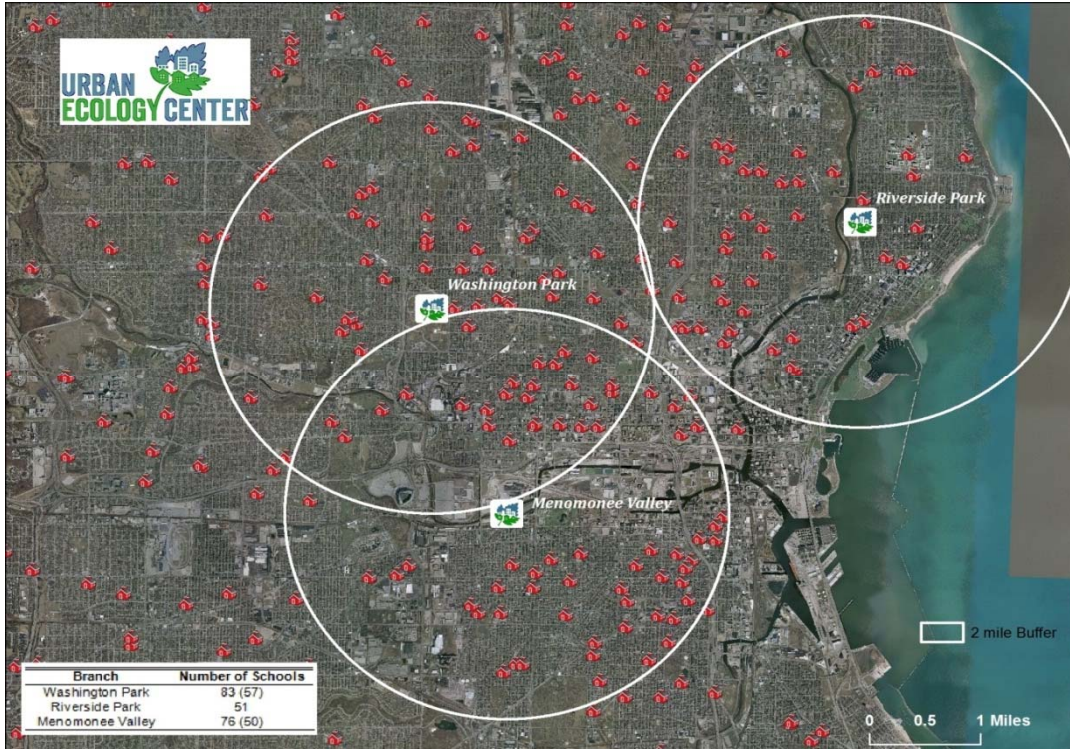


The Urban Ecology Center and Milwaukee Environmentalism

Organization Overview and Four Suggestions for Improvement

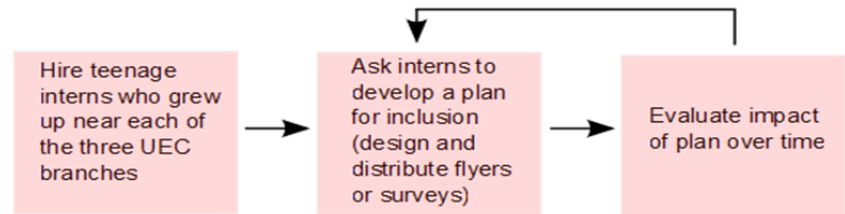
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May 6, 2012



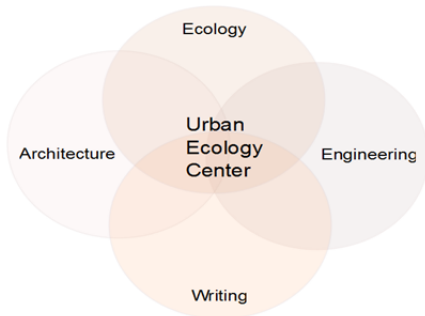
The Urban Ecology Center's mission is to “foster ecological understanding as inspiration for change, neighborhood by neighborhood.” This involves providing outdoor science education for urban youth, preserving local parks, offering community programs, and modeling environmentally responsible practices.¹ The most impactful way that they carry out this mission is engaging children in public schools. Each of the three branches of the Urban Ecology Center (pictured at left) reaches out to schools within a 2-mile radius by hosting field trips that involve canoeing, observing and drawing animals in the park; playing interactive learning games; or allowing students to hold animals and learn from the natural world around them. The following suggestions address some of the challenges the Center faces.

