

directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

Reconnecting Children with Nature:

Keynote address presented at the Teton Summit in Jackson Hole, WY August 2008

Larry Selzer
President & Chief Executive Officer
The Conservation Fund
Washington D.C.

Thank you for that wonderful introduction. It is indeed a great privilege to be here with so many friends. You in the outdoor industry have become my extended family over the past two and a half years, and like any family reunion, it's fun to sit around and explore new ideas, talk about things you want to do together, and tell stories.

And after listening to more than a few tall tales last night, I was reminded of this one:

Two men are out hunting, and as they are walking along they come upon a huge hole in the ground. They approach it and are amazed by the size of it.

The first hunter says "Wow, that's some hole, I can't even see the bottom,

I wonder how deep it is?"

The second hunter says "I don't know, let's throw something down



photo courtesy of Crow's Neck

Crow's Neck Environmental Education Center uses hands-on, outdoor education activities to create in-depth learning experiences which foster responsible stewardship of Northeast Mississippi's natural and cultural resources.

and listen and see how long it takes to hit bottom."

The first hunter says "There's an old transmission here, give me a hand and we'll throw it in and see."

So they pick it up and carry it over, and count one, and two and three, and throw it in the hole. They are standing there listening and looking over the edge when they hear a rustling in the brush behind them. As they turn around they see a goat come crashing through the brush, run up to the hole with no hesitation, and jump in headfirst.

While they are standing there looking at each other, looking in the hole, and trying to figure out what that was all about, an old farmer walks up. "Say there," says the farmer, "you fellers didn't happen to see a goat around here anywhere, did you?"

The first hunter says "Funny you should ask. We were just standing here a minute ago and a goat came

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Founded in 1989, the Association of Nature Center Administrators is a private non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers.

Serving nearly 500 organizations, ANCA is the leader in the profession.



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*Cicadas live mostly unseen,
But then when they burst from the
green,
They're loud and they're rude,
They eat tons of food,
And why not? They're all
seventeen!*

Doug Waters



photo courtesy of
Briar Bush Nature Center

Director's Notes

Jen Levy
Executive Director
Association of Nature Center
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I love the fall. Although much of the natural world winds down for that long winter sleep, fall finds me wide awake and excited for cooler weather, falling leaves, and that fluffy white stuff that will blanket the north. In addition, I always feel energized after the annual ANCA Summit. This year is no exception – our gathering at the Teton Science Schools in Jackson Hole, WY was a great opportunity for ANCA members to meet with colleagues, attend informative sessions, keep current in the field, and go home with new ideas and inspiration. If you were unable to make the Summit, we will post some of the resources that were made available on the Member's Only page of the ANCA website.

Although we meet by phone throughout the year, the Summit gives the ANCA board and staff the opportunity to gather for a one-day, in-person meeting. *The Director's Guide to Best Practices* describes an effective board as a director's greatest resource. That is true in the case of the ANCA board which is structured to include representation based on budget size, day use/residential facilities, geographic location, years of experience, and governance type.


After reviewing the current board structure and with two vacancies to fill, we welcomed new board members Holly Dill, ED of the Environmental Learning Center in Vero Beach, FL and Cynthia Harrell, ED of Crow's Neck Environmental Education Center in Tishomingo, MS. I look forward to working with both Holly and Cynthia over the next few years. I would like to thank outgoing board members Saul Weisberg and Paul Tebbel for their work and dedication to ANCA's mission.

One of the highlights of this year's



Summit was the keynote address by Larry Selzer, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Conservation Fund. The Conservation Fund organized the National Forum on Children and Nature to find and fund projects that improve the lives of children by addressing four key areas. In his talk, Larry provided a preview of some of the demonstration projects selected by the Forum for recognition and support. We had so many requests for a copy of his talk that we decided to run it in this issue.

In addition, Jack Shea, Executive Director of Teton Science Schools was presented with the 2008 Nature Center Leadership Award (see Profiles in the Summer 2008 issue of Directions). As with all great leaders, Jack possesses the qualities he tries to incorporate into his team and colleagues. To that end, when his daughter Hayden asked Jack about ANCA he fittingly described our members as Happy Optimistic Purveyors of Education. He suggested we consider a new acronym for our organization – HOPE.

I think Jack described perfectly the members of ANCA. Despite all the roadblocks we encounter in our lives as administrators and "purveyors of education," we all have hope. If we didn't, we would be doing something else with our time and energy. Thanks to Jack for reminding us of this and thanks to all of you for the good work you do. Have a great fall ANCA members. 

