

# directions



The journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

## Special Issue

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This Special Issue of *Directions* is one of the benefits of membership in ANCA. Members also receive quarterly issues of *Directions*, along with discounted fees for ANCA's annual Summit and other benefits (see Membership Form on page 17).



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RECYCLE THIS NEWSLETTER -  
GIVE IT TO A FRIEND

## Feedback to Grow On: Beneficial Input from the Outside

Receiving critiques from other Nature Center professionals can prove invaluable to your Nature Center. This Special Issue of **Directions** contains articles from organizations that have benefited from such input from a variety of sources.

## Priceless Feedback

**Patty Weisse**  
Executive Director  
Centers for Nature Education, Inc.  
Marcellus, NY

The new Executive Director of a nearby nature center called to inquire about resources that could get someone new to this field started. I told him about ANCA, loaned him my copy of the ANCA Director's Guide to Best Practices, and recommended strongly that he seriously consider applying to the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for funding.

Many people rule out applying for IMLS funding because it is an extremely selective process. Comments about IMLS funding usually include the complaint that the only organizations to get funded are those that don't really need the funding to begin with. My experience with applying for IMLS funding is that an applicant can gain a lot from the process - whether or not they actually receive funding. What follows is my summary of how the process has helped Centers for Nature Education (CNE), where I work.

Having taught high-school science for ten years, I became Executive Director of CNE in December of 1998. My family had maintained its CNE family membership for much of the previous decade and my children had all

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ANCA is a private, non-profit organization, dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers.

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SPECIAL ISSUE 2005

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## Priceless

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attended the nature day camp. Still, I knew little about CNE and even less about how to run a not-for-profit, let alone a nature center. After discussions with board members and former directors, I decided to prepare an IMLS General Operating Support (GOS) application for the January 15, 1999 deadline. As much as anything I was looking for an exercise that would quickly immerse me in the workings of CNE.

The GOS application guidelines required detailed but succinct information about the following areas:

- 1. The institution's audience** and how they reach an appropriately broad and diverse population.
- 2. How collections are utilized** to further the mission and how the institution develops, manages and cares for them.
- 3. How exhibits are utilized** to further the mission and how the institution develops, manages, evaluates, and cares for them.
- 4. Details** about the institution's education program development, implementation, and evaluation,
- 5. Physical facilities** and security.
- 6. Staff qualifications**, responsibilities, professional activities, recruitment and personnel practices.
- 7. Board** recruitment, training and development,
- 8. Support** (both cash and non-cash) from the community and fiscal management.
- 9. Development and** implementation of the institution's strategic plan.

After completing the January 1999 application I understood CNE's practices and challenges well enough to begin working with the board, staff and volunteers to tackle some of them.

No one likes to get rejected and I hardly could expect success with my first IMLS application. Still, when

the rejection was received the following September I was astonished by the multitude of shortcomings that were so clearly and consistently articulated by the three anonymous IMLS reviewers. Reviewers highlighted the lack of comprehensive program evaluation, insufficient staff development support, low school program attendance, shortcomings in

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### **Centers for Nature Education, Inc.**

(CNE) is a private, not-for-profit environmental education organization committed to promoting environmental awareness, understanding, and responsible natural resource stewardship among all people, especially children. CNE manages the 182-acre Baltimore Woods

Nature Preserve in Marcellus, which includes over six miles of hiking trails, a number of demonstration gardens including the Faust Wildflower Garden and the new John A. Weeks Interpretive Center.

CNE's largest program offered at Baltimore Woods is its summer nature day camp. Campers experience a variety of activities such as stream and pond exploration, nature games, and the new archaeological dig (see photo).

The new Nature in the City program is CNE's largest outreach effort to nearby Syracuse. Nature in the City uses hands-on/minds-on activities in city parks to help elementary school children learn about science, geography, culture, and history right in their neighborhoods. The culmination of the program is a performance of the Nature in the City show created for CNE by Billy B, The Natural Science Song and Dance Man. Nature in the City won a 2004 EPA Environmental Quality Award.

For more information about CNE visit [www.takeahike.org](http://www.takeahike.org).

board recruitment and governance, lack of an endowment and cash reserves, poor staff compensation levels to name the most glaring problems.

**It hardly seems fair when you are turned down for funding because you don't have enough funding to pay staff better.** My initial, defensive reaction was "Thanks a lot for nothing!" The evening the rejection was received I was pouring my frustrations out to my husband. He was great with the sympathy, but he also added an insight. "You know, you have been talking about a lot of these same issues. Maybe you should show the reviews to you board."

After licking my wounds for several days I decided there was merit to the suggestion. When the board saw the reviews, they were initially surprised and defensive, but they also wondered why they hadn't seen reviews from previous applications CNE had sent to IMLS. The next board meeting was full of complaints like, "How can we possibly set aside money for an endowment when we have so much trouble with our operating budget?" "How can we implement these suggestions without additional support to make them happen?" "Why do we waste our time applying to the IMLS for funding anyway?"

**Let me fast-forward** you to the present and show you the Centers for Nature Education's summary of some fundamental financial indicators. The following table includes figures from CNE's independent audits for fiscal years ending June 30.

F.Y. Ending June 30	Operating Surplus (Deficit)	Endowment	Land, Building, Equip. Fund Value	Cash Reserves
1998	(\$3,209)	0	\$119,297	\$30,461
1999	(\$8,397)	0	\$120,104	\$26,145
2000	(\$6,900)	0	\$157,573	\$40,381
2001	(\$2,326)	\$ 6,263	\$330,703	\$73,604
2002	\$ 4,202	\$11,263	\$355,321	\$116,666
2003	\$20,636	\$16,263	\$644,309	\$113,820
2004	\$ 3,686	\$17,263	\$753,722	\$159,870

During this six-year period, CNE's staff compensation and staff size have also increased significantly. Did the board and I decide to save time by not applying for IMLS funding in the future? No way!

**Criticism is not easy to take.** The temptation to cast aside the reviews was exacerbated by the fact that there were always one or two small things noted by each reviewer that were not a fair or accurate reflection of CNE. It would have been so easy to dismiss the feedback and move on to something more pressing. Fortunately, several board members and I noted that many of the problems articulated by the reviewers had been discussed at previous board meetings. A local foundation was subsidizing a Non-Profit Leadership and Management training series. I signed up for this affordable local training opportunity to start fishing for ideas. The next thing was to join ANCA and start reading the newsletter carefully.

