

VOLUNTEER SHOWCASE

October 2012, Iowa

Bikes, Bananas and Conservation--An Annual Iowa NRCS Partnership

Each July, more than 9,500 people pedal across the state of Iowa, covering a total distance of more than 400 miles in just seven days. The Register's Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI) attracts cyclists from across the globe.

Cyclists travel from one Iowa town to the next, enjoying the Midwest hospitality. Iowa residents living along the route can watch the swarms of bicyclists ride by for hours straight.

For the past 10 years, the Iowa office of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has partnered with Iowa conservation groups to form the "Iowa Conservation Team" to assist riders. The team sets up a tent site each day along the route to provide riders with a place to refill water bottles, send free conservation-themed postcards and enjoy free bananas while taking a break from the heat.

"One of the things I like best about RAGBRAI is that my granddaughters, their aunt (my daughter) and myself get to volunteer one day on the route."

--Duane Miller, retired NRCS employee and Earth Team volunteer

In its 10th year at RAGBRAI, the Iowa Conservation Team recruited two Earth Team volunteers specifically for communications and outreach. Logan Phillips, 18, created a 10th anniversary logo for the Iowa Conservation Team. Phillips is attending Iowa State University in the fall of 2012 to study graphic design. High school junior, Paul Hadish, filmed and edited a video highlighting the past decade of the Iowa Conservation Team at RAGBRAI.

Volunteers are up early each day setting up the tent site, filling up water coolers and preparing for the hundreds of riders who will stop by the site that day. One or two cyclists ride by occasionally in the early morning, but as soon as bike



The Iowa Conservation Team designed conservation themed postcards for riders to send to their friends and family with no cost for postage.

traffic increases later in the morning, bananas and postcards last only a couple of hours.

Many riders have become familiar with the tent site and look forward to stopping there each day. During the 2012 ride, nearly 8,000 bananas (more than 3,200 pounds) were handed out and more than 3,500 post cards were sent to friends and family of RAGBRAI riders, including several that were mailed to locations outside the United States.

The partnership began in 2002 as an outreach project to educate riders about conservation and Iowa agriculture. Laura Crowell, NRCS state public affairs specialist in Iowa, says the Iowa Conservation Team has increased awareness of conservation efforts in Iowa and the organizations that help to accomplish those efforts.

In addition to staffing the tent during RAGBRAI, the Iowa Conservation Team places permanent signs along the roadways to show conservation efforts in Iowa. The route changes each year, so the signs can be found year-round throughout the entire state.

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"Cyclists are surrounded by conservation efforts each day along the route, so RAGBRAI is the perfect setting to show the impact of conservation in Iowa," said Crowell.

The hard work of Earth Team volunteers like Duane Miller makes this event a success each year. Miller, a retired NRCS employee who continues conservation work as an Earth Team volunteer, says, "One of the things I like best about RAGBRAI is that my granddaughters, their aunt (my daughter) and myself get to volunteer one day on the route," said Miller. "It is always great fun and they are excellent help."



A group photo of RAGBRAI volunteers. The 10th Anniversary logo on the banner was designed by Earth Team volunteer Logan Phillips.



Volunteers stay busy throughout the day filling up water coolers, handing out bananas and interacting with cyclists.



The Earth Team is the volunteer component of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a USDA agency. For more about NRCS and the Earth Team, visit www.usda.nrcs.gov.

If you are interested in volunteering, call (888) 526-3227 or visit your local NRCS office to learn about volunteer opportunities.