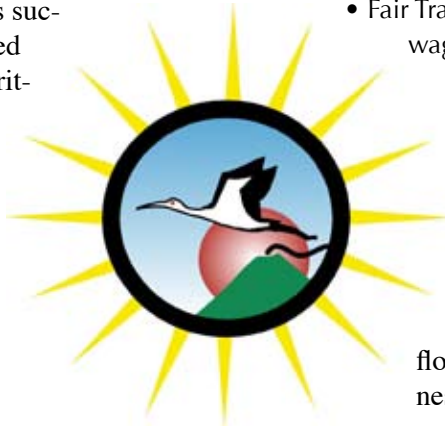
Membership News

Fund-the-Need 2009: Paving the Way for ANCA's Future

Each year the ANCA board and staff identifies a project for the upcoming year that will be especially beneficial to the membership, but needs a little extra funding. With support from our members, ANCA has successfully implemented projects including writing and publishing the first two ANCA Monographs and establishing the Richard Haley Memorial Fund that provides Summit and Consult scholarships.

Why invest in ANCA's future? If ANCA's goal is to enhance professionalism and provide the support system critical to innovative and progressive management in the nature and environmental center profession, we must have a professional system in place to collect, compile, and share our network, resources, and activities for current and future leaders.

We are happy to report that in addition to the \$5,000 challenge grant generously donated by Debbi and Paul Brainerd, we raised \$6,518 at the ANCA Summit in August with another \$5,825 pledged through March of 2009 for a total of \$17,343. With these funds we will begin to develop a structured collection of records, resources, and data that can effectively serve the membership of today and tomorrow. We are still collecting contributions to this fund. Please consider making a donation by going to the Join/Support page of the ANCA website or sending a check to the ANCA office.



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running out of the bushes doin' about a hundred miles an hour and jumped headfirst into this hole!"

And the old farmer said "That's impossible, I had him chained to an old transmission."

Sometimes, you just can't help feeling a bit like the goat. Especially if you read the news:

- 1 in 5 American children is clinically obese
- 50% of Hispanic boys drop out by the 8th grade
- And some states are now projecting their future prison needs based on third grade reading scores.

There is something fundamentally wrong with the health of our nation when these are among our headlines.

A healthy nation takes notice when more than 3 million children are being treated for depression, or when doctors seriously consider prescribing cholesterol-lowering drugs to kids as young as 9.

A healthy nation asks how it is that children now gain 3-5 times as much weight during the summer as they do during the school year.

And a healthy nation questions why doctors don't treat so many broken bones anymore – instead, the most common ailment among children these days is repetitive motion disorder.

George Bernard Shaw famously remarked that all progress depends on being unreasonable. Well, I believe it is time for a large amount of civic unreasonableness. It is time for each of us to step back from our day-to-day and develop a deeper critique of what is going on.

Once before, we were able to do just that when found ourselves in a similarly tight spot.

You see, 46 years ago, there too was something fundamentally wrong with the health of our nation.

We faced different challenges then, of course – our air and water were fouled with industrial pollution and the incidence of cancer and asthma were rising. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, came an angel to illuminate a new path. Her name was Rachel Carson and her scripture was called *Silent Spring*.



photo courtesy of Briar Bush Nature Center

For 100 years the Briar Bush Nature Center, located in Abington, PA has been instilling a sense of wonder in kids from six months to 101 years old who visit their sanctuary. Trails, pond, bird observatory, museum, and hide-holes offer boundless opportunities for discovery and fun.

This book, which for the first time linked the environment and human health, unleashed a tidal wave of grass roots activism that resulted in the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Today our air is cleaner, our water is clearer and we are beginning to take our stewardship role of our natural world seriously.

Forty six years ago Rachel Carson ushered in the modern environmental movement and we are all better for it.

Now, four and a half decades later, we face another urgent health crisis,

this time with our children. And, as in 1962, another angel, Richard Louv, has appeared.

Like Rachel Carson before him, his scripture presented in the form of a book, *Last Child in the Woods*, and like his predecessor, his writing has unleashed a tidal wave across America. It is a wave that is still rising; one that will not crest until we have succeeded in launching a new movement in this country – a Leave No Child Inside movement – that will challenge us to take seriously our stewardship responsibilities for our most precious natural resource – our children.

And that is what I want to speak with you about this evening – your role in helping to lead this new movement – in helping to bring a new story to the American people – a story of hope of optimism, of whole and healthy children.

You see, I believe we are in trouble right now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story.

It is a story we must write together, and though we may not know how it ends, we know how it must begin: reconnecting children with nature. We know this is how we must start because there is a growing body of evidence that shows that the declining health of our children indeed is related to the growing divide we now see between children and nature.

And furthermore, there is evidence that by reconnecting children with nature, we can begin to reverse some of the terrible trends we now see in children's health, educational attainment, and socialization.

Yet, reconnecting children with nature means that there must be some nature left to reconnect to.

From the remote backwoods to lands near small towns, nature is shrinking: 35 acres here, 500 acres

there. The decline is so incremental it masks a crisis. You wake up one morning and the forest you took for granted has bulldozers tearing up the trees.

Across the country, more than 13 million acres of forests have been destroyed since 1992, with another 23 million projected to be lost in the next three decades.

