

directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

Special Events - funds, new friends & fun!

Charity Krueger
Executive Director
Aullwood Audubon Center & Farm
Dayton, OH

During these tough economic times, it is often difficult for nature centers to increase earned income to keep pace with the every day cost of doing business. Another challenge that we all face is engaging new and diverse audiences. How can we attract new people and increase or maintain attendance numbers when everyone is so busy with all the things that just happen in life? Special events can help us meet these challenges!

Special events are lots of work but the rewards are great! Raising funds for your center is an important benefit. Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm raises 16 - 17% (\$200,000) of our operating income from special events. Consistently each year we exceed our

income goal. Our special events introduce many new people to Aullwood's mission, attract demographically and culturally diverse audiences, and create a fun environment for discovery!

Most importantly, new visitors

who attend events may become members or participants in special classes, programs or conservation activities. There are also opportunities to expand their involvement with proper cultivation to include volunteering,

becoming an annual donor, and even providing a planned gift for your center.

To create successful events you need:

- An organizational culture that encourages entrepreneurial experimentation so that appealing and quality venues are offered to your community.
- Corporate or individual sponsorships that cover a significant cost of the event.
- Staff with strong

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photo courtesy of Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm

Johnny Appleseed visits with a youngster during Aullwood's Apple Fest. Aullwood raises about 17% of their annual budget from a variety of fun, educational, and engaging special events.

ANCA Headquarters:

Jen Levy, Executive Director
mail • P.O. Box 464
Logan, Utah 84323
email • jenlevy@natctr.org
phone • 435-787-8209
toll free • 800-490-2622
fax • 435-752-3984

www.natctr.org

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.



Rooted in Experience. Reaching for Excellence.

Directions is a quarterly publication of the Association of Nature Center Administrators, distributed to members of ANCA as a membership benefit.

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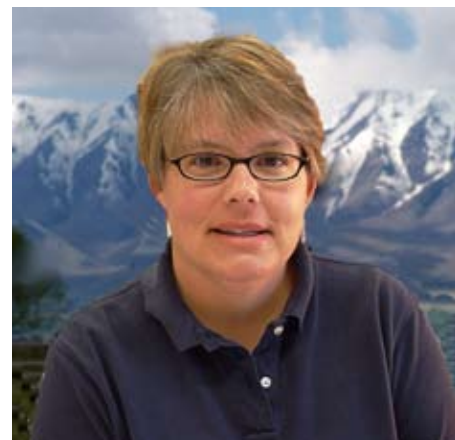
photo by Burr Williams

Woody mushroom in sand dune north of Imperial, Texas

Director's Notes

Philanthropy & Fundraising in Troubled Times

Jen Levy
Executive Director
Association of Nature Center
Administrators
Logan, UT



There have been some tremendous ups and downs in the world recently including the historic election that took place in this country, the decline in the stock market, and the anticipation of change on a global scale.

On a local level, many of our centers are faced with school field trips being cancelled, donations declining, and budget cuts. This is a challenging time for ANCA members, especially those of us who include “fundraiser” in our job description.

In October I attended a fundraising luncheon that I found to be particularly relevant in these complex financial times. The speaker was Lynne Twist, global activist, fundraiser, and author of *The Soul of Money*, published by W W Norton.

Twist spoke about fundraising in difficult times. I thought she was very inspirational as she encouraged us to go out and change the world, and I left the event with a strong feeling of optimism and a better understanding of true philanthropy.

Her message was timely as we watch the television news or read the paper and witness the unraveling of systems that are not sustainable. She told us it is our job to facilitate giving to sustainable causes that promote hope and not fear. We, as fundraisers, have the ability to reach out to our members and donors and get people rooted in the wealth of our communities. She also said that everyone is waiting to become a philanthropist and philanthropy is not limited to the wealthy.


After her presentation the question was asked that must be on almost everybody's mind, “How do we

continue to ask for money in a time when so many people are losing their homes, their investments, even their retirement income?” Twist explained that now is the perfect time to encourage people to give money where it can make the biggest difference, and we have the ability to facilitate giving to positive change and sustainable systems. She also reminded us of the importance of giving back and being responsible for how our money moves in the world.

