

Champaign County Forest Preserve District Interpretive Plan

This Interpretive Plan articulates the vision of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District's (CCFPD) effort to interpret the natural and cultural resources of Champaign County as part of one dynamic and interconnected story. This Interpretive Plan:

- focuses the District's mission-based selection of priorities for conservation, collection, education, and compatible outdoor recreation experiences;
- provides District employees with the resources needed to aid visitors in understanding what happened in the past as well as how and why Champaign County and East Central Illinois, is what it is today;
- identifies the media and programs best suited for meeting visitor needs, achieving management goals, and telling District/County stories;
- presents the story of Champaign County in one voice and can be applied to all levels of interpretation as well as program and media planning;
- outlines the goals and objectives of the education department in its effort to fulfill the CCFPD mission and encourages all CCFPD employees to implement these ideas when creating the visitors' experience.

Champaign County Forest Preserve District Mission

We are stewards of our county's natural and historic resources through conservation, education and the compatible outdoor recreation experiences we provide at Champaign County's Forest Preserves.

Natural and Cultural Interpretation within the District

There are two areas of interpretation within the District recognized as established education program plans: Natural and Cultural Interpretation. Both are supported in the State of Illinois Forest Preserve District Enabling Legislation. Although staff and supplies are housed at separate facilities, natural and cultural programming can and is implemented at each of the District's five preserves. Programs offer high-quality educational experiences for people of all ages – new ways of seeing, understanding and learning through five shared interpretive themes.

- Formation / Lifestyles of the Grand Prairie (positive and negative impacts)
- Adaptation and survival on the Grand Prairie
- Migration and forced migration
- Technology, communication, and transportation on the Grand Prairie
- Humans as a part of the natural and cultural communities of Champaign County

Education Department

Purpose Statement

To provide visitors with purposeful learning experiences that will help them identify and understand Champaign County's natural and cultural resources, their connection within each other and to other communities. By accomplishing this, visitors will recognize themselves as a vital part of their natural and cultural communities, past, present and future – thus, instilling stewardship.

Who is the Education Department?

Director of the Early American Museum, Curator of History, Coordinator of Environmental Education and Interpretation, Historical Educator, Historical Program Coordinator, Environmental Education Program Specialist, Naturalist-Garden Specialist, Environmental Educator(s), Volunteers

Natural Interpretation Strategy

Purpose Statement

Create educational and interpretive experiences that increase the understanding and appreciation of Champaign County's natural resources and in turn encourage the preservation of those resources.

Goals and Objectives

- Provide positive learning experiences for people of all ages and abilities, following the best and most innovative interpretive and environmental education techniques.
- Educate the public about the Grand Prairie ecosystems, including animals, plants, plant science and horticulture.
- Highlight the connections between plants, animals and people.
- Foster people's connection to nature, and encourage sustainable behaviors and environmental stewardship.

Central Theme

The ecosystems of the Forest Preserve District are unique to the Grand Prairie of East Central Illinois, and the lands and residents of Champaign County are connected to them throughout history, today and in the future.

Interpretive Themes

Creation / Lifecycles of the prairie (positive and negative impacts): Over the last 10,000 years through today and into the future geological events influence the ever-changing ecosystems of the Grand Prairie making them unique environments.

Sub theme 1: Changing climates result in changing communities over the last 10,000 years.

- Wisconsin Glacier helped create Champaign County's unique topography and ecosystems.
- Prairie, wetlands, savannas, groves, sand prairies, gravel pits, the Mahomet Aquifer, and the Mississippi flyway are unique geological and hydraulically features of the Grand Prairies of East Central Illinois and Champaign County.

Sub theme 2: Animals and plants in the Grand Prairie exhibit biodiversity and interdependence.

- Biodiversity is important to preserving a species and the entire ecosystem.
- Grazing, buffalo traces, etc. have effects on plant and animal communities.
- Intentionally and unintentionally introduced species – cats & dogs (e.g. hunting wildlife), starlings, house sparrows, livestock, etc. have an effect on the plant and animal communities of the Grand Prairie.