One of CNE's first major changes involved acquiring Director's and Officer's Liability Insurance so that CNE could attract and retain board members with skills like financial management, personnel, fund raising, and legal experience. There was a great deal of turn over in the CNE board and staff during the first three years of my tenure. The organization had gotten along in the past by depending on a few, highly dedicated people who made sacrificial commitments to CNE.

**It was not easy to shift direction amidst protests of "We have always done it this way."** I thank my strong family for helping me get through it. In addition, I thank the anonymous IMLS reviewers who brought up topics that I was having trouble convincing the board to do something about. It was one thing for the CNE board to reject the suggestions of their new director who had been a high school science teacher for the past decade. It would

have been a more egregious problem if they ignored the reviewers who were administrators of nature centers with similar operating budgets and were qualified by a minimum of five year's experience in their position.

**Another major change** occurred in 2001 when CNE established an endowment. There was a great article in the ANCA Directions newsletter about building an endowment that

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helped pull the rhetoric together to convince the board. Even so, there were times when it seemed an impossible step. When I convinced my father to give a stock donation to seed the CNE endowment and was told at the board meeting, “this is great, now we can use the funds in case we ever ran short of operating money”, it seemed we would never get there. Indeed, CNE still has a long way to go to secure its financial future, but the foundation has unquestionably been laid. CNE has turned the corner from hand-to-mouth management and truly has a future beyond the immediate horizon.

CNE kept applying to the IMLS GOS program for support. We also kept crying over our rejection reviews until 2002, when we finally succeeded and were awarded a \$26,994 GOS grant over a two-year period. Is it true that CNE no longer needed its GOS award by 2002?

**Absolutely not!** However, I will share with you that had CNE received a GOS award in 1999, we probably would have used it for a much-needed increase in staff salaries. The problem would have been, however, that two years later when the award ran out, CNE would have had to cut staff compensation again. CNE had to find a solid, sustainable way to increase staff compensation on its own before it could receive IMLS support.

How did we manage all this growth over a six-year period? The longest journey begins with a single step. CNE made one small change after another. The IMLS reviews helped focus CNE on areas where its approaches were most clearly out of line with best practices in the field of nature center administration.

IMLS no longer offers the General Operating Support program. IMLS has a number of programs nature centers might consider applying to for funding. For a complete up-to-date list of IMLS funding programs, please visit [www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov). The General Operating Support program has been replaced by the Museums for America program at IMLS.

Museums for America is the largest grant program offered by IMLS. Museums for America grants help build the capacity of museums, zoos, aquariums and nature centers to serve as centers of community engagement. Activities funded through this program must advance the funded institution’s mission and strategic goals.

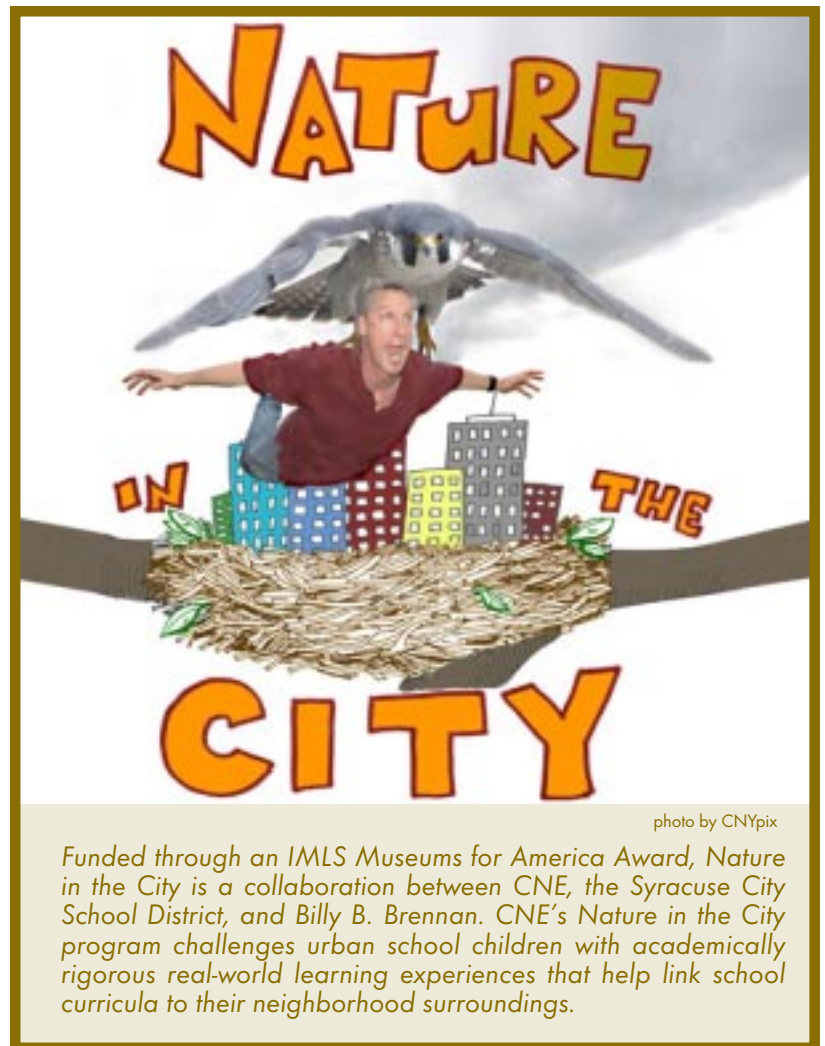


photo by CNYpix

*Funded through an IMLS Museums for America Award, Nature in the City is a collaboration between CNE, the Syracuse City School District, and Billy B. Brennan. CNE’s Nature in the City program challenges urban school children with academically rigorous real-world learning experiences that help link school curricula to their neighborhood surroundings.*

Any nature center serious about applying for IMLS funding must be serious about embracing best practices in the field of nature center management. I am not aware of any other funding program that provides as rich and comprehensive feedback. By tying applicants to experienced peer reviewers from institutions with a similar, size, scope and mission, IMLS reviews can identify problem areas and focus attention and resources where they are most needed. Nothing has done more to help CNE grow and fulfill its mission in the last six years than the process of applying to the IMLS for support and paying close attention to the feedback.