I highly recommend Twist's book. It is inspirational and includes practical advice that will benefit anyone who wants to make the world a better place.

Three reminders I'd like to pass along:

- The Professional Leadership Institute will be held January 13-18 at the Ashland Nature Center in Hockessin, DE.
- The Residential Environmental Learning Center Directors Conference will be held January 17-21 at the McDowell Environmental Center in Nauvoo, AL.
- The Midwestern Regional Summit will take place in Wilmot, OH at The Wilderness Center on January 27.

Keep up the good work ANCA members because you all make remarkable things happen. 

ANCA's 2009 Summit

The Granite State Summit • August 26-29

Iain McLeod
Executive Director
Squam Lakes Natural Science
Center
Holderness, NH

The Squam Lakes Natural Science Center (SLNSC) – located in Holderness, NH – is delighted to be the host of the 15th ANCA Summit.

Our mission is to advance understanding of ecology by exploring New Hampshire's natural world. Through spectacular live animal exhibits, natural science education



photo courtesy of Squam Lakes Natural Science Center

Summit XV plans will include pontoon boat tours of beautiful Squam Lake, hiking in nearby mountains, bird watching, wildlife viewing, and much more.

programs, and lake cruises, the Science Center has educated and enlightened visitors for more than forty years about the importance of our natural world.

In September 2006, SLNSC gained national accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). This accreditation distinguishes SLNSC as the only AZA-accredited institution in all of northern New England.

Summit plans are still coming together but, you can look forward to pontoon boat tours of beautiful Squam Lake (with nest-

ing loons and bald eagles), hikes to nearby East and West Rattlesnake Mountains, trips to the Mount Washington Observatory (home of the world's strongest recorded wind) and our beautiful White Mountain National Forest, and a chance to view our spectacular collection of native NH wildlife on our exhibit trail (black bear, bobcat, mountain lion, red fox, bald eagle, red-tailed hawk, river otter, fisher, turkey vulture, etc.)

The keynote speaker for this Summit gathering will be Gary Hirshberg, Chairman, President, and CE-Yo of Stonyfield Farm, the world's leading organic yogurt producer. There will be local music and comic entertainment, local beers to sample, and, of course, the all-important fire circle for late evening singing.

Registration materials and full details will be available in April. But, save the dates now - Aug. 26-29!

For further information about the Center visit www.nhnature.org.



photo courtesy of Squam Lakes Natural Science Center
Lions, and fishers, and bears are a few of the animals in residence at Squam Lakes Natural Science Center's AZA-accredited facility.



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larryr@lensc.org / 440-871-2900

SECRETARY

Dick Touvell
Chippewa Nature Center
dtouvell@chippewanaturecenter.org
989-631-0830

TREASURER

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2gohiking@Earthlink.net
704-910-9809

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Cibolo Nature Center
carolyn@cibolo.org / 830-249-4616

Holly Dill

Environmental Learning Center
holly@discoverelc.org / 772-589-5050

Jenny Harmon

Ozark Natural Science Center
jennymharmon@hotmail.com
479-789-2754

Cynthia Harrell

Crow's Neck Environ. Education Center
cbharrell@nemcc.edu / 662-738-6751

Dede Long

Briar Bush Nature Center
dede@briarbush.org / 215-887-6603

Bob Mercer

Silver Lake Nature Center
ramercer@co.bucks.pa.us / 215-785-1177

Jimmy Paz

Sabal Palm Audubon Center & Sanctuary
jppaz@sbcglobal.net / 956-541-8034

Ken Voorhis

Great Smoky Mountains Institute
ken@gsmi.org / 865-448-6709

Staff

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Jen Levy
jenlevy@natctr.org / 435-787-8209

MARKETING & COMM. DIRECTOR

Ann Rilling
arilling@natctr.org / 970-375-7090

BOOKKEEPER

Teresa Bassett
435-787-8209

planning, marketing, and education skills.

- A core of dedicated volunteers who provide leadership, manpower, and connections.
- An annual planning calendar for events and programs that is updated regularly.
- Accessible and safe places to hold events either on-site or off-site.
- Good weather and a plan for inclement weather.