Sub theme 3: The Prairie experiences damage to and renewal of its ecosystems throughout time.

- Animal – plant relationships can be helpful or harmful to each other and the entire ecosystem.
- Prairie fires and prescribed burns (natural, native American, modern) have similar and different purposes and effects. There are repercussions when it is suppressed.

Sub theme 4: Geology, hydrology and plant life provide important habitat for animals.

- Wetlands in the Grand Prairie provide important stopover sites for migrating waterfowl.
- CCFPD works to preserve and restore these unique habitats.

Adaptation and survival on the prairie: Plants and animals throughout time have altered their physical and behavioral characteristics to survive as individual organisms and as a species.

Sub theme 1: Plants and animals in the Grand Prairie have internal and observable adaptation features and behaviors that enable them to survive.

Sub theme 2: Plants and animals are sometimes able to adapt to habitat change.

- Extirpation/extinctions on the Grand Prairie has occurred since the last ice age because of many different factors. These factors indicate potential for future extirpations/extinctions (e.g. prairie birds declining, river mussels, etc.).
- Some plants and animals have benefitted from changes in population numbers. They include coyote, deer, cowbirds, maple trees, etc.
- CCFPD makes an effort to preserve and restore habitat needs of native Grand Prairie animals and plants.

Migration and forced migration: The plant and animal communities of East Central Illinois ecosystems have moved into and out of the area in different ways and for different reasons throughout time.

Sub theme 1: Migrations have happened throughout history on small and large scales

- Annual migrations throughout time include buffalo, elk, insects, bats, birds, etc.
- The Grand Prairie region is an important part of the Mississippi fly-way (*interesting note: the Whooping crane ultralight route now goes through Piatt county*)

Sub theme 2: Populations of plants and animals have shifted on the landscape since the last ice age, and may shift in the future.

Technology, communication, and transportation on the prairie: Technology, communication and transportation have positive and negative effects on the plant and animal communities of the Grand Prairie.

Sub theme 1: Innovations in restoration and monitoring equipment have aided humans in studying and caring for the communities and geology of the Grand Prairie.

- These innovations have made it easier for the CCFPD to reconstruct and preserve the natural communities of Champaign County.
- Other organizations include the University of Illinois and the Illinois Natural History Survey.

Sub theme 2: Development of technologies and transportation have had an effect on the plants and animals of Champaign County (positive and negative impacts).

- Channelization & dredging of waterways have lowered water levels and lead to fewer wetlands.
- Highways, plow, railroad, Power/telephone line right-of-ways, towers, windmills, etc. have disturbed habitat and food sources for plants and animals.

Humans as a part of the natural and cultural communities of Champaign County: Actions of society impact the natural areas of the Grand Prairie and Champaign County– past, present, and future.

Sub theme 1: Many people, institutions and agencies throughout time have taken an active role in preserving Champaign County’s natural resources.

- Nationally and internationally recognized naturalists have studied and interpreted the Grand Prairie region.
- Agencies such as the CCFPD, University of Illinois, and the Illinois Natural History Survey operate in Champaign County.

Sub theme 2: People can play an important role in preserving Champaign County’s natural resources, both now and in the future.

- Responsible gardening practices can help maintain natural biodiversity.
- Humans can provide native habitats (large and small scale) that allow native plants to flourish and in turn provide habitats for animals.
- The use of using native plants for aesthetic purposes is becoming a popular form of landscaping.
- Environmental stewardship can be promoted and executed at the individual and community level.
- The CCFPD is a leader in the community and sets an example to the public.

Cultural Interpretation Strategy

Purpose Statement

Enhance learning, promote creativity and encourage discovery through Champaign County's historical objects (or replicas) and their stories.

Goals and Objectives

- Educate the public about the history of Champaign County by providing the perspective which only the study of past lifeways can.
- Enrich and stimulate conversation about how people of the past lived in light of how we live.
- Inspire visitors to make a connection between their own personal history and the history of the community conveyed through exhibits and activities of the museum.
- Encourage preservation of personal history and community history.