The Urban Ecology Center has three branches that together can serve 158 Milwaukee schools.²

Even with their variety of programs, the center has trouble reaching a diverse audience. One way to increase membership among the general population would be to hire interns who know the area well and can help the Center create and advertise programs that cater to the community.



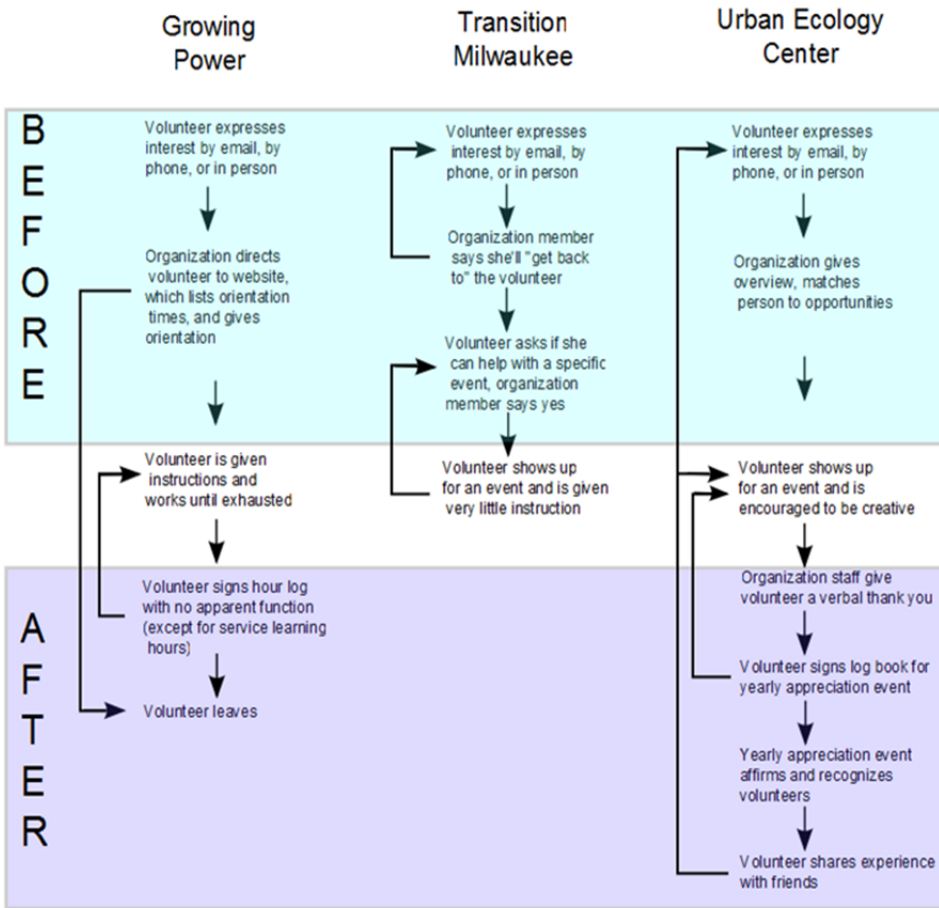
Hiring interns who focus on reaching a diverse audience could help the UEC make a bigger impact.



Teaching ecology by itself may give children an appreciation of the natural world, but blending ecology with other topics relevant to their classroom studies or post-graduation interests would foster a new generation of environmentally-minded people. Are the children interested in construction or architecture? Spark their imagination by challenging them to design an environmentally-friendly house. What about engineering? Encourage them to design products that are multi-purpose, reusable, and recyclable. Future writers or artists? Encourage them to write stories or make drawings about their experiences in nature. Interdisciplinary education is key to connecting children’s studies to the world they will inhabit as adults.