And 15 million acres of agricultural land have already been lost to housing development in just the last five years.

And here in the west, more than 25 million acres of open ranch land is at risk of residential development by 2020.

The cumulative impact is staggering.

From the family farms in New England to the open prairies of the Midwest to the mountain valleys of the west, we are losing the landscapes that for 200 years have shaped us as a nation and defined us as a people. In our lifetime we are changing the very face of America.

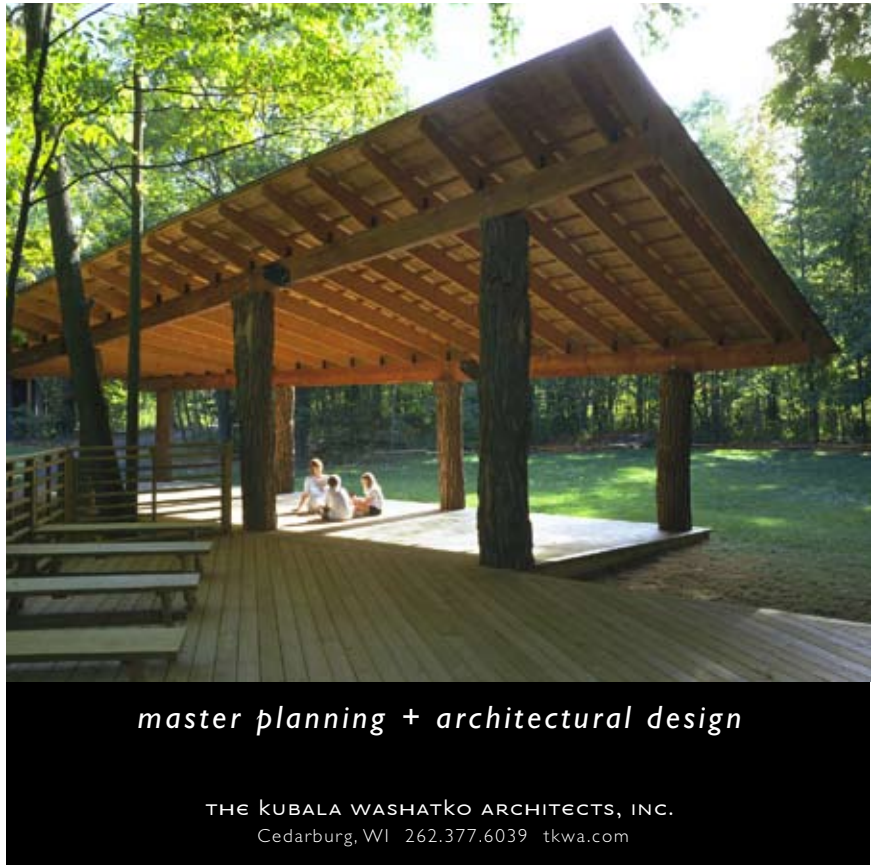
But of course America is changing in other ways as well.

The most recent U. S. Census indicates that some time around the year 2050, people of color in this country will outnumber the current white majority. And some time around that same period, a majority of Americans – 85% – will live in cities.

These shifts, fundamental and profound, represent huge challenges as we attempt to maintain a connection to the land, and as we try to maintain a land base that we can be connected to.

America adds 2.7 million people every year, requiring a minimum of a million units of new housing annually – and with the population in the U. S. expected to double to 600 million, these challenges are not going to subside. How we plan for this growth, and how we incorporate nature into our communities is of paramount importance.

We must return to the old wisdom of living in harmony with nature, but this will take vision, political will, and money – things that are in short



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supply these days.

In the past, our nation's economic and environmental goals benefited greatly from strong partnerships between public and private institutions, and a sense of balance between resource use and resource conservation. But these are different times.

Federal investments in land conservation are at historic lows, and for the second time, this administration has proposed permanently terminating the state

and local side of the Land and Water Conservation Fund – an unacceptable outcome for a program that has provided more than \$3.5 billion in matching grants to states and localities over the past 40 years, completing more than 40,000 projects that have conserved more than 2.5 million acres of land.

I believe that we who are at the front lines, we who are beneficiaries of these programs, must do more to

raise our voices to champion land conservation in America.

Across the country, in red states and blue, Americans have voted decisively to spend more money for natural areas, neighborhood parks, and conservation in their communities - \$30 billion over just the past five years. Of 161 conservation ballot measures proposed during the last election cycle, 75% were approved by voters - a success rate that has held steady over the last five election cycles.

Why? Because these measures unify us. It's hard to be against new parks and trails, or to disagree with wanting to protect farms, forests, and ranches from development. What's more, voters have learned that these measures often provide local solutions to clean air and clean water, and provide a foundation for new, sustainable economies.

The American people, it seems

to me, are increasingly clear about their preferences. And yet, our elected leaders seem to be on a different path, especially those in Washington. Never before have I seen a greater distance between what voters say is important to them and what our leaders champion. We must demand more from our elected officials, and the upcoming elections are a great place to start.