Central Theme

The cultural resources of Champaign County as preserved by the Champaign County Forest Preserve District are unique to the Grand Prairie region of East Central Illinois and are connected throughout history, as well as, today and the future, to Champaign County.

Interpretive Themes

Creation / Lifecycles of the prairie (positive and negative impacts): The societies that inhabit the Grand Prairie are/were influenced by national and world trends, but remain unique partly because of their relationship to the natural communities of the area.

Sub theme 1: Throughout time, Native American cultures have traveled through or inhabited the Grand Prairie region.

Sub theme 2: Champaign County's development and sustainability as an agricultural community is largely effected by the ecosystems of the Grand Prairie.

Adaptation and survival on the prairie: Throughout history, individuals, communities, and cultures have modified their practices and lifeways to survive in the ecosystems of East Central Illinois.

Sub theme 1: Native American and early settlers' were able to find shelter on the prairie

- Groves provided shelter, wood for homes and comfort for the early settlers.

Sub theme 2: Native Americans, settlers and people of today have found practical and medicinal uses of plants and animals of the Grand Prairie.

- The prairie can provide food, medicine, aesthetics, tools, etc.
- There are positive and negative impacts on the plant and animal communities of the prairie due to use by humans.

Sub theme 3: Humans can meet their needs with little impact on the environment as possible.

- Sustainable and organic gardening practices, growing your own food and buying locally grown food are modern movements that help reduce human impact on the ecosystems of Champaign County.
- Action is taken at the individual- and community-level to reduce impact on water, land, etc.

Migration and forced migration: The Grand Prairie region has seen many ethnic, racial, religious and familial groups move into and out of this area in different ways and for different reasons. This activity influences and informs our lives today.

Sub theme 1: Settlers and Native Americans have a variety of motivations for migration to and through East Central Illinois

- Native Americans traveled through the Grand Prairie in the summers.

- The first big migration of Euro-American settlers included English and Scotch-Irish from Ohio and the south.
- Immigration of Germans, Jews, Italians, Swedish, and Irish took place in the mid 19th Century.
- The great migration of the early 20th century included African Americans coming to Champaign County from the South.
- The University of Illinois brings rich diversity of people and cultures to the Prairie, including a global influx in the later 20th century.

Sub theme 2: Euro-American settlement of East Central Illinois had a great impact on the Native American communities in the area.

- The Trail of Death was a forced migration of the Potawatomi through and out of Champaign County.
- In some cases there was a fusion of cultures.

Technology, communication and transportation on the prairie: The development of technology, communication and transportation on the Grand Prairie is directly and indirectly influenced by its environmental and geological conditions.

Sub theme 1: Native Americans possessed technology that helped them travel through and survive on the prairie.

Sub theme 2: The shaping of the home and world economies in Champaign County was influenced by technology, communication and transportation.

- The invention of the self scouring (John Deere) plow allowed settlers to break the prairie and reap the benefits of its rich soil.
- Introduction of the railroad had a great impact on emerging cities
- The steam, gasoline, diesel engines had a great impact on agricultural practices.

Sub theme 3: Geological, hydrological and environmental factors have effected the development of transportation routes throughout history.

- The development of modern corridors is influenced by existing topography (buffalo traces, water ways, geological formation of the land) and early Native American and settler roads.
- Methods of transportation influenced the volume and demographics of travelers throughout time.
- Road improvements have had an impact on economic/agricultural development.
- The rise in consumerism in the last 20th Century has had a great impact on the environmental communities of Champaign County and the east central Illinois region.

Sub theme 4: Communication methods have changed over time and will continue to change.

Humans as a part of the natural and cultural communities of Champaign County: As the economic, social and political trends of society change they have great impact on the natural communities of Champaign County and the Grand Prairie.

Sub theme 1: Humans impact plants, animals, and the geology of the Grand Prairie as a community and as individuals.

