

## **Project Summary Great Lakes Coalition for Watershed Education: Listening to the River Project**

Picture groups of teenagers wandering along the riverbanks and feeder streams of a watershed – but they are not out there to fish or find a place to party. Instead, armed with advanced sound recording equipment, digital cameras, global positioning systems and well-informed imaginations, these young scientists are documenting the nature of the watershed using cutting-edge mapping and multimedia technology.

The proposed *Coalition for Watershed Education (CWE): Listening to the River* project grew out of just such a vision. This is a unique three-year collaborative effort to engineer and demonstrate innovative ways to link informal science education with the exploration, documentation and description of a region's most significant watersheds. The project has two goals:

Goal One: To build an innovative and sustainable program of informal watershed science learning opportunities for teenagers, children, and adults by tapping the expertise and capacity already present in a dynamic coalition of local and regional organizations; and

Goal Two: To document and describe the Coalition's flexible structure and strategies for informal watershed science education so they can be adapted for use by other regional coalitions in communities and watersheds throughout the Great Lakes Region and beyond.

Last February, with NSF planning grant funds, more than 50 experts and students involved in informal science education practice in northwest Lower Michigan came together at a Watershed Summit designed to stimulate collaborative relationships and explore innovative ideas...and the Coalition was born.

The CWE is now firmly anchored by four well-established community organizations:

Land Information Access Association-LIAA (the planning grant recipient); Northwestern Michigan College's Great Lakes Water Studies Institute-WSI; Great Lakes Children's Museum-GLCM, and Interlochen Public Radio-IPR.

These core partners represent a nucleus of project roles in varied but intersecting domains. They have expertise in technology, broadcast, exhibit design and water resource management functions that are highly transferable to other communities in concept and content. Add affiliate community service clubs (Optimist), youth advocacy groups (4H Cooperative Extension programs, Girl Scout chapters) to this mix and the Coalition ensures an engaging range of youth participants and mentors for the project activities.

**Intellectual Merit:** The project partners have a long history of researching and mapping watersheds across the Great Lakes Region, as well as having hosted public information forums and exhibits on critical environmental issues. Collectively, they have considerable experience in working with community agencies, educators and youth. This local effort will produce a unique collaboration, broadly representative of community organizations, in a unified approach to watershed education activities that bridges many science fields and topics. Pairing the use of new technologies with a dynamic, discovery approach to watershed biology, geology, hydrology, earth science and computer information sciences is a creative way to focus on scientific content that captures and gives voice to teens' perceptions and interests.

**Broader Impact:** The Coalition's *Listening to the River* project activities link innovative learning approaches with a mentoring process that engages diverse groups of rural teens in field teams for watershed exploration, documentation, and stewardship. Discovery field trips at key sites in the Grand Traverse Region watersheds will lead to the creation of a vibrant digital youth radio documentary series, *Soundscapes*; two youth-designed exhibits, *Waterscapes*; and an interactive project web site. The breadth of the Coalition's resources allows for activities and dissemination efforts across varied out-of-school educational settings, and at many age levels through wide-ranging media. The project contributes significantly to the understanding of watershed ecology for many youth, their peers and parents, complementing and deepening informal science practices in community settings and among educators. It reaches thousands of radio listeners and museum visitors in the region. National dissemination links with 4H, Scouts and Optimist clubs have the potential to reach many thousands more, bringing about societal awareness beyond the individual science and technology learning that occurs.