But a central question remains. Even if we are successful in re-establishing land conservation as a national priority, will future generations be prepared to inherit and be good stewards of this land legacy we are setting aside today?

You see, over the past 30 years, children of the digital age have become increasingly alienated from the natural world with disturbing implications, not only for their physical fitness, but also for their long-term mental and spiritual health, and of course, for the environment.

Young people who grow up without spending time in nature are much less likely to be strong champions of the environment when they

We will have a generation deciding the value of open space and agriculture that has not seen an elk migrate, crops ripen, or simply gotten its hands dirty in the garden.



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reach voting age. Twenty or so years from now, we will have a generation of leaders in our public, private, and nonprofits institutions who will be asked to make policy and budgetary decisions about forests and wetlands who have never seen a forest, or waded a stream.

We will have a generation deciding the value of open space and agriculture that has not seen an elk migrate, crops ripen, or simply gotten its hands dirty in the garden. This is an untenable position.

Young people today have access to an unprecedented array of media in their homes and in their bedrooms. While opening up a wealth of “virtual” experiences to the young, these technologies have made it easier and easier for children to spend less time outside.

Wall Street calls this progress. But if that’s true, then Ogden Nash was right when he said, “Progress may have been a good thing at one time, but it went on a little too long.”

We need to seek a little more balance – to move toward what entrepreneur and economist Paul Hawken

calls a ‘developing economy’ rather than focusing solely on growth. A growing economy he says is getting bigger; a developing economy is getting better.

Put another way, the market has its place, but the market needs to be kept in its place.

On my trip here, I passed a giant billboard from IKEA that read “Kids, go play inside!” What does it say about our priorities as a society when we choose to market clever furniture in place of clever kids? When we will drive miles out of our way to buy free range chicken but are too busy or too scared to encourage free range children?

There is a dullness in our young people today because they have lost the spark that comes from interacting with the world around them. It is time we reclaimed the higher ground.

But how do we get there from here? Martin Luther King said that

the success of any social movement depends on its ability to “show a world where people will want to go.” But where is that?

You and I may want to go to the Boundary Waters of Minnesota or the canyons of Zion National Park. But for a child in East Philadelphia, East

St. Louis or East L. A., it may be someplace entirely different.

In fact, it may be the abandoned lot next door -- New York City has over 47,000

vacant land parcels totaling thousands of acres.

For decades, these have been considered liabilities, to be fenced off, avoided. What a waste. Where is the vision, the creativity in that? Mark Twain said “you cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” I prefer Agatha Christie’s outlook better.

You see, she was married to one

(continued on page 10)

There is a dullness in our young people today because they have lost the spark that comes from interacting with the world around them.

“In wilderness is the preservation of the world.”
Henry David Thoreau

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From The Field:

Reflecting on the ANCA Peer Consult

Larry Richardson
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The ANCA Peer Consult is a service we provide as a professional organization. Our goal is to provide “best practice” solutions to organizations confronted with a variety of issues needing resolution. ANCA does this very effectively. There are, however, other benefits as well.

For the ANCA professional that participates in or leads the consults, it is an uplifting educational and professional development experience. There is no substitute for learning from one’s peers and peer organizations. Indeed, solving other’s problems often provide the insight to do something even better within one’s own organization.

The Peer Consult is much more than just the application of best practices to solve organizational problems, though. The ANCA Peer Consult often results in organizations more effectively delivering their missions and enriching and educating their audiences. ANCA is providing leadership and inspiration, and instilling confidence that results in making a real difference in our missions, the people we touch and in the stewardship of the things we value the most.

The Last Frontier and The New Frontier contributing article for Sun

Newspaper Westlife, Cleveland, OH originally published in March 2008

Alaska: “The Last Frontier.” The 49th State’s endorsed description is really true! It is a vast expanse. The amount of wilderness is simply beyond comprehension. The central region from the Kenai Peninsula to Fairbanks is not measured by number of mountains but the number of mountain chains. The vistas from



photo by Larry Richardson

Since 1982 the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies in Homer, AK has provided effective experience-based field science instruction to Alaska residents and visitors, with youth as the primary audience.

every turn of the road are breathtaking and the beauty is seen by the eye and sent directly to the heart.

Alaska isn’t for everybody. Underlying all the incredible scenery, abundant wildlife and extensive forests is a harsh, frigid, dangerous, and unforgiving environment. The extremes are as vast as 24 hours of daylight to 24 hours of darkness. Failing to take precautions most of us would never even consider can result in the loss of life. Anyone who chooses to live in Alaska can only survive on her terms.

The Alaskan population is small but hardy, to say the least.