- The diverse lifeways of the cultures that have inhabited and interacted with the Grand Prairie have used its natural communities for food, tools, trade, clothes, decoration, as part of cultural expressions of art, dance etc.

Sub theme 2: The natural communities of the Grand Prairie shape home and world economy.

- The wildlife trade, fur traders, fashion industry and exchange of non-animal items have a place in the development Champaign County's economy over time.

- Major trade routes through time have come into, out of and passed through the Grand Prairie Region.
- Game, fish, and meat have been hunted or raised for necessity, industry or recreation in Champaign County ever since before it's foundation.

Sub theme 3: There is a distinct relationship between one's knowledge of the prairie and one's view and stewardship of it.

- Pre and post industrialization and environmental movement of the past, today and into future are examples of national sociological trends that impact natural communities.
- Perceptions of the purpose / aesthetics of forest preserves, highways, office buildings, etc. are ever changing.

Sub theme 4: Diverse cultural organizations have developed within and interacted with the cultural communities of Champaign County.

- Family life has transformed over time to represent large, supportive extended families (productive units) to small nuclear families (consuming units).
- Education in Champaign County has developed throughout history to include one-room schools and town schools, consolidation of schools, and the founding of the U of I.
- Religious institutions have affected community life and its regard for the environment or lack thereof.
- Champaign County residents have participated in larger political, military, social movements/actions with methods that are similar and unique to national and world trends.
- CCFPD educates the public with the intentions of instilling stewardship at home and in their communities.

Natural and Cultural Interpretation Collaboration Strategy

Purpose statement

To identify and execute potential collaboration in all forms of media and all levels of interpretation including exclusively intellectual collaboration as well as collaboration that involves shared responsibilities in development and execution stages. Under the Collaboration Strategy the Education Departments will:

Goals

- provide personal and non-personal interpretation in a spectrum of levels at all CCFPD sites to a variety of audiences
- meet the expectations of audiences specifically interested in cultural or natural interpretation (teachers, students, and special interest groups) using the most conducive forms of media
- utilize one another as a resource for their individual projects that support the purpose of the Interpretive Plan and its shared interpretive themes
- identify collaboration potential among all CCFPD employees. All staff members have an equally important job in achieving the District's mission thus, impacting departments' purpose and goals. To promote good relationships and mutual respect any project that overlaps departments will be seen as a collaborative effort. (e.g. maintenance staff moving picnic tables for a program)

The Forest Preserves of Champaign County

Each of the Forest Preserve's five sites offer diverse and unique recreational and interpretive opportunities. Listed below are the features currently interpreted as well as those that have the potential to be in the future.

Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve

Site Location

- 10 miles west of Champaign-Urbana
- Mahomet (1.5 miles, pop. 4,877)
- Rising (5 miles, pop. unknown)
- Mansfield (8 miles, pop. 950)

Site Description

- 900 acre preserve located along the corridor of the Sangamon River
- home to the Early American Museum, Mabery Gelvin Botanical Gardens, and Hartwell C. Howard Golf Course

Self-guided recreational opportunities

- fishing, boating, hiking, picnicking, cross-country skiing, sledding
- HI-Tower bell carillon and observation area
- 3.3-mile bike/pedestrian path
- four buildings for group rental as well as numerous shelters

Interpretive Significance

Natural

- Covered bridge houses a colony of big brown bats
- Buffalo Trace prairie restoration
- Rayburn Purnell Woods (wildflowers, trees)
- Mabery Gelvin Botanical Gardens & Discovery Garden
- Elks Lake area (frogs, pond dipping; trees & grassy areas in the region) (We have used just about all of the area around HQ and Elks Lake for programs)
- Sangamon River (haven't developed programs based on the river yet, but could in the future)
- Trails (list as a separate item in each park, or are they implied?)

