovery effort with building projects/Habitat for Humanity or, closer to home, with Habitat in the Adirondacks.

Since 1975 children and adolescents with kidney disease have attended the resident camp at Frost Valley YMCA, the first of such programs in the U.S. There is a dialysis center located in the new Guenther Family Wellness Center with care provided by doctors and nurses from the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx.

Many schools, religious groups, hospitals, businesses and other organizations go to Frost Valley for trainings, retreats and team-building exercises. Some people go just to relax. For a schedule of activities and overnight stays, call (845) 985-2291, Fax (845) 985-0056 or email reservations@frostvalley.org.

John Roccano is a technology teacher at Webutuck Central School. His affiliation with the Y goes back to the 1970s when he and his wife, Jean, were volunteers with the Sioux Indian YMCA in South Dakota.