I recently traveled nearly 5,000 miles of interior Alaska exploring glaciers and fjords, gazing at Mt. McKinley, chasing killer and humpback whales and discovering the rich birdlife of the great land. However, my main purpose for going to Alaska was to visit Kachemak Bay and the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies

(CACS) in Homer. A four-member team of nature center professionals from the Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA) was asked to consult with the organization on several program related issues. Three of my colleagues and I were invited to observe school-age marine ecology programs at low tide in China-Poot Bay and make recommendations about the program’s future.

In the shadows of the Kenai Moun-

tains and wilderness spruce forests, local fourth grade students explored the exposed tide pools for marine creatures and all the aquatic life that supports it. When asked what they had learned, the answers flowed with the force of the Bay’s incoming tide. This is their land. These are things they need to know to appreciate their world and to understand why this beautiful place requires their (and our) stewardship. They are doing science, but learning to be good citizens.

Kachemak Bay is incredibly

scenic. It is a dynamic ecosystem that is rich in salmon, halibut, and seafood of every description. It is also threatened. Below the rich bay is oil, and when the first rig was erected, the good people of Homer got organized, got tough and willed the oil industry out of Kachemak Bay. There would be no Exxon Valdez incident in their region. Out of this movement, the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies was born, along with hands-on programs for future generations of Alaskans.


Kachemak Bay is just as important to you and me as it is to Alaskans. A recent problem for CACS is the docking for boats bringing children to the Peterson Bay Field Station where the China-Poot Bay experience begins. A gravel bar where the docking site has been for 25 years is growing feet per year to such extent that the site will soon need to be abandoned. The gravel is deposited by the outwash of melting glaciers high above in the mountains. This is a hydrologic problem resulting from climate change. Climate change is not an Alaska problem. It's everyone's problem.

"The Last Frontier" is more than worthy of our concern. Alaska is sending us all a warning sign that the world as we know it may soon change into something as unforgiving as the great land but for much different reasons. "The New Frontier" may largely be defined not by the planet, but by what we do in the near future to reduce our carbon footprint and to minimize our impact on climate change running out of control. The only way to preserve the awesome beauty and majesty of Alaska is for each of us here in our own community to think, act and embrace environmentally sustainable practices that reduce our carbon footprint to some acceptable, sustainable standard.

The New Frontier has some things in common with The Last Frontier. Many of us love our Lake Erie as much as Alaskans love their great land. Many of us here in northeast

Ohio care about the boundless wilderness of Alaska and the importance to preserve our wild legacy. Our fourth graders are studying and exploring in their world, just like the Alaskan children up north. All children must come to appreciate their world. They need to learn to accept Alaska as their world, too, and to understand the message she sends us.

I am impressed with the work being done by the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies. I felt most at home watching Alaskan children in China-Poot Bay because it was like watching the children at the Lake Erie Nature & Science Center exploring Porter Creek in Huntington Reservation. Fourth graders in both places will inherit a huge environmental responsibility. Field studies will help prepare them.

You and I are defining "the new frontier" for our children. We can't directly protect Alaska but by taking stewardship of our community, we can also preserve the great land so our children and grandchildren can chase whales and birds and mountains, to discover the meaning of "The Last Frontier" themselves. 

Larry Richardson has been executive director at Lake Erie Nature & Science Center on Lake Erie for 20 years. Thirty-three years of avid birding has proven a valuable course in natural history and nature center and ANCA colleagues have heavily shaped his environmental ethic and commitment to environmental education.

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of the preeminent archaeologists of her time. Once when she was asked what's it like to be married to an archaeologist, she replied... "It's wonderful! The older I get, the more interested he is in me!"

She was clever enough to see her age as an asset rather than a liability. And we need to be clever enough to recognize that New York City with its 47,000 abandoned lots has an amazing asset just waiting to be deployed.

This brings up a central point in our efforts to reconnect children with nature. As we become more of an urban nation, and as the demographics of our country continue to change, reconnecting children with nature will be less about bringing kids to nature, and more about bringing nature to the kids.

Taking an inner city kid from Washington, D. C. to Yellowstone is a bit like sending her to the moon for a week. It is too big a leap. We need to bring nature to these kids in a way that makes sense to them. Then, later, after they have developed a connection, a love for nature, we can make our way to Yellowstone.

If we are to make nature relevant to the 85% of Americans who will live in cities, then we must recognize the value, not only of our national parks and wildlife refuges, but also of our neighborhood parks, wooded cul-de-sacs, and abandoned lots that have yet to be restored.

For too long, we in the environmental movement have defined nature in terms of wildness, far away and pristine. And the result is that nature has become a foreign country that we get to visit only once in a while. That will never do.

Nature must be nearby, accessible. It must be returned to our day care

centers, our schools, and our communities. We need to rethink our priorities and remake our culture – a tall order indeed.

But, Daniel Burnham said "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood." Restoring our connection to our natural world is no little plan, and we have little time to waste.



photo courtesy of Crow's Neck

Located in the northeast corner of Mississippi, near the tiny town of Tishomingo, Crow's Neck Environmental Education Center sits on a 530-acre peninsula owned by the United States Army Corps of Engineers and surrounded by 6,600-acre Bay Springs Lake. Crow's Neck has a simple two-part education philosophy: Have Fun and Learn Something!

