

Teacher's conservation efforts blossom into award

By JACKIE YOUNG

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CEDAR FALLS — A sixth-grade teacher at North Cedar School has been selected as the Iowa Wildlife Federation Outstanding Conservation Educator of the year.

Mary Norton, 51, who has taught for 17 years in the Cedar Falls Community Schools, received the award in part for her development of a summer school environmental studies program.

Through the summer program she calls E.A.R.T.H., 20 students studied Iowa's three native habitat: woodland, wetland and grassland.

The summer program included day trips to Cedar Hills and Clay Prairies, Iowa marshes and woodlands, and libraries, museums and preserves in Cedar Falls, Des Moines and Iowa City.

NORTON ALSO was recognized helping develop three prairie ecosystems in the 1985-86 school year. More than 24 species of prairie flowers and grasses and 400 seedling trees and shrubs were planted in the outdoor education habitat located by the playground near the school.

The outdoor habitat project, Norton said, was an example of "a lot of people working together." But not everyone in the community initially recognized the benefits of the project, she said, adding, "A lot of people thought it was a bunch of weeds for a long time."

Norton also won recognition for



Courier photo by DAN NIERLING

Mary Norton shows off the Iowa Wildlife Federation's Conservation Educator of the year award, which she recently won.

her unique mentor program that pairs sixth-graders up with younger students so they can teach each other about nature in the outdoor laboratory. The students help maintain the outdoor habitat.

Joe Wilkinson, the Iowa Wildlife Federation awards committee chairman, said Norton "rose head and shoulders" above the rest of the approximately dozen people who were nominated for the award.

"She had the idea, sold the idea and is working with it now," Wilkinson said in praise of Norton's effort to create the outdoor habitat.

Norton has made many contributions to conservation education through her membership in numerous conservation groups.

She is a member of the national and Iowa Wildlife Federations, the Natural Heritage Foundation, Wetlands Preservation, Rails to Trails,

National Geographic, Smithsonian, and Greenpeace.

Recently Norton was appointed to a REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection) planning committee to help establish state environmental education priorities and to decide how to best use \$3.5 million for these programs.

The REAP Act, passed in the last legislative session, represents a long-term effort to wisely use and protect the state's natural resources through the acquisition and management of public lands, the upgrading of public park and preserve facilities; and environmental education, monitoring and research.

NORTON ISN'T the type to rest on her laurels.

Already she's writing a state grant proposal for what she calls the "Iowa Tall Grass Project." She hopes the project, designed to teach students in grades six through eight about different types of prairie, will be ready to begin in April.

In addition to the prairie ecosystem Norton helped develop at North Cedar, she has created a five-acre restored prairie at her home, between New Hartford and Parkersburg.

Norton found out Oct. 14 she had won the award. The next day, her students surprised her with a celebration party. "It was just the best party I've ever had," she said.

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