Review the following brief summaries of some of Aullwood's popular, annual special events. The majority of these events are mission driven. Who knows, this may be just the incentive your staff needs to build special events into your annual operational plan? The possibilities and rewards are endless!

- Aullwood's Native Plant Sale is held on a Friday and Saturday in April to celebrate Earth Day. More than 70 species of indigenous wildflowers, trees and shrubs are sold in addition to a variety of rescued wildflowers. Six hundred individuals participate in the event.

Prior to the sale, workshops on gardening with native plants are held through Aullwood's Center for Lifelong Learning. Admission is free for the sale. The net profit is \$12,000+. Our local utility company is the corporate sponsor at the \$5,000 level.

A big plus is that unsold plants are planted in our sanctuary. For example, in 2008 more than 700 unsold native plants were planted in Aullwood's sanctuary during Audubon's kick-off for Toyota's TogetherGreen Volunteer Days. Twenty two adults and 19 youth planted prairie plants in meadows and wetland species around our marsh. Volunteers received information about non-native invasive plants as well as a native wildflower to plant at home. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this

two day event: 48 volunteers = 210 hours.

- Aullwood's Farm Babies Fest is held the third Saturday of May. Annually 2,200 – 2,800 people attend. Admission is modest, \$5/car, so many young families participate as well as a large number of low-income families.

Visitors enjoy lots of farm babies including ducklings, chicks, turkeys, lambs, rabbits, goats, and even newborn calves. People enjoy draft horse-pulled wagon rides with our team of



photo courtesy of Aullwood Audubon Center & Farm

A pileated woodpecker entertains & educates young and old alike at Aullwood's Enchanted Forest - a multi-day special event which attracts thousands of visitors to the Center.

Belgian draft horses. Aullwood's 4-H club members provide many interactive livestock demonstrations and sell vegetable plants.

Other demonstrations include sheep shearing, blacksmithing, Father Duck, weaving, and spinning. The children's activities tent is packed with youngsters enjoying free and educational activities. Visitors consume hundreds of sandwiches made with Aullwood's organic meat.

Aullwood's outreach naturalist entertains people in the barn with music and humor. A plant sale featuring perennials culled from the gardens of members from a local garden club is a hit.

Corporate sponsors contribute \$3,000 - \$4,250. This one-day event

nets about \$9,000. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 146 volunteers = 540 hours.

- Aullwood Apple Fest is held on the last weekend of September. Depending on the weather 4,000 – 8,000 people attend. In 2008, 6,000 people participated in the festival enjoying Aullwood's delicious farm-raised food, music, dancing, demonstrations by artists, free children's activities, and a rooster crowing contest. 3,400

pounds of apples were used to create lots of wonderful apple treats. 800 pints of apple butter were made as people watched the butter simmer in copper kettles. 110 apple pies were baked in dutch ovens and the free samples of pie delighted visitors. 800 ears of corn were steamed and 950 apple dumplings were sold. 1,400 people enjoyed draft horse or tractor pulled wagon rides. The children's tent was a hit with dozen of activities including the creation of 600+ paper hats and 800 apple doll babies by children. Faces were painted, stories were read, stilts walked on, and Johnny Appleseed entertained hundreds of children with stories and free apples.

Corporate sponsors pledge \$8,000 and the event nets \$25,000 - \$30,000. The fest is free to members and costs \$4/adult and \$3/adult for non-members. Volunteer needs include paring apples several days in advance, set-up, and take-down for this two day event: 325 volunteers = 1,450 hours.

- The Friends of Aullwood's Autumn Gala is held on a Saturday evening in mid-September at the Marie S. Aull Education Center and usually is a sold-out event with 160 people in attendance. Naturalists introduce arriving guests to Aullwood's goats, chickens, red-tailed hawk, or turtles. As guests mingle, they enjoy appetizers, viewing tables of items

that are sold through a silent auction. An artist provides music as guests sip wine and view a beautiful exhibit of Amish quilts and furniture that can be purchased during the evening at marked prices. A dinner features locally grown produce and Aullwood's organic meats. After dinner, a live auction with about 7-10 major items is held. The live auction raises between \$9,000 - \$15,000 and the silent auction raises between \$8,500 to \$13,000. The "fund-the-need" portion of the live auction raises an additional \$14,000+ to meet a challenge grant to provide busing for Dayton Public School's youngsters to participate in Aullwood field trips. The cost is \$75/patron or \$100/grand patron. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 20+ volunteers = 75 hours.

