

## Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department

February 18, 2014

### Conservation Plate Funding

The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department is hoping to augment existing conservation plate sales to help fund the Green Mountain Conservation Camps for children (GMCC). Inaccurate information has recently been distributed by anti-hunting and trapping interests, hoping to kill a widely supported omnibus fish and wildlife bill, H. 589, in which the conservation plate language is included. Critical facts regarding GMCC curriculum and funding, conservation plate authority and development, and intent of the provisions outlined in H. 589 are as follows:

- Hunter education instruction at the GMCC and other existing hunter education courses is the single most effective way to teach firearm safety to children. Trapper safety instruction is critical in teaching safe, humane, and proper trapping methods for existing regulated trapping opportunities. Relevant curriculum at GMCC is critical to ensure safe hunting, trapping, and shooting sports. Trapping is an optional component of the advanced week only.
- The GMCC curriculum also includes Animals in the Wild, wildlife identification, Project WILD, orienteering, camping, hiking, shelter building, canoeing, first aid, swimming, botany of the forest, forestry wetland & aquatic ecology, watersheds, fishing, fish identification, and knots. The camp program is extremely popular with nearly 1,000 children per year participating in basic and advanced courses, including one week reserved for children of military families. Because of its low tuition rate and generous scholarship program, many Vermont children who would otherwise not be able to attend summer camp can do so.
- GMCC curriculum for hunter education and trapper safety is covered entirely by a combination of federal grants at 75% and state volunteer instructor match at 25%. Under the current and projected funding models, no revenue from conservation plates would be needed or used for hunting and trapping instruction.
- The Department has previously announced plans to update the conservation plates, authority that already exists under current law. Funds are currently split between the watershed grant program and the wildlife diversity program.
- The department would like to offer a game species plate to help fund a variety of outdoor curricula at the GMCCs, but needs the authority proposed in H. 589 in order to do so.
- Through a variety of surveys and direct outreach, the Department has asked Vermonters what specific fish and wildlife images they would prefer to have on a conservation plate. Following up on that response, the Department is currently developing three conservation plate images: a brook trout representing the watershed grant program, a loon representing non-game programs, and a white-tailed deer to help fund the GMCCs.

- It is clear from outreach efforts that very different constituencies exist with regard to conservation plate preference, and the Department feels very confident that adding a plate to fund the GMCC would simply augment existing plate sales, not divert sales from other plate images.
- Under existing language in H. 589, funding needs for both the watershed grant program and the non-game program must first be met before revenue can be directed towards the GMCCs. Because of current federal agreements and existing statutory requirements, the funding of non-game work is not considered optional. As federal grants for non-game work decline, it will be critical for the state to help offset funding sources, including offering alternative plates to augment sales.