

Forest Preserve's "Trail Tales" to mix literacy with nature

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The Greenbelt Forest Preserve on Green Bay Road is one of two sites for a new program that will mix literacy with nature and hopefully attract more youngsters to the trails. | SUN-TIMES MEDIA FILE PHOTO

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Lake County Forest Preserve officials hope that turning beloved children's stories into trail hikes this summer may boost literacy, offer families a new outdoor learning experience and, hopefully, make the preserves a go-to destination.

The forest preserve district, Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, and Waukegan Public Library are collaborating to create what likely will be the region's first children's trail book at Greenbelt Forest Preserve near North Chicago and Ryerson Conservation Area in Riverwoods this summer.

Drawing on a popular concept started in the United Kingdom and adopted successfully elsewhere, local organizers hope to draw families into local preserves with a trail story and, perhaps, a Little Free Library stocked with English and Spanish children's books as part of the bilingual Lake County program.

The selected story, to be displayed on some 15 panels along a half-mile trail, will include accompanying nature-related activities to enrich the experience.

“Each page will have an associated activity that will encourage people to do something in nature, like look for animal prints or look for a leaf — whatever makes sense to the story,” Sophie Twichell, executive director of Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, said.

Though directed at young children age 2-6, the hike and related activities in what might be called “Trail Tales” in English and “Caminata con Cuentos” in Spanish will have a broader appeal.

“Everyone will learn, ‘Oh you look for tracks this way,’” she said.

The Trail Tales concept, will encourage readers “to apply the story in real life to what they’re seeing,” Nan Buckardt, Forest Preserve director of Environmental Education and Public Affairs, said. “It’s not just a cute little story. It really is based in reality and nature that’s in their backyard.

Twichell has already secured \$15,000 in outside funding from a Libertyville family and Lake Forest Garden Club to create two rotating trail stories in the pilot program.

“The response to the concept has been really positive,” Twichell said. “People seem to love the idea of linking physical activity with time in nature with literacy.”

The Forest Preserve Board’s Education, Cultural Resources and Public Affairs and Finance and Administrative committees approved the concept this month to produce and install the story panels along a designated trail in each preserve.

Carmen Patlan, community engagement and Spanish Literacy Services manager at the Waukegan Public Library, is searching classic children’s books to find the right nature-related story already translated into Spanish by the publisher as the first installment.

“We hope to engage children in the outdoors and into reading books — and bringing the books to life in the outdoors. That’s what we’re hoping for,” Patlan said.

Greenbelt, on Green Bay Road south of Route 120, and Ryerson Woods in Riverwoods, were selected specifically to draw Latino and African-American families who tend to not be users of forest preserves, Twichell said.

The Brushwood Center focuses on building an environmental ethic in the region and looking for segments of the community not connected with nature and building programs to pique their interest.

“Both the Latino and African-American communities have higher rates of diabetes, high cholesterol, depression and obesity — and time in nature can help alleviate all those things,” Twichell said. “Literacy is a big issue in a lot of these communities, too.”

The Little Free Libraries, which organizers hope to incorporate in this program, was launched in 2010 in northern Wisconsin and has had huge success in a very short time, with currently more than 10,000 libraries worldwide, Buckardt said.

“Our greatest hope is that our program would be installed by June,” Buckardt said.

Getting families to explore the environment on their own terms could be a new draw for Lake County Forest Preserves.

“This will be a thing that, over time, especially if we have the ability to add more stories and rotate the stories over several years, can be a destination for families with younger children,” Buckardt said, “especially encouraging repeat visits.”