CNE’s two most recent applications to the IMLS have been successful. It may be valid, however, to say that CNE was helped more by the multitude of rejections it received than from its two successful attempts. CNE still has far to go and a lot to learn. As long as IMLS continues to require funded institutions to demonstrate clear leadership in following best practices, any nature center should seriously consider applying. If you approach the process with a genuine commitment to self-improvement, you simply cannot lose. 🍁

# Board's Eye View

**Alice Murphy**  
President of the Board  
Centers for Nature Education, Inc.  
Marecellus, NY

For every action, there is an equal, opposite reaction. A sound physical principle, but not an effective way to run a nature center.

Centers for Nature Education has always relied on a small, excessively dedicated group of volunteers to help forward its mission. Couple that with an extremely "hands on" board at the helm and the Center seemed unable to break out of a cycle of scrambling and reacting. We needed to become larger, more professional, and more proactive. Add to that an ambitious capital drive to fund a major building expansion as well as the construction phase itself. We have seen vast changes over the past five years; however all have begun from several small steps. It has been an enlightening, exciting, and sometimes nerve-wracking time to be on the board but the evolution has been a healthy one.

Although our Executive Director, Patty Weisse, has been responsible for many of our successful outcomes, particularly involving conservative budgeting and overall staff development, the Board has made significant strides as well. Several changes have come directly or indirectly from the IMLS General Operating Support Guidelines, and the comments from the reviewers.

**The first guideline** addresses the goal of reaching an appropriately broad and diverse population. One past president remarked that our programming has changed significantly. "In the beginning, we offered programs and our audience was comprised of those who showed up." Our Nature in the City and urban outreach programs have come from our attempts to broaden and diversify our audience. In the process we have benefited from new relationships and partnerships with other organizations as well.

**Second**, Patty came to the Board to plead the case for strategic planning. Despite being mired in construction details, we drew a collective breath and moved forward. Having a plan has allowed us to become more focused and more productive. Actually developing the plan was a lesson in itself. Having to formulate and articulate our mission and vision, as well as our long-term goals for the organization, generated discussion and serious reflection during our Saturday "retreats" led by an outside moderator.

**Third**, once the endowment became a reality, our commitment to funding it became a priority. It is difficult to dedicate dollars to the long term when operational needs are the immediate concern. Through sound fiscal management we were able to meet those concerns while still contributing to the endowment. As a Board, we have chosen to put all non-restricted bequests in the endowment and have added extra money from fundraisers that have exceeded our expectations.

**Fourth**, the Board itself has changed, both in composition and practice. We have recruited from the surrounding townships, but also from the city of Syracuse as well as the local colleges and universities.

Always heavily loaded with educators, we have added attorneys, business people and others with fiscal expertise. We continue to look for members with experience in fundraising and operations.

The Board has had to learn to move away from day-to-day operations and toward seeing the global picture. "Best Practices" can no longer be considered corporate jargon. Many members have attended Best Practices seminars focused on fiscal responsibility, board development, and fundraising.

Looking back on the changes, we wonder how we functioned. The answer is "not very well". We continue to follow our strategic plan, build bridges with other agencies, expand our programming, and diversify our Board's expertise.

The changes over the last 5-6 years have created greater responsibility, but also greater satisfaction. Even our reaction time has improved. 🌟



photo by CNYpix

*Billy B. Brennan, The Natural Science Song and Dance Man performs a drop and dive move during a performance of "There Again, The Peregrine" with students in Syracuse's Roberts Elementary School.*

# Reviewing IMLS Grants: The Next Best Thing to Receiving One

**Tracy Kay**  
Founding Member of ANCA  
ANCA Leadership Award Recipient 2005

*The Institute of Museum and Library Services is an independent federal grant-making agency dedicated to creating and sustaining a nation of learners by helping libraries and museums (including nature centers) serve their communities.*

*IMLS depends on a pool of knowledgeable library and museum professionals to serve as grant reviewers each year. Reviewers provide real service to the profession by the high standards they apply to the grant making process. They serve their profession by promoting best practices and also realize professional benefits for themselves.*

*There are many benefits to volunteering to review IMLS applications. If you are selected to serve, you will: help IMLS and the museum and library communities; better understand the grant review process; see what other museums and libraries are doing; and assist your own museum or library in preparing more competitive grant applications.*

- From The Institute of Museum and Library Services Website

Each year the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) offers a series of competitive grant programs for the nation's 15,000 museums. **All types of museums, large and small, are eligible for funding.** In addition to nature centers, eligible museums include aquariums, arboretums and botanical gardens, art museums, youth museums, general museums, historic houses and sites, history museums, natural history and anthropology museums, planetariums, science and technology centers, specialized museums, and zoological parks.

When meetings were taking place in the mid-1980's to explore the formation of the Association of Nature Center Administrators, there were many spirited discussions regarding the limited success nature centers were having with IMLS grant awards. My own center had been rejected for funding twice and at issue was whether or not the application process was worth the effort.

Applications for IMLS funding are reviewed by a minimum of three evaluators. I and many other nature center directors believed that our applications had been consistently well-prepared and competitive but often, the reviewers of a single application disagreed in their comments. In the case of my own institution, it appeared that

one of the reviewers did not understand the purpose and function of nature centers. IMLS program staff had indicated they would be available to discuss applications and reviewer comments and, since I was scheduled to attend a meeting of the National Institute for Urban Wildlife in Washington, DC, I called for an appointment. The program officer agreed that the evaluations were inconsistent, but even after eliminating the errant scores the application fell just short of qualifying for funding. I then expanded my discussion with the representative to the larger issue of how to position nature centers to improve their standing among IMLS grant applicants. The answer was quite simple: If applications from nature centers were to succeed, the professionals employed in the field would need to serve as qualified peer reviewers.

Thus began what has become for me a 20-year association with IMLS as a reviewer and program panelist. I have read hundreds of grant applications, some well-prepared and others not. I've gained valuable insights concerning operating procedures of successful organizations and characteristics of thriving programs that have helped me better manage my own institutions. Perhaps most importantly, however, serving as a program panelist has broadened my perspective on the museum field and its importance in the non-profit landscape. It also has expanded my professional network.

Several other nature center professionals currently are serving as grant reviewers and reaping similar benefits. While many applications are still rejected, the number of nature centers and related institutions who receive funding has substantially improved.