- An Amish Quilt Auction is held the second Sunday in October. Amish quilts and wall hangings are ordered by staff a year in advance from select Amish quilters. Amish made quilts, rugs, furniture, baskets, and toys are displayed in our Hallway of Wonder for six weeks prior to the auction. An auctioneer donates his time to auction over 200 items. 200 people attend the auction and thousands of people view the quilts. Admission is free for the auction.

We raise \$15,000 - \$20,000 in corporate support for the Gala and Amish Quilt Auction and net about \$80,000 - \$85,000. Volunteer needs for the auction include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 22 volunteers = 75 hours.

- Enchanted Forest is held in the middle of October. Aullwood offers a day program for school groups and an evening program for families. When individuals or groups arrive they enjoy stories, music, and self-directed activities. Next volunteer guides lead groups through one of two trails featuring five costumed creatures that are often misunderstood. The creatures (skunk, coyote, flying squirrel, snapping turtle, great blue heron, etc.) tell their stories in dramatic and fun

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ways. After the guided walk, participants enjoy refreshments. A three-day school program attracts 650 – 800 children (cost is \$4/child). The Friday and Saturday evening program for families and youth groups (\$5/ non-member and \$4.50/member) attracts 1,000-1,500 people. This program nets about \$7,500 - \$10,000 annually.

Corporate sponsors contribute \$1,000 - \$1,500. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this five day event: 165 volunteers = 850 hours.

- Happy Bird Day is held on the first Saturday of November and features a day of free activities about birds and wildlife for the entire family. Early Morning Bird Walk, Watching Ohio's Birds, Fun Family Bird Activities, Birds Watching for Young Birders, Build Your Own Bird Feeder or Bird House and Meet the Red-tailed Hawk are a few of the programs that visitors enjoy.



photo courtesy of Aullwood Audubon Center & Farm

Volunteers stir apple butter during Aullwood's Apple Fest. 3,400 pounds of apples are used during the event - some of which go toward making 800 pints of apple butter.

About 700 people participate in the activities. Gross sales for pre-sold seed or seed sold on the day of the sale total about \$12,000. The event is free.

Corporate sponsorship is \$500. The net profit for the seed sale is about \$3,500. In addition, our nature store grosses about \$2,000 in sales. Volunteer needs include set-up and

take-down for this one day event: 38 volunteers = 90 hours.

- The Museum Holiday Shop Around is held on the second or third Saturday of November. It features one-stop shopping for our community with 12-15 non-profit museums bringing their stores to Aullwood's Marie S. Aull Education Center. Participating museums may include –

America's Packard Museum, Aullwood, Boonshoft Museum of Discovery, Dayton Aviation Heritage National Park, Dayton History at Carillon Park, Dayton International Peace Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright's Westcott House, Glen Helen Nature Shop, Preble County Historical Society, SunWatch Indian Village, WACO

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Historical Society, Wegerzyn Gardens, etc. This free event attracts 1,000 - 1,300 people.

Aullwood Nature Store's gross sales range from \$6,500 - \$10,000. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 18 volunteers = 90 hours.

• The Holiday Art Fair and Open House is held the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It is a wonderful way for people who are home for the holidays to return to Aullwood. Admission is free and there are a variety of activities for the entire family including beeswax candle dipping, holiday story telling, and family nature hikes. Also featured is the work of 15 artists. 600 - 800 people participate in the event and Aullwood Nature Store's gross sales are \$4,000 - \$6,000. Volunteer needs include



photo courtesy of Aullwood Audubon Center & Farm

Build-your-own-birdhouse is just one of the activities in which people participate during Aullwood's Happy Bird Day. More than 700 community members partake in bird-related activities at the Center throughout the day.

set-up and take-down for this one day event: 16 volunteers = 50 hours. Freshly made boxwood wreaths and trees and fir swags are sold with gross sales of \$3,100. Volunteer needs include making wreaths in advance for pick-up at the event: 6 volunteers

= 147 hours.