The UEC could take a more interdisciplinary approach to teaching ecology.

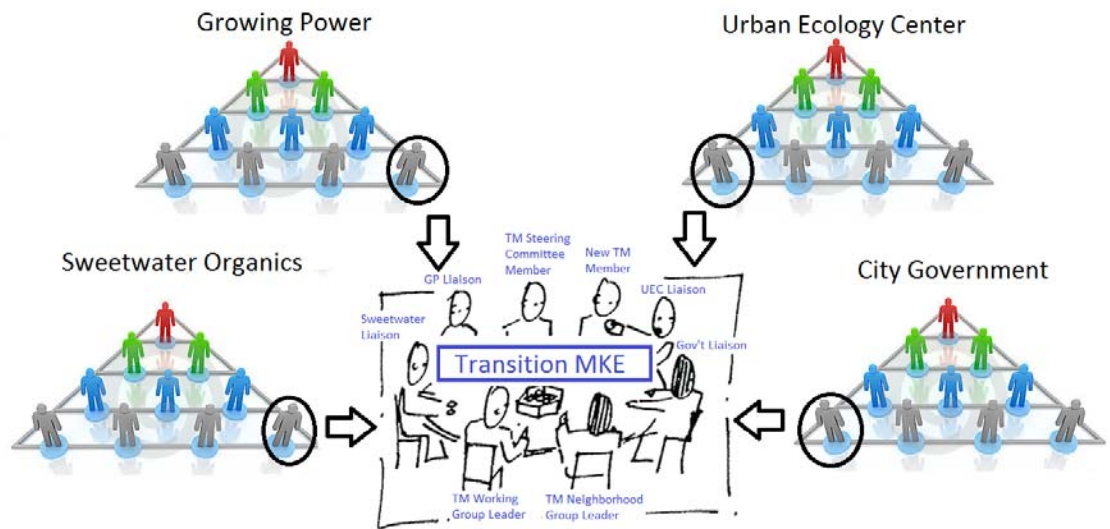
¹ “Urban Ecology Center Mission.” *Urban Ecology Center*. 2012. Urban Ecology Center. 16 Feb. 2012. <http://www.urbanecologycenter.org/mission_statement.html>
² Image courtesy of Susan Winans, Volunteer Coordinator at the Urban Ecology Center.



The Urban Ecology Center’s model for retaining volunteers is highly effective. Although there is a high barrier to entry because volunteering at the Center requires a background check, once a volunteer has signed up she is likely to stay. Volunteers are encouraged to take initiative and be creative, and employees thank volunteers each time they volunteer as well as during an annual volunteer appreciation banquet. The environmental movement of Milwaukee would benefit greatly if other environmental organizations could maintain such a strong, committed volunteer force. The Urban Ecology Center could pioneer the effort to improve volunteer retention in these organizations by offering an intensive workshop for a small cost and advertising it to Growing Power, Transition Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Environmental Consortium, and others. The Urban Ecology Center could gain recognition for its practices and would make a large impact on organizations with similar goals of teaching environmental responsibility, enhancing communication between the organizations that make up the environmental movement in Milwaukee.

Comparison of new volunteer experiences before, during, and after an event for three key environmental organizations in Milwaukee.

One other way the Urban Ecology Center could increase communication with other environmental groups in Milwaukee would be to form an alliance with Transition Milwaukee, a group that focuses on forming resilient, sustainable communities within the city. Monthly Transition Milwaukee hub meetings, each with a specific theme, connect local groups with members of Transition Milwaukee to make change. The UEC could contribute a formal liaison to these meetings to promote collaboration.



Transition Milwaukee hub meetings should include formal liaisons from non-profits, businesses, and governmental groups as well as steering committee, working group, and neighborhood group leaders and new members.³

³ Graphics courtesy of dreamstime.com and dcpug.wordpress.com.