Anyone who has participated in the peer review process (either through ANCA or perhaps the American Association of Museums' Museum Assessment Program) will tell you that reviewers generally learn as much, if not more, from the grant process as do the institutions being reviewed. On behalf of ANCA and the growing nature center field, I encourage you to consider being part of the review process. 🍁

Visit the following IMLS web pages for more information about becoming a reviewer for IMLS grant programs:  
[http://www.imls.gov/grants/review/rev\\_how.htm](http://www.imls.gov/grants/review/rev_how.htm)  
[http://www.imls.gov/grants/review/mp\\_reviewerform.asp](http://www.imls.gov/grants/review/mp_reviewerform.asp)

For more information about becoming a surveyor (reviewer) for the AAM MAP process, visit:  
<http://www.aam-us.org/getinvolved/pr/apply.cfm>

# M • A • P

## Set Priorities & Identify Needs for Change

**Julie Hart**  
Assistant Director, Accreditation Program  
American Association of Museums  
Washington D.C.

The Museum Assessment and Accreditation Programs offered by the American Association of Museums are tools that you can use to:

- Assess your museum's operations in light of its mission and resources
- Compare your museum to other similar institutions on a national level
- Evaluate your museum against standards and best practices in the museum field

This feedback—in the form of written and in-person review by your peers — is one of the great benefits of both programs. In addition to a period of self-assessment when you fill out a detailed questionnaire, you get a 1-3 day site visit by one or two museum professionals—whose experience and expertise aligns with your institution's size operational needs — and 15-25 page report. However, there are significant differences in the type and nature of the feedback you get, and even what you do with it. Consider your museum's goals and needs to determine which process is right for you.

The purpose of the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is to provide collegial, consultative feedback that you can use to set priorities and identify needs for change. The feedback comes in the form of peer advice on how to implement professional museum practices to make your museum more sustainable and to help it more effectively serve the public. You, your staff, and the governing authority find out how the institution's operations measure up to standards and best practices in the field, get ideas on how you might address current challenges, and get a list of what resources might be of help. Once the process is completed, it's up to you to decide how, when, or if, you are going to act on the recommendations and feedback you received.

The Accreditation Program confers a widely accepted "good housekeeping seal of approval" that recognizes

museums for their excellence, high professional standards, public service, leadership and educational role. The Program's purpose is also to strengthen individual museums and the field as a whole by promoting ethical practices and professional standards; and serve as the field's primary vehicle for quality assurance and self-regulation.

The Accreditation Program also includes a site visit and report as part of the process, but in contrast to MAP, the assessment is not consultative — meaning the role of the peer reviewers is not to provide specific recommendations on how to improve operations or rectify problems, but to objectively assess and report on whether the museum meets the Accreditation Program standards: The Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum, The Accreditation Commission's Expectations, and The Two Core Questions (more on these below).

There are many benefits of the peer review aspect of the MAP and Accreditation processes. It provides an outside perspective on the museum's operations — which is sometimes more valued or accepted by the governing authority/parent organization, and which can be used to leverage change. It is also an opportunity to converse with, and learn from, your colleagues. And you wind up with a report that validates your successes and challenges, and captures the museum's current operations and its strengths and weaknesses; your report can be shared with funders and donors, serve as a tool to benchmark operations against, be a useful guide for planning, and be incentive for change.

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The accreditation process also has one more layer of peer

review than MAP – feedback from the Accreditation Commission. Your decision letter(s) from the Commission – a group of nine senior museum professionals who hail from a range of museums types and sizes and who make all decisions on accredited status – will identify any issues that need to get immediate attention in order to achieve accreditation or that need to be addressed in the 5-10 year period before the reaccreditation process starts. This feedback, however, will not give you guidance about how specifically to tackle the problem. Any such issues cited are carefully looked at during the next scheduled review.

All nature centers are not the same size, nor do they have the same mission, audience, or governance structure, among many other things. Therefore, in the MAP and Accreditation processes, a museum's operations are assessed against its mission and resources, and standards and best practices as they are generally understood in the field as appropriate to the museum's particular circumstances. To do this, the peer reviewers (and the Accreditation Commission) enlist their individual experience and expertise as museum professionals, and also apply the appropriate program-specific standards or assessment framework.

For MAP, this means using the Critical Issues Checklist specific to one of the four assessments (Institutional, Collections Management, Public Dimension, Governance). These checklists contain questions in all areas of operation relevant to the particular assessment at hand to help the peer reviewer ascertain what practices are in place, and how, why, and if standards are being met.

For Accreditation, this means using the Two Core Questions, Characteristics of An Accreditable Museum, and the Accreditation Commission's Expectations. The Core Questions ensure that a museum is measured against benchmarks it establishes and in a context appropriate to its mission and circumstances. The Characteristics are broadly stated outcomes that describe the attributes of a professionally run, high-functioning museum, that, depending on its particular type, resources, collections, mission, etc., will fulfill in a different way. And, the "Expectation" documents provide more detail on a certain topic and how the Accreditation Commission interprets the Characteristics.

Museums in MAP, and the peer reviewers assessing them, are also encouraged to use these accreditation standards as general guidelines – as they are not extra or special things only accredited museums should do, but things all museums should be doing in some way to be an accountable, sustainable, and ethical organization. In addition, institutions are expected to abide by relevant discipline-specific standards that apply to institutions of their type.

Keeping the Accreditation and Museum Assessment Programs dynamic and reflective of the changing museum field and non-profit environment is a challenging yet critical responsibility for AAM. To do this, AAM and the two programs draw on the collective wisdom of the field. Information – particularly from self-assessment documents and peer reviewers' reports –

comes into AAM from the hundreds of museums in these programs at any given time; and from ongoing discussions with the field via the AAM Standing Professional Committees, Council of Regions, Council of Affiliates, and participants in colloquia, workshops, and seminars. By gathering information from all these sources, AAM observes what is happening across the field. The Accreditation Commission uses this as one way to inform its deliberations on decisions and shape its expectations. The staffs of the two Programs and the Accreditation Commission use the data to adjust the programs accordingly to advance the profession. Recent examples include the development of the MAP Governance Assessment in 2002 and the revision of the Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum in 2005.

Go to [www.aam-us.org/museumresources](http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources) learn more about the Museum Assessment Program and the Accreditation Program and its standards.

Both MAP and the Accreditation Program are always looking for new peer reviewers. Find out what the requirements, commitments, and benefits are, and how to apply at [www.aam-us.org/getinvolved/pr](http://www.aam-us.org/getinvolved/pr).



# the Value of Accreditation

**Robert A. Thomas**  
**Loyola Chair in Environmental Communications**  
**Loyola University**  
**New Orleans, LA**  
**ANCA Leadership Award Recipient 2001**

In the mid-1980s, the Louisiana Nature Center's (LNC) operations were becoming stable enough to allow the staff to resume its innate practice of dreaming of new ventures.

