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Follow the trail's growth

By Warren Allmon and Nancy Grossman • May 22, 2010, 12:00 am

Last year wasn't just the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. It also marked a decade since the museums and public library of Tompkins County first teamed up in a partnership called the Discovery Trail.

This unique collaborative, begun in 1999, involves the Cayuga Nature Center, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell Plantations, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, The History Center in Tompkins County, Museum of the Earth at PRI, Sciencenter and Tompkins County Public Library. It started 11 years ago with three major goals: improve awareness of our individual organizations among county residents, attract more out-of-county visitors, and facilitate collaborations among ourselves.

Our partnership has been made possible by generous support from many sources, especially the Park Foundation, the Triad Foundation, the county's Strategic Tourism Planning Board and the Ithaca and Tompkins County communities in general. We are very grateful to all of them.

Our 10th anniversary year was an opportunity for some self-congratulation and self-assessment. Surveys have shown that there is increased awareness of our individual sites and the cultural richness of Ithaca and Tompkins County in general. Total annual visitation to our eight sites has increased to more than 700,000.

Regular meetings of our staffs have yielded better communication and coordination. Most notably, our collaboration has made possible an important partnership with the Ithaca Public Education Initiative and the Ithaca City School District known as "Kids Discover the Trail!" The program allows every student from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade in the district to visit one of the Discovery Trail sites every year as part of their school curriculum. Since 2005, Kids Discover the Trail! has supported more than 12,000 visits for elementary students in Tompkins County.

In looking ahead to our next decade, we convened a focus group of community leaders in 2009 and additional focus groups of community members in 2010 to explore community needs and how the

Discovery Trail might best respond. As a result of this process, we refined our vision as helping to grow a community "where curiosity flourishes and every resident and visitor uses the Discovery Trail to explore science, nature and culture." We also reaffirmed our objective to reach county residents who have never benefitted from any of our member organizations.

We concluded that the most effective way to achieve our goals is to expand the Discovery Trail's most successful program, KDTI, to the rest of Tompkins County. This expansion has already begun, with the inclusion of the Trumansburg Central School District and its program "Trumansburg Kids Explore and Discover," which offers curriculum-based field trips that enhance in-school learning, provides equal access to Discovery Trail sites for all students, and expands awareness of the Discovery Trail.

We hope that other school districts in the county will join this program in the coming years, so that every county elementary student can take advantage of the world-class educational opportunities offered by the eight member sites of the Discovery Trail.

Warren Allmon is chair of the Discovery Trail and director of the Paleontological Research Institution. Nancy Grossman is coordinator of the Discovery Trail.

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