Cultural

- Early American Museum
- Discovery Garden
- Looking for Lincoln
- waterways

Homer Lake Forest Preserve

Site Location

- 15 miles south-east of Champaign Urbana
- Homer (3 miles, pop. 1,200)
- Ogden (5 miles, pop. 750)
- Saint Joseph (6 miles, pop. 3,825)

Site Description

- 800-acre preserve features an 80-acre lake
- home to the District's Environmental Education Center.

Self-guided recreational opportunities

- fishing, hiking, sledding, boating, canoeing, picnicking

Interpretive Significance

Natural

- Environmental Education Center & Overlook tower
- prairie restorations – Timberdoodle trail, west side
- mineral/salt lick on the Timberdoodle Trail
- Flicker Woods is the oldest-growth forest and has a great variety and amount of spring wildflowers
- Homer Lake
- Homer Lake wetland
- Salt Fork river
- Collins Pond (haven't done programs there yet, but could in the future)
- trails
- glacial outwash just off of the Oak Ridge trail system
- devastated by a tornado in 1974

Cultural

- historic sugar maple grove
- Old Homer Park
- Looking for Lincoln
- schoolhouse
- trees planted in rows, possibly originally planned to be a tree plantation
- spillway and the creation of the lake
- Collins Pond burial mound excavated in the 1960s

Middle Fork River Forest Preserve

Site Location

- 25 miles northeast of Champaign-Urbana
- Penfield (5 miles, pop. 550)
- Gifford (9 miles, pop. 815)
- Rantoul (16 miles, pop. 12,857)

Site Description

- 1,530 acres of land composed of old hardwood timber, reforested lowlands and grassy meadows.
- three ponds: Willow Pond (4 acres); Cypress Pond (2.7 acres) and Emerald Pond (3.2 acres) and about 4 miles of the Middle Fork River
- home to Middle Fork Camp Ground

Self-guided recreational opportunities

- hiking, camping, swimming, fishing, boat rentals, cross-country skiing, and picnicking

Interpretive Significance

Natural

- Tall grass prairie
- Middle Fork river
- Willow pond (and Cypress & Emerald)
- Kettle Marsh and other small wetlands
- Waterfowl Management Areas with viewing areas; more than 130 acres of prime nesting habitat for migratory waterfowl
- Trails
- Patton Woods

Cultural

- CRP land

River Bend Forest Preserve

Site Location

- 4 miles south of US 150 in Mahomet

Site Description

- 275-acre site
- approximately 130 acres of clear water in two lakes, one of which is now the largest lake in Champaign County
- 2.5 miles of forest along the Sangamon River

Self-guided recreational opportunities

- hiking, fishing

Interpretive Significance

Natural

- Sangamon river
- Lakes – large, deep, pristine, man-made
- Grassy areas
- Trails

Cultural

- 911 Grove
- Mining

Sangamon River Forest Preserve

Site Location

- 2 miles south of Fisher

Site Description

- 160 acres
- 5/8 of a mile on either side of the Sangamon River
- site of the Cook/Nelson Farmstead an early 1900s prairie four-square farm house

Self-guided recreational opportunities

- hiking, bird watching, picnicking

Interpretive Significance

Natural

- Sangamon river ecosystems
- Wildcat Slough
- old gravel pit
- endangered ash tree grove
- prairie, savanna and grove ecosystems
- Green Ash Tree
- Glaciers

Cultural

- historic Cook/Nelson Farmstead

Implementation -- Audiences and Media

Champaign County Demographic Information

Area.....	997 square miles
Population	179,669
C-U residents (27.4 square miles).....	57.8%
High school diploma or above	87.9%
White.....	78.8%
African American.....	11.2%
Other races	10%

Audience and Media Types – Appendix I

Appendix I provides a chart of audiences, the CCFPD’s desired outcomes of their experiences, the media that is used to communicate information to them, and the conversations between the District and audiences these media types create. This chart is to be added to and adjusted as new audiences and media are pursued.