• Aullwood's Birds, Boughs, and Berries Brunch is held on the first Sunday of December and takes place in a big, beautiful home of one of Aullwood's supporters. The champagne brunch features Aullwood's organic meats and is attended by 75-100 patrons. The items (many of them are handcrafted) are donated for a silent auction and are displayed at the Marie S. Aull Education Center two weeks prior to the brunch. The silent auction grosses about \$10,000 and the net for the brunch is about

\$14,000.

Corporate sponsors contribute \$2,000. The cost is \$60/patron or \$85/grand patron. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day

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Profiles:

Sibley Nature Center: www.sibleynaturecenter.org Using the Web for education & mission

Burr Williams
Executive Director
Sibley Nature Center
Midland, TX

We believe the Sibley Nature Center has created the best internet website in the nation for bioregional environmental education. Our website has 600+ essays and 110 photoessays with over 4,000 photographs of the Llano Estacado – part of the High Plains, straddling the Texas - New Mexico border.

The majority of either teachers or students in any school cannot name our region's 50 most common birds, 50 most common wildflowers, 50 most common invertebrates, or the 20 most common mammals, or 20 most common reptiles and amphibians.

The majority of either teachers or students in any school in our region cannot name the Indian tribes that lived in their bioregion, nor can they list the 20 most important early European explorers and early settlers that shaped their bioregion's history. The Sibley Nature Center's mission is to change that!

Bioregional education is basic to becoming a knowledgeable citizen of one's home. How can a student (or adult) become proud of where they live if they do not know what is around them? The most basic level of patriotism is love of where one lives,

and one can only love where they live if they know the stories of all that shares their landscape.

To create our website we first delineated the eight major habitats of the region. We focused on animal behavior and plant and animal adaptation as major themes for our educational efforts. We also focused

must first visit our Virtual Trail. The Virtual Trail is a series of photoessays about what can be found along our trails at any one time. During the first two years of the website, we created 19 virtual trails.

The student arrives at our center with knowledge and expectation about what they will see on the trail.

Volunteer and staff photographers working on the Virtual Trails have documented invertebrate activity previously unknown to science (about velvet mites and about dung beetles' use of cryptogamic soil.)

Our programming is built around the habitat concept, so students are also required to visit at least one of our photoessays about the habitat they will be learning. After the student returns to school, we supply the teacher with a set of questions the students can answer by reading

some of the essays about the habitat in question. Historical information about the region is always included as part of the visit, but is a major part of the follow-up exercise. We maintain email lists of teachers that visit our center or use the website and send out notifications of website additions of interest, to further keep the teachers involved.

The website is not only for our own citizens. Anyone that plans to visit anywhere on the Llano Estacado can visit our website and learn what they might expect to see. We have



photo by Burr Williams

Pecos River north of Imperial, TX. Saltgrass (the same species grows on the coasts of North America) has reclaimed the banks of the Pecos River after the invasive exotic salt cedar was sprayed.

on the Indian and Hispanic history of the region as well as the early days of settlement and of the oil fields in our region.

We report on other major economic forces of modern life – farming, ranching, and now wind energy. As water conservation is important in the western part of Texas, we also developed a xeriscape section on the website, landscaped our grounds with xeriscape plants, and we sell xeriscape plants as a fundraiser.

Before any school child's visit to the Sibley Nature Center, they

several indexes on the website to make finding information easier, as well as a website search engine.

Please visit our website at www.sibleynaturecenter.org! Over 40 photographers contribute to the website. More than 6,000 separate computers visit our website each week and over 70,000 different computers have accessed our website over the last two years. 🌿

Burr Williams is a co-founder of Sibley Nature Center, which was established in 1981. He has served as executive director since 2005. He is on the board of directors of the Texas Association of Environmental Educators, a founder of the Gone Native Arboretum, and a member of the City of Midland Parks Commission and board of directors of Keep Midland Beautiful. He is an avid nature photographer and the non-attributed photographs in the photoessays on www.sibleynaturecenter.org are his photographs.

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Best of the List Serve:

from a May '07 discussion about dog rules at nature centers

Signs of a creative mind: Messages peppered with humour
Marcie Good - mgood@nsnews.com

DON'T park here, clean up after your dog, and whatever you do, keep your kids out of the flower beds.