Our own efforts began to take shape back in 2006 when we first hosted a conference on children and nature that drew some 500 people from around the country, representing educators, health-care experts, recreation companies, residential developers, urban planners, conservation organizations, and academics.

Surprising to me was the strong participation from religious leaders. Liberal and conservative, they came because they understand that all spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder, and that one of the first windows to wonder is the natural world.

Now, out of this initial gathering, emerged the idea of an action-oriented national effort focused on reconnecting children with nature, and one year ago, with strong support from The North Face, REI, and the Outdoor Industry Association,

the National Forum on Children and Nature was born.

Chaired by the Governors of Pennsylvania, Connecticut, South Carolina, and Montana, the goals of the Forum are threefold:

- First, to elevate this issue of reconnecting children with nature to the highest levels of our national consciousness
- Second, to connect the fast growing grassroots side of this movement to some of the most powerful engines of American society – public, private, and nonprofit
- And third, to make real for every American – through nationally significant demonstration projects - ways that each of us can help reconnect children with nature - no matter where we live or what our station in life.

The response to the Forum has been overwhelming. Over the past year, we have heard from more than 500 communities about work they are doing, or hope to do to reconnect children with nature. They are energized and looking for partners.

And that's where you come in. You are uniquely positioned to engage America in this essential conversation, and to engage young people in new and exciting ways.

It is time for you, as individuals and as an industry, to step into the fray. Saving a generation is not a spectator sport, and you, especially you, cannot afford to sit this one out.

With that in mind, let me tell you briefly about some of the great ideas, some of the great investment opportunities, now working their way through the Forum:

- In Pittsburgh, a group of outdoor recreation partners has banded together under the name Sustainable Pitts-

burgh to develop a prepaid gift card for kids that can only be redeemed for outdoor recreation activities such as canoeing, kayaking, and biking.

- Also in Pittsburgh, in a first for the country, rather than incur the expense of establishing their own physical education facilities, the region's charter schools are outsourcing their physical education to the nonprofit recreation partners. The schools fulfill their PE requirements and the outdoor partners get paid for taking the kids outdoors.

- Down in Houston, the METRO Transit Authority is teaming up with the Parks and Recreation Department to create a new four-acre Outdoor Center at the soon to be built central metro station and transportation hub in the heart of the city, thus providing access to nature for the city's majority Hispanic and black population that relies on public transportation and if not for this new outdoor space would have no access to the city's perimeter parks.

- And in Denver, the Public Housing Authority is partnering with the University of Colorado, the Parks Department, and Earth Force to engage at-risk kids from 7-21 years of age in a progression of nature-based programs, thus defining a critical new role for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

And there are other great ideas moving forward as well.

- A select group of progressive residential developers has come together to create a child-friendly design standard and certification program for new neighborhood developments;

- The National Environmental Education Foundation is working with pediatric health care providers to train them to prescribe outdoor time for children. Their goal is to have 1 million prescriptions written in the next two years;

- And the Teens Outside program, currently up and running in more than 20 communities, plans to expand to more than 200 communities by the end of 2010.

These outstanding examples prove

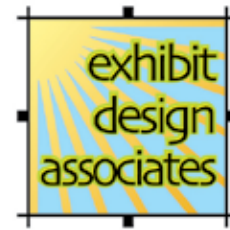
that there is a deep well of human ingenuity that can be tapped when we understand the challenge and get all hands on deck.

But I don't need to remind you that it is time we bring some urgency to these tasks.

There are 20 million diabetics in this country today; there will be 40 million in 2015; and, if we don't change course, 80 million in the year 2050! Type 2 diabetes, which didn't even have a name 25 years ago, has risen 300% in the past 5 years.

Already, we spend \$1.5 trillion each year on health care with 95% of that spent on direct medical service – and only 5% allocated to preventing disease and promoting health and a healthy lifestyle.

The implications for the country are severe – from a health perspective, to the impact on local, state, and national budgets, to the very future of your industry. Sick people are less productive at work and do not recreate much outdoors. We need to rethink our approach to wellness and health – nature as the 1st prescription rather than the last.



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Photo by Kleinman

We know, for example, that patients in rooms with tree views have shorter hospitalizations and that children with ADHD who have access to natural areas are calmer and require less medication.

And we know that the presence of trees outside apartment buildings in a public housing project in inner-city Chicago predicted better coping skills, less crime, and less violence.

And finally, we know that among children who play in paved over playgrounds, the leaders tend to be the most physically mature; while among children who play on green playgrounds, the leaders tend to be the most creative.

Remember, these are the future leaders of our country. With all the complexity in the world today, from global warming, to free trade and immigration, to ethnic and religious intolerance, do we really believe we can lead based on strength alone?