New Media Resources – Appendix II

The CCFPD is constantly looking to its community and its innovative resources to reach a broader audience and provide its current audiences with more meaningful experiences. Appendix II provides a chart of audiences, media, and conversations that are pursued as research is done and resources come available. This chart is to be added to and adjusted as new audiences and media are identified.

Definitions of terms:

Audiences

- General Preserve visitors
- Teachers
- Students
- Home schools

Outcomes: Desired Visitor Experience

Based on the logic model for outcome-based evaluation, implementation of Interpretive Plan will bring about measurable outcomes in the lives of Champaign County Forest Preserve’s visitors. They are defined by a change in skills, attitude, knowledge, behavior, status, or life condition.

Media

The medium for communication most suited to each specific audience type based on observed and expressed habits and interests.

Level of Interpretation

The information the CCFPD intends a specific audience to receive through a given media type.

Appendix I – Audiences and Media Types

General Preserve Visitors	
<p>People visit all of the preserves to engage in self-guided recreational activities. When they read a kiosk, pick up a brochure, converse with an employee or attend a program, they have automatically received some form of interpretation that can have a great influence on their experience.</p>	
Outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors will connect emotionally and/or intellectually with the natural and historic resource environment. • Visitors of all ages will identify themselves as part of environmental and cultural communities and place their previous knowledge and experiences into the larger context of state and national events throughout time. • Visitor curiosity about the things they see or learn at the CCFPD will increase. • Visitors will be inspired to return • Community member who have not been to the forest preserve will be encouraged to come through word of mouth • Visitors will adapt their behavior and become stewards of the resources in their home and the communities they belong to. 	
Media	Level of Interpretation
Brochures at each preserve	General information, maps
Interpretive signs along walking/biking trails, Exhibits	Natural and cultural interpretation of specific features
Website	General information, hours, locations, amenities, volunteer opportunities
Programs	In-depth interpretive or educational experiences on the stories of Champaign County
Teachers/ Educators	
<p>Teachers not only look to CCFPD to supplement their students’ classroom experiences, but also for professional development.</p>	
Outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers will gain subject knowledge for themselves and for the children they teach • Teachers will develop a new connection or strengthen an old connection with the District and its facilities, and the programs offered. 	
Media	Level of Interpretation
Brochures	Program brochures outlining programs offered and State learning requirements they will meet
Workshops	Teachers’ workshops that help them develop their knowledge base and raise awareness about the CCFPD
Website	Information on programming, pre-visit material
Loan boxes / Backpacks	In-depth interpretive or educational info on the stories of Champaign County

Students

The CCFPD education department provides an extensive offering of programs for the preschools, grade schools and middle schools of Champaign County as well high school and college students.

Outcomes

- Students will gain skills in proper public behavior – museum and environmental manners.
- Students will gain a sense of connectedness to their environmental and cultural surroundings including their community’s natural and cultural past.

Students will gain subject knowledge

Media	Level of Interpretation
Programs	In-depth interpretive or educational experiences on the stories of Champaign County
Exhibits	Natural and cultural interpretation of specific features

Home Schools

The CCFPD education department has a good relationship with home school families in the area and is sensitive to their learning needs and interests.

Outcomes

- Parents and students will gain subject knowledge
- Students will gain social interaction skills
- Students will gain skills in proper public behavior – museum and environmental manners.
- Students will gain a sense of connectedness to their environmental and cultural surroundings including their community’s natural and cultural past.

Media	Level of Interpretation
Programs	In-depth interpretive or educational experiences on the stories of Champaign County
Exhibits	Natural and cultural interpretation of specific features
Loan boxes, Backpacks	In-depth interpretive or educational info and experiences on the stories of Champaign County
Website	Information on programming, pre-visit material

Appendix II – New Media Resources

Audiences	Media types	Level of interpretation
Teens and young adults	Social networking (Facebook, Myspace)	Advertising, raising awareness, current events
	Flickr, Snapfish	
	You Tube	
	Blogging	
	Wikipedia	
	Pod casts	Museum tours, post-visit information
Students	Website resources	Natural and cultural interpretation of specific features