We, as all urban nature centers, competed for funds and other types of support in a crowded market. Trying to capture support dollars was not difficult. Our main struggle was distinguishing ourselves from other eleemosynary organizations, and convincing potential donors that we were as well managed.

Among our memberships was the American Association of Museums. I had been a member since teaching in the museum science program at Texas A&M University in the early 1970s.

LNC had participated in MAP programs, and we profited immensely from the external evaluation.

AAM touted its accreditation process as a means of self examination that would show your strengths and your weaknesses. In our nature center world with no manual of standards, we thought we were doing a great job, but had no validation beyond comments we received from colleagues.

We contacted AAM, sent our initial fee, and received a large packet of instructions and forms. Faced with the

daunting task of filling out forms that would culminate in two large binders of organizational information, sounds of wry chuckling reverberated around the offices (naturalists wondered just who would do all this work— knowing full well that they were the usual targets).

I clearly remember diving in with visions of clearly demonstrating our organizational strength and efficiency. The first pages were easy – contact information, summary of history, a variety of descriptive questions, etc.

We decided to answer what we could then go back to the more difficult requests. Believe me, there were many, many blanks after the first run-through.

We did have many operations policies in place. LNC staff had attended many Natural Science for Youth Foundation (an early, strong resource for nature centers that is now defunct) and Association of Interpretive Naturalists (now the National Association of Interpreters) meetings, and brought home procedural improvements from each. But we found we were, according to AAM, far from the standard of museum operation that they found worthy of accreditation.

We certainly could have decided to abort the accreditation process.

Instead, we read the blanks left in the forms as areas where we needed improvement if we

wanted to hunt with the big dogs.

As I look back on the process, I believe this is the first major benefit of seeking accreditation. Before we reached this spot in the road, we simply did not know our exact deficiencies, including simply how to be a better organization.

## Nature Centers Presently Accredited

Those who list themselves primarily as nature centers:

- Louisiana Nature Center (Audubon Nature Institute)
- Lichterman Nature Center
- Coyote Point Museum for Environmental Education
- Chula Vista Nature Center
- Earthplace (Westport, CT)

Those who list themselves secondarily as nature centers:

- Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
- Descanso Gardens (California)
- Buffalo Museum of Science (includes Tiff Nature Preserve)
- National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian (includes Naturalist Center)

Three previously accredited nature centers voluntarily withdrew from the reaccreditation process.

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We set about creating new programs, policies, and procedures that would allow completion of the questionnaire. In so doing, we strengthened all aspects of our programming, gained confidence as a staff, credibility with our board, and patronage from our supporters.

We finally mailed our documents to AAM and eagerly awaited their response. Within days, I received a phone call saying, "We have a small problem. We don't accredit Nature Centers."

My riposte was, "Then why did you take our fee and send us the forms?" I was told, "We'll get back to you on that."

Luckily, our application, coupled with a request from NSYF, resulted in AAM appointing, in 1985, a Nature Center Task Force (see side-bar) that was asked to evaluate the need for nature center accreditation. This group of nature center directors recommended the desirability for the program, and ultimately worked with AAM staff to develop the "Supplemental Accreditation Questionnaire for Nature Centers" that is still used today.

In 1989, two nature centers formally received accreditation – Lichterman Nature Center and the Louisiana Nature Center (we had to apply again because during the period that the Nature Center Task Force was doing its work, AAM revised all the forms!!!). Today, five nature centers are accredited, along with another four museums that secondarily list themselves as nature centers.

Once you receive accreditation, is that the end of the process? No. Your nature center must undergo reevaluation every ten years thereafter. The idea is that an accredited museum continually improves over time.

Why are there not more accredited nature centers? The answer is certainly not due to

a lack of well run, excellent institutions. Indeed, only 20% of AAM members overall are accredited. The answer is more easily explained as follows:

- Few nature centers are active members of AAM, seeing the organization as serving the needs of larger museums;
- Most do not realize the many benefits of AAM membership;
- There is a general opinion that the submission of documentation is arduous, with little intrinsic value;
- The accreditation fees, expenses, and annual fee totals are considered too rich for nature centers' typically small budgets (see <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/costs.cfm>);
- Speaking of fees, since most institutions have to spend staff time developing new materials, and in some instances physical improvements may be required, there are sometimes expenses beyond the norm (discussed in the website above);
- The opinion that attaining and maintaining accreditation is not worth the effort.

In recognition of the important role that nature centers play in the museum world, AAM invited me, as a nature center director, to sit on the Accreditation Commission. I accepted and served from 1991-1996. This panel, consisting of nine museum directors, reviews all new and renewal accreditation