There are different ways of telling people what not to do. Cameron Stewart spends a lot of time thinking about the best way.

He's the parks sign maker for North Vancouver District. His signs have sparked a lot of talk among neighbourhood dog walkers, because they are exactly what you don't expect from municipal signs.

They're funny.

One of his personal favourites stands at the entrance to Harbourview



For more inspiring ideas join the ANCA list serve. Visit www.natctr.org/index.php?id=13 to sign up.

and Mosquito Creek parks: "Attention Dog Guardians \ Pick up after your dogs. Thank you. \ Attention Dogs \ Grrrrr, bark, woof. Good dog."

"I like that one," said Stewart, reflecting on his best creative and public relations exercises. "Because I'm allowed to, because it works. People accept it and that's very satisfying not to be told, 'you can't do that.'"

That sign inspired lots of fan mail. The most recent was a widely forwarded e-mail with a picture of the sign and the message: "proof that municipalities do have a sense of humour." It eventually ended up with Richard Boulton, acting parks manager, with the question, "Do you have a Dr. Doolittle on your staff?"

(continued on next page)

Events (continued from page 7)

event: 7 volunteers = 30 hours.

- Breakfast with Woodland Santa is held on the second Saturday of December with 100-115 individuals participating. Children meet creatures of the woods in the Hallway of Wonder and interact with Woodland Santa. Children/parents/grandparents decorate cookies and enjoy breakfast pizza, cereal, and juice. Our outreach naturalist provides a 45-minute program with music and magic and sings the "12 days of Aullwood" with animal characters. Children and adults receive a \$5 gift certificate to Aullwood Nature Store. At the conclusion of the event, everyone goes to the farm to dip a beeswax candle. The cost is \$20/adult member or \$25/adult non-member and \$15/child member or \$18/child non-member.

Corporate support is at the \$500 level. The event nets \$1,200 and the nature store gross sales for the day are \$1,600 - \$2,000. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 22 volunteers = 90

hours.

- A Pancake Brunch is held on the first Sunday of March. 700-800 people enjoy fresh pancakes, sausage, eggs, juice, maple syrup, and coffee prepared by our Friends of Aullwood Board members. The event nets about \$4,000. Tours to the sugarbush are offered throughout the day. All of our waste is composted in our compost facility. The plates and cups are made from sugarcane and the eating utensils are made from cornstarch. Much of the corporate support is through in-kind donations. For example Perkins Restaurant donates the pancake batter, Waffle House donates the sausage, etc. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this one day event: 60 volunteers = 200 hours. Individuals may rent a bucket for \$35 in our sugarbush woods. Their name is placed on the bucket and at the end of the season, they receive a 1/2-pint container of maple syrup. The Rent-a-Bucket program nets about \$1,800.

- Moon Over Aullwood is a four-part concert series that is held on Saturday evenings from January – April.

The concerts feature exceptional musical performances that often have environmental themes, a guided night hike during intermission and delicious desserts. All concerts are held at the Marie S. Aull Education Center. 500 – 600 people attend the concert series.

Corporate support is at the \$1,500 level and the series nets \$4,500 - \$5,000. Volunteer needs include set-up and take-down for this four evening event: 9 volunteers = 80 hours. 🌿

Charity Krueger has been the executive director at Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm since 1982. Aullwood is owned and operated by the Friends of Aullwood Board of Directors and the National Audubon Society. The 200-acre sanctuary includes a working organic farm at one end of the property and nature center at the other end. Aullwood is a 20-minute drive from downtown Dayton, Ohio. Charity is a past recipient of ANCA's Nature Center Leadership Award.

Perhaps he doesn't talk to animals, like the literary vet, but the fact that he addresses them seems to be appreciated.

Another sign in Mosquito Creek park came in response to a number of complaints from people who live near a wide pool in the creek, where dogs like to splash around.

"Residents in nearby homes are greatly affected by excessive barking in this area," reads one sign.

Down at the dog's level, another has a "b" with a familiar red circle and strike mark. "No barking," it says, indicating with arrows the quiet zone.

When Stewart came to North Vancouver District from the same job at West Vancouver, he decided to try his best to deal with a typical bone of contention among park users: dogs and what they leave behind.

