

ENTERPRISE

The Natural Resource Brings the Outdoors On-line

Local entrepreneur Eric Kraus has taken a life-long passion for the outdoors to a new level... online. As a child growing up on The Anderson's Farm in Maumee he was rarely seen without a fishing pole in hand. While attending school at a small rural college in Minnesota he worked for the state's Department of Natural Resources traveling the state doing what he loves - collecting over 50 varieties of fish.

After graduation he moved back to Ohio, worked for a local engineering firm, only to return every February to join four of his best friends for a week of ice fishing. This tradition continued for the past ten years. As Kraus and his fellow outdoorsmen sat in the cramped quarters of a 10x15 shack they talked a good deal about other trips they've taken and future trips they would like to take. The group came to a consensus that it is too difficult to research new locations and felt an opportunity was there for the taking.

According to Kraus, Google searches located Web sites of the large chain stores such as Gander Mountain, Cabela's or Dick's Sporting Goods, but missed the small, one location locally-owned businesses without Web sites or those on the tail end of the search list. Kraus dabbled with the idea to fill this void in the marketplace for a few years, but nothing came of it.

While working back in Ohio for a civil engineering firm, Krause spent a good



Entrepreneur Eric Kraus

portion of his time working to patent a new seeding technology for the firm. When the firm shelved the project, Eric asked to buy the patent and looked to take leave of the firm to begin marketing the product.

He partnered with his older brother Tom and spent a year traveling the country only to find the product he was pitching suddenly became of interest to the firm. Ownership negotiations became discouraging and ultimately he and his brother stepped away.

Kraus began consulting to "keep the lights on," knowing that it was not what he



www.thenaturalresource.com

wanted to do the rest of his life and began aggressively researching his original idea of an online resource guide for outdoor enthusiasts that would act like a collective marketing effort for both the big box and the one location privately owned shop.

He began by reconfiguring his semi-finished garage into an office, reserved the Web site domain name www.thenaturalresource.com and began laying the concept out in Powerpoint. With a rough draft in hand, Kraus solicited the help of Ian Hartten of Toledo.com to develop his first beta Web site.

After nine months of database and layout revisions, the Web site was launched this past October with media kits sent to over 120 newspapers and over 20 outdoor enthusiast/professional writers.

Kraus has seen a strong response from the public. When he's not updating his vendor database (currently 6,000 vendors) he is traveling the state demonstrating at tradeshows and conducting radio station interviews by phone. At a recent tradeshow in Cincinnati, several attendees told Eric they couldn't believe the site wasn't a public offering and shook his hand to thank him for creating it.

What has caught the most attention, according to Kraus, is the mapping element that allows visitors to click on layers of maps (state, county, park, specific area)

that drill down to a vendor in an area of interest, as well as, satellite maps that can zoom in on locations as small as a hunting cabin.

Each vendor is provided a free listing consisting of basic contact information and those looking to further market their products and services can purchase memberships ranging in price from \$350 per year for a company profile to a mini Web site for \$750 per year.

While money will help maintain the site, Kraus notes that money is not the primary focus. The goal of the site is to increase the responsible stewardship of natural resources and to improve the quality of the outdoor experience in Ohio, both now and in the future.

"There is a lot to be proud about in Toledo and the state of Ohio. Lake Erie, the Ohio and the Maumee rivers are unbelievable resources. There are tens of thousands of miles of streams and Ohio has one of the best state park systems in the country," Kraus enthusiastically added.

He has recently brought his brother Tom on as a partner once again, hired additional staff (web designer, office/database manager and two salespersons) and is in the process of moving into a new office space downtown Maumee located, ironically across the street from a family-owned bait and tackle shop.