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Southeast Missouri Lake Project of the Year for Army Corps

Wappapello Lake in southeastern Missouri near Poplar Bluff was recently recognized as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Natural Resources Project of Year. Lake personnel accepted the award from Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp, Chief of Engineers, at a ceremony in Pittsburgh August 4.

For over 40 years the Army Corps of Engineers has recognized excellence with its Project of the Year Award. The Corps operates and maintains over 400 multi-use lake projects around the country and all are eligible to submit a nomination package. Wappapello Lake was first selected as the representative project for the Mississippi Valley Division before being forwarded to the Headquarters panel for consideration.

The award recognizes a project for its accomplishments in management efficiency, public involvement, public safety, management effectiveness, and partnerships as related to all elements of the Natural Resources Management Program. The evaluation focuses on management efforts that contribute to greater efficiency and effectiveness in use of personnel and funds, while sustaining or improving good customer service and stewardship of project resources.

Gary Stilts, Wappapello Lake's operations manager, was ecstatic at the news.

"The staff at Wappapello Lake are some of the most creative and innovative individuals I've worked with in my 26 year career with the Corps," Stilts said. "We had a really good year in 2007, and it was great to receive this recognition for our work.

"All of our management decisions revolve around what is good for our visitors, the American taxpayer and the natural resources we are committed to being good stewards of," Stilts added. "The team has a lot to be proud of and I certainly couldn't be prouder. This isn't just our award but it also belongs to all our contractors, volunteers, partners and the public that visits the lake."

Another reason for pride at Wappapello Lake is the selection of Park Ranger Andrew Jefferson for the Corps' Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence. The Chittenden Award recognizes outstanding individual contributions in interpretation and environmental education by a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employee in a district or field office. The award is based on the demonstrated creativity and originality, which produces a positive experience for visitors and enhances the public's understanding of the Army Corps.

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Jefferson, an employee of the Army Corps for 24 years, was presented the Chittenden Award at the Aug. 4 ceremony. Jefferson was recognized for his efforts in leading the Interpretive Services and Outreach Program at Wappapello Lake. He was lauded for his many accomplishments achieved through leveraging creative partnerships and engaging the community surrounding the lake.

He was also recognized for coordinating nine special events, cultivating relationships with local media, administering the lake's volunteer program, operating the Bill Emerson Memorial Visitor Center and spreading the Public Safety Awareness Campaign across the region.

"Andrew is one of our shining stars here at Wappapello," Stilts said. "He is a source of inspiration for the entire staff here and proves that you can accomplish anything with passion and commitment."

Jefferson will also be recognized by his peers in November at the Annual National Association of Interpreters in Portland, Ore. He is a former resident of East St. Louis, Ill. He volunteered and completed an internship with the Army Corps of Engineers prior to receiving a B.S. Degree from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. He and LouRetta (spouse) are the proud parents of two sons and a daughter and reside in Poplar Bluff, Mo.

As part of the Project of the Year Award, Wappapello Lake received \$25,000 to use on an unfunded item. Stilts said current plans are to build a picnic shelter at the Redman Creek Beach Area.

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Editor's Note: For interviews with Gary Stilts or Andrew Jefferson, media can contact the Wappapello Lake project office at 573-222-8562.