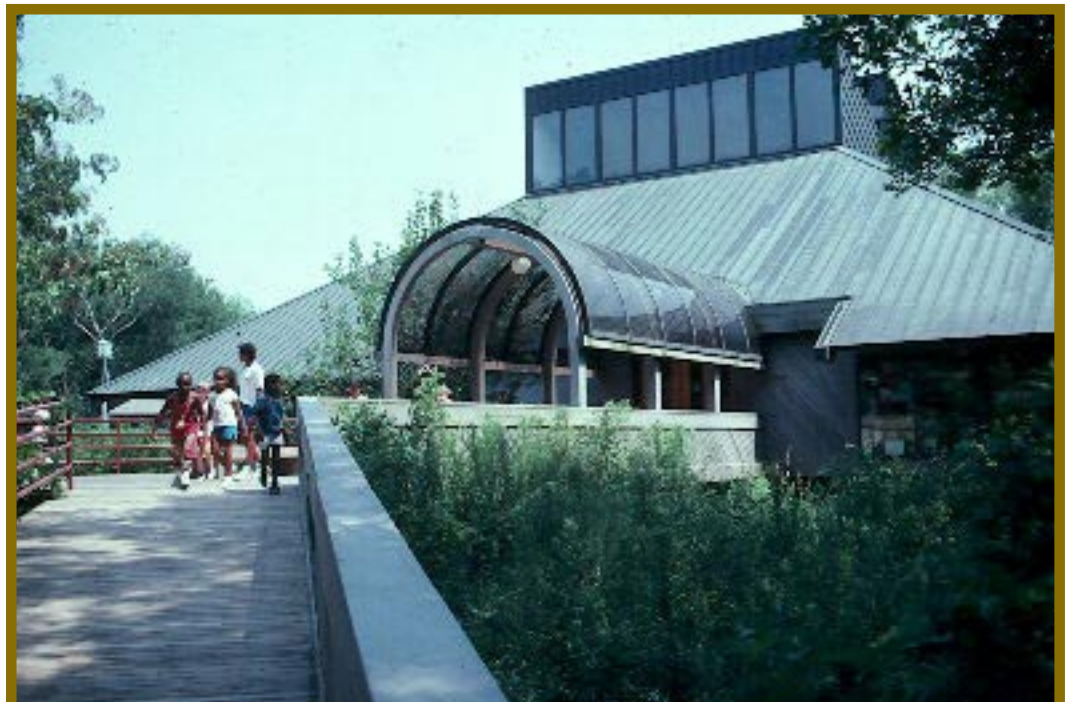


photo by Julia Sanders

*The Louisiana Nature Center's Interpretation Center, shown here in 1987, was featured on the last nature center directory produced by the Natural Science for Youth Foundation.*

(continued on next page)

applications from museums, of all varieties, from throughout the nation. The commission meets three times per year and, at each meeting, diligently

groups and operational partners, etc., thus improving the effectiveness of interactions among these components of the organization;

But, having operated a nature center for many years, I know that we tend to become consumed by the daily demands of delivering our extremely important product, and that often deprives administrators of the privilege of improving the operating systems of the organization. The AAM accreditation program places those values on the front burner – makes it a priority that can pay off in the long run.

Do yourself and your nature center a favor, and at least look into accreditation (<http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/index.cfm>). It might just set your organization on a new, productive path. 🍁



photo by Alan Karchmer

*With the addition of the new education complex in 1987, the Louisiana Nature Center rapidly expanded the breadth and depth of its offerings to the New Orleans community.*

## Nature Center Task Force of AAM – 1985

- James A. Fowler, ex officio, Cranbrook Institute of Science
- Joann Heidelberg, Bruckner Nature Center
- Tony Knapp, National Park Service
- Sandra Kurtz, Chattanooga Nature Center
- Linda Liebes, ex officio, Cayote Point Museum
- Gordon T. Maupin, Wilderness Center
- Douglas R. Noble, Lichterman Nature Center
- Dixie Pemberton, Center for Estuarine Studies, U. Maryland
- Rodolio Pena Garcia, Center for Science and Technology, Mexico
- George Perry, Austin Nature Center
- Robert P. Sullivan, Virginia Living Museum
- Robert A. Thomas, Louisiana Nature Center

works through 50 or so applications. It is grueling, yet satisfying work.

Is there value in nature centers seeking AAM accreditation? From my experience of going through the process (twice!), serving on the Nature Center Task Force, and being a commissioner for AAM, I remain a strong proponent for the process for the following reasons:

- The accreditation forms are an excellent guide to the highest standards of operation in the museum world;
- In order to complete the forms, a nature center has to have in place an array of policies and procedures that lend stability to operations;
- The development of these policies and procedures involves an intense collaborative process among board, staff, volunteers, associated support

- The organization grows professionally by going through the process;
- It strengthens the bonds and credibility between board and staff;
- It bolsters morale within the organization (and we know that high morale has tremendous value);
- Being accredited by a national organization of the stature of AAM sends a signal to supporters (especially donors) that the nature center is operating at a sophisticated level;
- Accreditation of the local nature center makes the community proud.

That said, can a nature center operate with impeccable standards if it is not accredited. **The answer is a resounding YES.**

# ANCA Peer Consults

## Strategic Thinking At It's Finest!



**Corky McReynolds**  
Director, Treehaven Environmental  
Learning Center, Tomahawk, WI  
ANCA Leadership Award Recipient 2004

ANCA's Peer Consults were conceptualized in November 1991. It was in Washington, DC and ANCA's Board had taken the opportunity to meet face-to-face during another nature-related conference that they were all attending. During this meeting there was discussion about the need for the Board to meet more often in person. Someone said "we should meet at someone's facility and have them pay for it!" Everyone laughed. A few moments later, in one of those too few bright flashes, the laughable suggestion suddenly appeared as a great idea to me. I proposed the concept and everyone agreed it just might work.

The idea was to locate a nature center that would be willing to host a day-long board meeting, providing transportation and lodging in exchange for a day of board consulting to the host institution. Shortly after the meeting, I realized that if this was to get jump-started, then why not bring the board to Treehaven. This seemed like an excellent way to pilot this idea, get the board to see Treehaven, give the board an opportunity to meet in person, and get the benefit of the insights of these experienced nature center directors for Treehaven - it really seemed like a win-win situation all the way around.

So, in the cold month of March 1992, the first ANCA Peer Consult was held and deemed a great success both by the board and by all of us at Treehaven. One neat aspect of this consult was that the board helped Treehaven realize that we were involved in an outdoor component xxx, which led to the re-write of our mission statement and is the one we still use today.

The first four consults involved ANCA's entire board, and it soon became apparent that facilities were interested in smaller, more efficient teams, rather than a whole board, so the Peer Consult Team concept was born. Pocono Environmental Education Center in Pennsylvania was the first to receive a Team Consult in March 1993.

The purpose of an ANCA Consult is to provide strategic thinking toward a specific administrative or operational challenge or opportunity facing the host facility. ANCA Teams are assembled based on preliminary discussions with the primary contact of the host facility and consist of nature/environmental center administrators representing a diversity of expensive and expertise.

Consults have benefited organizations that need outside interaction and realize the value that can be gained from the experiences, knowledge, and insights of others in the nature center professionals. People who are already strong and quality leaders at their center are the ones that know they need outside input. These types of leaders recognize the need to check what's going on within their own organization. Unfortunately, if the leadership doesn't recognize this type of need, this is probably the organization that needs a Peer Consult the most.

The most successful consults have been the ones that started off broader in approach - allowing the Team to look at a lot of different areas to develop. An organization can benefit most by saying "open door to peers" and welcome input from creative and insightful professionals. A Peer Consult may not provide all the answers, but it will equip leaders with tools to continue their own search for answers through strategic thinking. An opportunity to exchange good strategic thinking is what consults are all about.