The demonstration projects of the National Forum on Children and Nature will, individually and collectively, be a most powerful platform for advocating for change – change in the products we make, the services we provide, the education we deliver, and the communities we build.

This is change we can believe in. It cannot be legislated or regulated – it is cultural change we are after – and will only happen if we reach out and engage all Americans in this effort.

You and I might sit down once a month to discuss programs and priorities, and that's a great thing, but when did you last visit with the National Council of La Raza, or the Southern Baptist Convention?

All Americans care about these issues. They may come to the table for different reasons, but they want a seat at the table. And we need to set a place for them. Poor people, people of color, people with disabilities, and others who have the least access to

natural settings, and who may need it the most. As a nation, we will be paid back many times over.

My favorite lapel button says simply “The meek are getting ready.” Now I'm not sure if the meek will inherit the Earth, but I am sure young people will. And you need to help them get ready.

As much as any other institution in

more basic motivation.

It may have something to do with what Harvard professor E. O. Wilson calls the biophilia hypothesis, which is that human beings are hard-wired to nature: that biologically, we are all still hunters and gatherers, and there is something in us, which we do not fully understand, that needs an occasional immersion in nature.

What we do know is that when we brought the leaders of the National Forum on Children and Nature together – those that were old enough to remember a time when outdoor play was the norm – almost all told stories about their own childhoods: this tree house or fort, that special woods or creek. They recalled those ‘places of initiation’ in the words of naturalist Bob Pyle, where they may have first sensed with awe and wonder the largeness of the world seen and unseen.

And when people shared these stories, their cultural, political, and religious walls came tumbling down and ideas came pouring forth.

Now, I'd like to leave you with a few final thoughts.

As I travel across all 50 states of this great country, too often I witness a culture of confrontation, rather than collaboration. Too often I am reminded of John Gardner's phrase “The war of the parts against the whole.” This has got to change.

Over fears of liability, we post ‘No Running’ signs in county parks.

Over fears that our children may encounter a sociopath, we encourage sedentary, anti-social behavior by allowing our kids to spend hours in front of an electronic screen.

And over fears of nature itself, we quarantine kids under virtual house arrest, thereby ensuring that they too will fear the very thing they need the most.

For tens of thousands of years, kids went outside and played in



photo courtesy of Sabel Palms Audubon Center

Sabel Palms Audubon Center, in Brownsville, TX, works with local school districts, to teach Nature of Learning, a place-based science program for schoolchildren.

America, this is your issue. You have the opportunity, the obligation, to lead. Give people a platform, a place, a voice so that together, as a nation, we can speak powerfully about our needs, our hopes, our desires.

Certainly, you are, and should be, motivated by self interest. And why not? Self interest is a good thing. But beyond self interest, I believe there also is something deeper going on here. With its nearly universal appeal, this issue seems to hint at a

nature, and we are reversing that in a matter of decades. The area beyond which children are free to roam has shrunk by 89% in the past 20 years.

These simply don't add up.

Denis Hayes, the founder of Earth Day perhaps captured it best when he said, "we drive our cars to the grocery store and think that 'paper or plastic' is a meaningful choice."

We need a Children's Bill of Rights that is explicit about the freedom to explore and improvise, about the right to experience nature in a meaningful way. If the world of our future, with all its complexity, will demand people who are able to understand and adapt, who have creativity and compassion, can we afford anything less?

In the Declaration of Independence, it says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. With all we know about

the benefits of nature to children's health, cognitive ability, and socialization, shouldn't access to nature be an unalienable right?

Christopher Reeve, the actor, had on the wall of his room when he was in rehab a picture of the space shuttle blasting off, autographed by every astronaut then at NASA. On top of the picture it said "We found nothing is impossible."

And Reeve said, "That should be our motto. Not a Democratic motto, not a Republican motto, but an American motto. Because it's not something one party can do alone. It's something we as a nation must do together.

So many of our dreams at first seem impossible. Then they seem improbable. And then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable."

We must make it inevitable that children are reconnected to nature, for no one among us wants to be a member of the last generation to pass on to its children the joy of playing outside in nature.

