

Conservation Corps Minnesota

Provides Youth an Opportunity to Improve River Recreation

by Nina Eagin

Paddling hard downstream, gear filling the canoe up to the gunnels, crews of youth workers slip by the thick verdant green forests of the Cloquet River in northern Minnesota. Conservation Corps Minnesota is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides hands-on environmental restoration and service-learning opportunities to young people. Conservation Corps Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources are working together to improve access to the Cloquet River.

About half of the youth on the crew had never canoed before. Anna Jefferson, one of the crew leaders on the project finds the team building aspect of working on a river invaluable. "The crew quickly learns teamwork while trying to steer the canoes around rocks and river bends. There are a few rapids where there isn't a portage ... one of us got stuck, and another youth had to get out and help the canoe get unstuck. It goes back to camaraderie and helping each other get down the river."

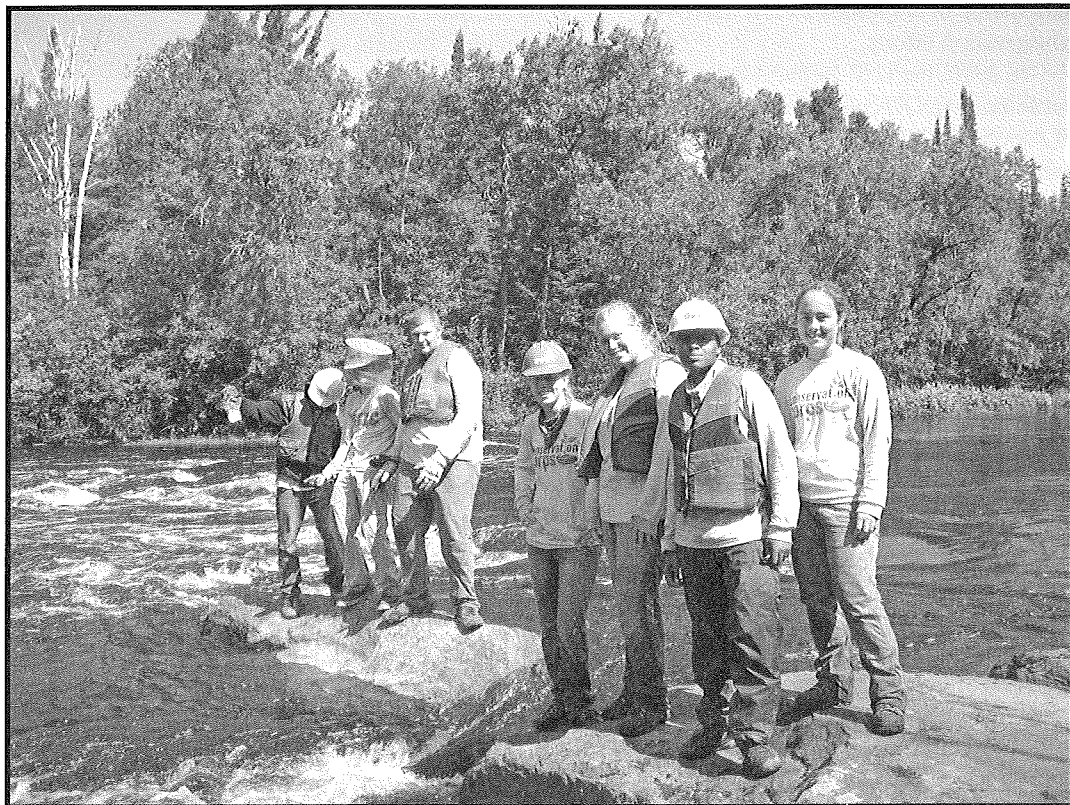
The Conservation Corps provides a summer youth crew, composed of two adult leaders and six high school youth, for this project. The leaders and youth come from all across the state and from various socio-economic backgrounds. The crew will spend a total of two weeks on the project, before heading off to another location for another round of project work. The crew works on weekdays to improve the Cloquet River, which is a Minnesota Water Trail with important conservation value to the state. When not working on the project during the day, the crew members are able to camp and recreate along the Cloquet River.

At the campsites, the crews clean out the fire pits, clear vegetation from the overgrown tent pads, and open up the paths to and from the campsites. The crews also install and repair several signs along the river. One of the youth on the crew say this is their favorite project of the entire summer. "I am learning

the most from portage maintenance because that is when I use the most tools."

Reflecting on the two weeks spent on the river, crew leader Anna Jefferson said, "When we arrived at campsites, we were often amazed at how beautiful, serene, and calm the site areas were."

When the crew left, the campsites were still beautiful, serene and calm, but they were also more accessible to future campers along the river. In total, six campsites and nearly two miles of hiking



Minnesota summer youth crews working along the Cloquet River.

paths and portage trails were improved. The Conservation Corps crew brought in all their tools and camping equipment by canoe and spent each night camping along the river. For many of the youth involved, the project involved many first-time experiences: working, camping, canoeing, cooking, living away from home, and many more.

The project completed in cooperation between the Conservation Corps and the Minnesota DNR restored access to the Cloquet River for canoe campers and introduced the youth crew to the wild and scenic character of the region. ♦