So, when is it time for an ANCA Peer Consult? Anytime an organization is at a crossroads and needs to look at which direction it needs to go is the right time for a consult. 🍂



# History of ANCA Peer Consults

3/92	Treehaven Environmental Learning Center	Tomahawk, WI
7/92	Pueblo Nature Center and Greenway	Pueblo, CO
10/92	Shaw Arboretum	St. Louis, MO
2/93	Stennis Space Flight Center	Nicholson, MS
3/93	Pocono Environmental Education Center	Dingmans Ferry, PA
5/93	Sarasota County Dept. of Natural Resources	Sarasota, Florida
6/93	Chippewa Nature Center	Midland, MI
8/93	Thomas Ivine Dodge Nature Center	St. Paul, MN
8/93	Chattanooga Nature Center	Chattanooga, TN
12/94	Louisiana Nature Center and Aquarium	New Orleans, LA
4/95	Aldo Leopold Nature Center	Madison, WI
9/95	Loxahatchee Nature Center	West Palm Beach, FL
2/96	GreenPrint Council/Blandin Foundation	Marine-on-St.-Croix, MN
4/96	Polk County Conservation Board	Des Moines & West Des Moines, IA
7/96	Dept. of Environmental Protection	Hartford, CT
7/96	Center for Wildlife Education Georgia So. Univ.	Statesboro, GA
3/97	Cincinnati Nature Center	Cincinnati, OH
10/97	Great Smokey Mountain Institute	Townsend, TN
1/98	Pine Jog Environmental Education Center	West Palm Beach, FL
3/98	Teton Science School	Kelly, WY
5/98	Northlake nature Center	Covington, LA
5/98	Fontenelle Forest Association	Omaha, NE
6/98	Great Meadows Project	Warrenton, VA
9/98	Jean Ellen DuPont Shehan Audubon Sanctuary	Easton, MD
10/98	Mountain Natural Heritage Learning Center	North Carolina
5/99	Nature Center at Shaker Lakes	Cleveland, OH
5/99	Callaway Gardens	Pine Mountain, GA
6/00	Pocono Environmental Education Center	Dingmans Ferry, PA
6/00	Lee and Rose Warner Nature Center	St. Paul, MN
6/00	Mohonk Preserve	New Paltz, NY
9/00	Russel WI Peterson Urban Wildlife Center	Wilmington, DE
11/01	Audubon Center	Audubon, CT
1/02	Nixon Park Nature Center	York, PA
6/02	Kalamazoo Nature Center	Kalamazoo, MI
6/02	Dickson County Nature Center	Spirit Lake, IA
9/02	FARMS Leadership, Inc.	Winters, CA
11/02	Yellowstone Institute	Yellowstone National Park, WY
1/03	Wildcat Bluff Nature Center	Amarillo, TX
1/03	Irvine Nature Center	Stevenson, MD
3/03	Strawberry Hill Nature Center	Fairfield, PA
5/03	Severson Dells Nature Foundation	Rockford, IL
5/04	Lake Katherine Nature Preserve,	Palos Heights, IL
5/04	Elkhart Environmental Center,	Elkhart, Indiana
2/05	Matagorda Bay Nature Center	Matagorda, TX
4/05	Bear Creek Nature Preserve,	Lancaster, TX
11/05	Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve	Auburn, AL
12/05	Eastern Kentucky PRIDE	Somerset, KY

## Impressive Happenings

**Dick Touvell**  
Executive Director  
Chippewa Nature Center  
Midland, MI

Imagine with me, for a minute, that you are a nature center administrator who is wondering how you could improve things at your nature center. Who you think would be the Dream Team that would help you set goals and improve your center?

Just more than 13 years ago (1993), I was in that position. Chippewa Nature Center (CNC) had one of the earliest ANCA consults. Guess who my Dream Team was? Nature center legends Ken Finch, Mike Link, Gordon Maupin, Corky McReynolds, Bob Thomas, Pat Welch, Bob Mercer, Charity Krueger, and Tracy Kay.

The excitement and results generated by this Consult Team was extraordinary. The following three days became part of Chippewa Nature Center highlights of 40 years of operation.

What their collective insights did for the development of Chippewa Nature Center, as they say, is now history. We had a very sound 20,000 sq. foot

building built in 1976 by well-known architect Alden B. Dow; however, many described it as a “diamond not yet fully polished.” The ANCA Consult Team made a significant contribution to polishing the diamond. They began, as Consult Teams do today, by going behind the scenes of our organization,

reminded us of hundreds of important things – all focused on improving the experience of the visitor. For example, the visitor center is a conduit to the outdoors (the real exhibit), how to make the building more warm and receptive, specifics of how to attract the return visitor, how to

make the trail system more engaging, and techniques on tracking visitor needs and wants.

As you can imagine, their recommendations carried weight with the board and staff. In fact, many ideas they expressed were issues staff had been discussing for years, but an ANCA Consult Team honestly adds credibility to many of your ideas.

So, what are you waiting for? Call

Bo Glover, and invite an ANCA consult “dream” team to your facility! It is one of the highlights of my 15-year tenure at Chippewa Nature Center, and one of the most influential happenings that this facility has experienced. 🌿



photo by Dick Touvell

*Chippewa Nature Center, host of the 2005 Summit as seen here, was one of the first recipients of an ANCA Consult more than 13 years ago. Having implemented many of the Consult Team’s suggestions, CNC is today a thriving and successful organization.*

by talking with key staff and board members. They then formulated specific recommendations, which for the most part have been implemented over the years.

We specifically asked that they focus on exhibits, signage, and other issues focused on improving the experience of visitors, such as audience flow and membership. They “dug in” and

# Disaster Consult

**Bob Mercer**  
Executive Director  
Silver Lake Nature Center  
Bristol, PA

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the ANCA Board recognized that there may be a need to build a disaster response team. The news media have forgotten about the communities destroyed by Katrina, and the situation is still very grave for the Louisiana Nature Center.

On December first, the residents of the ninth ward of New Orleans, where the nature center is located, were allowed for the FIRST time to see their homes. The area still was without electricity. Destruction was huge at the Nature Center where now eighty percent of the trees are down and the buildings are covered with mold. One of the challenges faced by the center is, if they rebuild, would anyone come?

The ANCA Board wishing to help some how contacted Bob Thomas, long-time ANCA member and former Director of the Louisiana Nature Center, asking what if anything ANCA could do. He suggested we find a way to field a consult team to come and help guide the rebuilding process at the nature center.

In reflection, the board realized that many sites in Florida have been severely impacted by hurricanes and some of our peers have faced some major disasters like fires,

floods, etc. We actually have a pool of people who have faced major disasters and survived. Their guidance could be invaluable.