Now I opened with a story, so with

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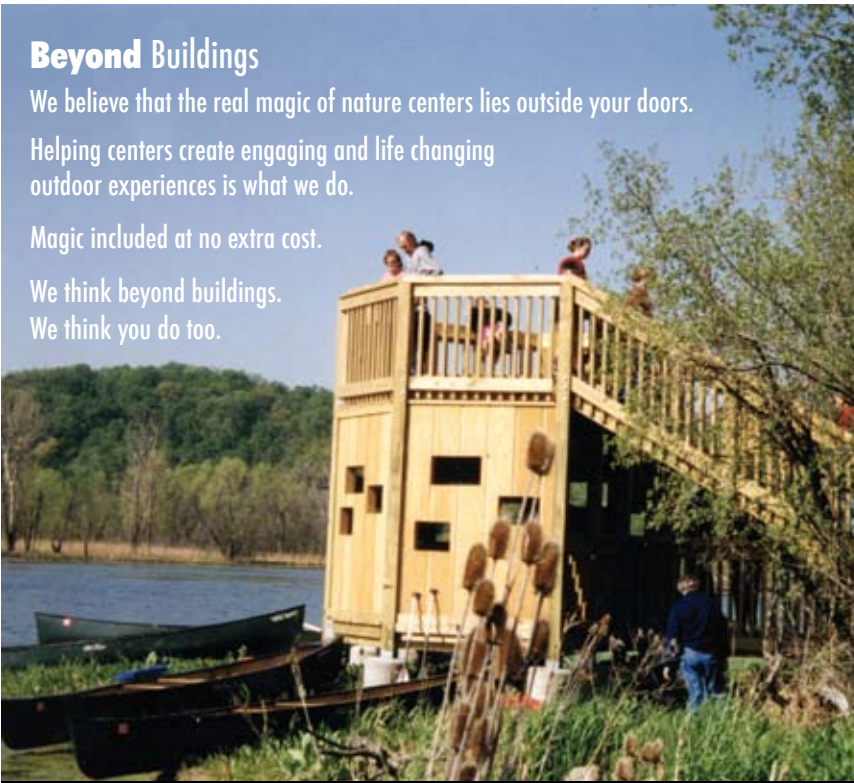
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your permission, I'll close with one.

A monastery has fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order which, as a result of religious persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, lost all its branches. It was decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the mother house: The Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a near by town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is," "the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old Rabbi and the Abbot wept together, and they read parts of the Torah and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the



photo by Dave Catlin

Kids muck about at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center outside of Lincoln, NE.

Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?" "No, I am sorry," the Rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. "The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery?"

Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course — it must be the Abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is undoubtedly a holy man.

Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod — he's so crotchety. But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip — he's too passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me — yet supposing he did? Oh Lord, not me! I couldn't mean that much to you, could I?"

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks

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began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere.

They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the young men who came to visit began to engage in conservation with the monks.

After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and — thanks to the Rabbi's gift — a vibrant, authentic community of light and love for the whole realm.

This my friends is how we will change the culture of our country. But you have to believe. You have to believe how important this is, and you have to believe how important you are. You have to believe.




photo by Wayne Reckard
Larry Selzer delivering the keynote address at ANCA's Teton Summit.

You are poised to make such an amazing contribution, and if you do, others will be drawn into this movement.

We must be carried forward by hope, a radical hope, that a better world is possible and that we can build it.

“Another world is not only possible” says author Arundhati Roy. “She is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

Thank you. 

Larry Selzer holds a Masters in Business Administration from the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia and Bachelors of Science in environmental studies from Wesleyan University.

The Conservation Fund protects the nation's legacy of land and water resources in partnership with other non-profit organizations, public agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals. The Fund has protected nearly six million acres since 1985. In 2006 The Conservation Fund organized the National Forum on Children and Nature. The forum is made up of 50 of the nation's most influential leaders. Their challenge is to find and fund projects that improve the lives of children by addressing four key areas: health, education, the built environment, and media/culture.

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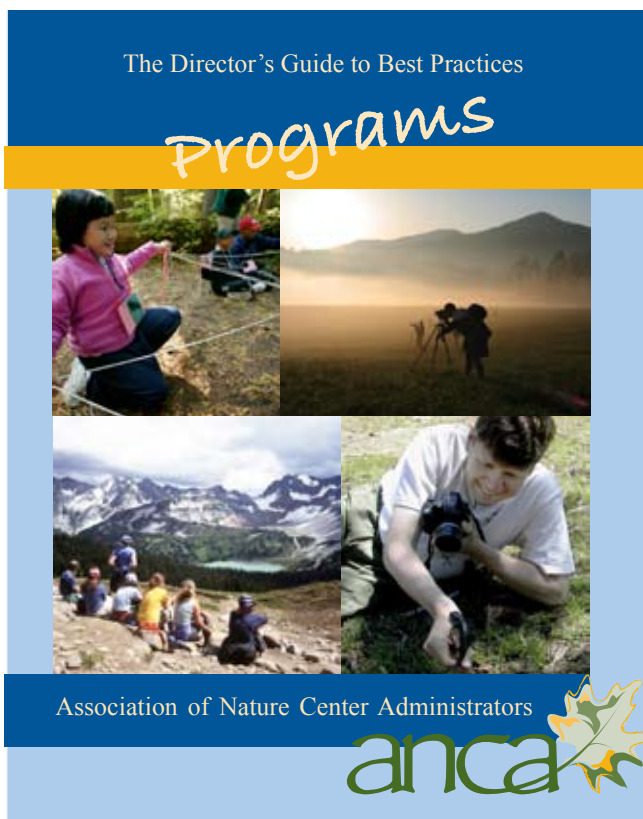
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