As this is being written, a team is being created that will travel to New Orleans early in 2006 to help the Louisiana Nature Center address how to proceed.

During the ANCA Board's strategic planning process in February, one issue that will be addressed is the concept of making provisions so ANCA could field future disaster consult teams so that none of our peers would need to face such devastation without support from the ANCA community.

Feedback from you our members will be important in guiding the process. Have you ever faced a disaster at your center? Would an ANCA Consult for which you did not need to pay the fees or travel expenses been of help?

Let us know. 🌿

Please offer your feedback to any ANCA Board Member. See page 2 for contact info.



photo by Bob Thomas

*What is left of the Thomas Teaching Deck at Louisiana Nature Center. Note the open canopy that was closed before Hurricane Katrina. Also, at the time of the photo (Oct. 18, 2005), all the trees should have been leafed out. LNC was inundated with 10 feet of salt water for two weeks.*

# ANCA's Summit XII the *Lone Star* Summit

McKinney Roughs  
Nature Park

Cedar Creek, TX  
Aug. 24-26, 2006



Be There!

## from Summit XI

Chippewa Nature Center, 2005

"Every administrator should reach out of their geographic and comfort sphere and attend the ANCA Summit. What a wealth of ideas and energy!"

"This was my first ANCA conference and I'm hooked. It was a very valuable experience."

"I actually felt recharged after this Summit. The pace was good, the free time was wonderful, food and snacks were dandy."

"I will never miss another Summit!!!"

## ANCA Business Sponsorship

Attention all businesses and organizations that support the nature center profession. We appreciate your interest and believe that ANCA members would be a good market for your products and services. What better way to reach the decision-makers in our field than to join ANCA as a Business Member. Below is information on our business membership program, which includes advertising opportunities, Summit exhibitor space and many other benefits.

### Business Membership - \$250 Annually

- All benefits of ANCA Membership plus:
- Special recognition in Directions and on web-site
- Exclusive right to one time rental of ANCA member mailing list

### Bronze Summit Sponsor - \$500

- All benefits of Business Membership plus:
- Free 1/4 page advertisement in 4 issues of Directions
- Free display table at ANCA's annual Summit (includes registration and meals for Friday and Saturday)

### Silver Summit Sponsor - \$1,000

- All benefits of Bronze Sponsor plus:
- Display Sponsor Banner at ANCA Annual Summit
- Special recognition in Summit Registration Packet

### Gold Summit Sponsor - \$5,000

- All benefits of Silver Sponsor plus:
- Recognition as sponsor of opening reception, lunch, dinner or auction at the Summit
- Web-site link until end of calendar year
- Insert business brochure in Summit Registration Packet

### Platinum Summit Sponsor - \$10,000

- All benefits of Platinum Sponsor plus:
- Recognition on all printed materials as "Official Summit Sponsor"

Thank you to our new business sponsors!

#### Bronze:

- MPR Museum Consulting
- Split Rock Studios
- World Discovery Safaris

#### Business:

- Design Craftsman
- Nature Watch

If you would like to become a business member to have any questions, please call Larry Brown at the ANCA Office at 1-800-490-2622 or email at [lbrown@audubon.org](mailto:lbrown@audubon.org)

# ANCA Membership Form

## Please Join Us!

Membership Benefits: Quarterly Issues of Directions • Special Publications • Invitation to ANCA Summits and Workshops • Reciprocal Admission Program • Membership Guide

Please check the desired membership level: \_\_\_ \$70 Individual or \_\_\_ \$110 Institutional (two staff members receive benefits)  
\_\_\_ \$25 Student (copy of full-time student ID required)

\_\_\_ ANCA also offers several Business Membership options. Check here if you would like more information.

NAME 1: \_\_\_\_\_ TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL 1: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME 2: \_\_\_\_\_ (with Institutional Membership)

TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL 2: \_\_\_\_\_

ORGANIZATION: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_ CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ Ext: \_\_\_\_\_ FAX: \_\_\_\_\_

- ANCA offers a reciprocal admissions program for our members. Please check the reciprocal benefits your institution will provide: \_\_\_\_\_ Free Admission \_\_\_\_\_ Store Discount of \_\_\_\_\_% \_\_\_\_\_ Not Interested
- If you would like to participate in ANCA's reciprocal website link program please note your web address below. ANCA's website is [www.natctr.org](http://www.natctr.org). (Inclusion is subject to review.) \_\_\_\_\_
- ANCA provides our members with a membership guide of participating institutions every 12 months. Please list my institution in the brochure as follows:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Web Site: \_\_\_\_\_

City & State: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

- ANCA is funded entirely by the generosity of members like you through membership dues, Summit registrations, grants, and donations. If you would like to make a donation at this time to support the operation of the organization, please note the amount here and add to your membership fees. \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Total Membership Dues & Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Payment Method: Cash \_\_\_\_\_ Check \_\_\_\_\_ Charge: Visa \_\_\_\_\_ Master Card \_\_\_\_\_  
Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Expires \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to ANCA and mail with this form to:

ANCA  
1000 Aullwood Road  
Dayton, OH 45414



# ANCA Technical Consults: YOUR FRIEND IN THE BUSINESS!

## ANCA offers consulting assistance

to nature centers and other environmental education organizations at very reasonable fees. The charge includes the cost of transportation, lodging and meals for the team, plus a \$2,750 fee that goes toward supporting ANCA's professional services and planning. Our Board of Directors, and members, provide these services with no personal financial gain, while you gain the advantage of advice and guidance from some of the profession's most respected and experienced leaders.

What can be covered? Well, just about anything involved with planning, funding, and operations. Some topics include:

- Assistance with long range and strategic planning
- Review education programs, exhibits, or trails
- Mission focus
- Fundraising and fiscal management
- Facility planning
- Starting a center
- Management strategies and use planning

## To find out more about

ANCA's Peer Consults, contact any ANCA board member or Bo Glover at  
949-645-8489  
boglo@aol.com

Jeff Brown from the Yellowstone Association had this to say about ANCA Consults:

"We contacted the folks at ANCA and they pulled together some of the best people in this business on very short notice. The consulting team spent two full days in the park and provided a detailed written report within one month. The process was fun, the cost was reasonable, and the results are tangible - we are moving forward with a revised proposal based on the excellent advice we received from these experts."

## directions

c/o Aullwood Audubon Center  
1000 Aullwood Road  
Dayton, OH 45414

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