In Mosquito Creek park, he put up "Due to excessive dog droppings, NO cart-wheeling."


After a deluge of complaints, it was quickly taken down. Tax dollars, wrote one enraged park visitor, could be better spent on doggy bags than on "frivolous signs."

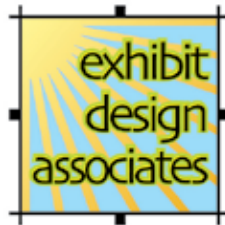
"That really hurt," said Stewart. But it wasn't, he insists, in vain. "Cart-wheeling was an example of going too far. But you have to push the envelope, or else you don't know."

He has also ventured beyond dogs, with a sign in the flower bed at Edgemont and Highland boulevards. "This bed is for plants only. Go jump on your own bed, and let sleeping dogs lie elsewhere."

People get signs, he reflects, but don't always pay attention.

The ones he makes himself seem to be different. He's not sure if they actually make people pick up after their dogs.

"But when people notice them and are talking about them and laughing about them and e-mailing their friends, they just might." 



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From The Field:

Kids in Nature: Why & How

Brent Evans
LMSW-ACP

Co-Author *The Nature Center Book*
Cibolo Conservancy
Boerne, TX

The recent ANCA Summit XIV at the Teton Science Schools in Jackson Hole, WY proved to be fertile ground for discussing the reasons, challenges, and opportunities for the development of “playscapes” for children at nature centers.

Dr. Louise Chawla, Professor in the College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado provided excellent insight and professional resources concerning the documented need for playscapes, as well as describing useful approaches for developing these facilities. She recommends *Playing Outdoors* by Helen Tovey, published by the Open University Press, and *Natural Learning*, by Robin Moore and Herb Wong, published by MIG Communications. The Children, Youth, and Environments Center for Research and Design can be contacted at www.cudenver.edu.cye This can access you to key studies in the field and much useful information. Dr. Chawla can be reached at louise.chawla@colorado.edu

By now, most of us recognize the staggering divide between our children and the outdoors, and have a vague idea that this divide contributes to the rise in obesity, physical unfitness, attention disorders, self-absorption, and depression.

What is amazing is how consistent the research outcomes are. Research-

ers around the world are drawing the same conclusions: that access to nature contributes to the health and well-being of young people, and helps to form a foundation for the development of responsible environmental behavior.

One study compared preschool children who played everyday among the trees, rocks, and uneven topography of natural school grounds with other preschoolers who played in conventional playgrounds. On tests



photo by Brent Evans

Kids at the Cibolo Nature Center in Boerne, TX get into nature with play and exploration time in Cibolo Creek.

of motor fitness, children with opportunities for nature play at school showed greater gains over the course of the years, especially in balance and agility.

In a study comparing preschool children using a traditional playground with others whose play areas contained a field and orchard, the children with the field and orchard showed significantly greater powers of concentration at the end of the year.

A study of adolescents found they often went to natural areas after upsetting events. They said they could relax there, clear their minds, gain

perspective on things, and sort out whatever troubled them.

Teenage girls with green views outside their windows performed significantly better on tests of concentration, inhibiting impulses, and delaying gratification than those with barren views.

A study of eight-through-eleven year olds revealed that regardless of a family’s socioeconomic status, the greener the home surroundings, the more resilient children appeared to be

against stress and adversity. The protective effect of nature was strongest for the most vulnerable children who experienced the highest levels of stressful life events.

In a Chicago study, children observed in green outdoor spaces engaged in more play and more creative forms of play than children in barren spaces. Children who played in vegetated edges of the yard with trees and shrubbery engaged in more creative social play than those on the built equipment, and

these areas attracted more balanced groups of boys and girls.

A study in metropolitan Chicago found that children exhibited fewer ADD symptoms after they played outdoors in green settings, and the greener their surroundings, the fewer symptoms they showed. According to 525 parents of children with ADHD, their children’s symptoms were relieved by leisure activities in green settings much more than watching TV.

One thousand thirty-seven children who attended the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont Programs went through an intensive study, and the outcomes were consis-

tent with all other studies around the world: students showed a greater interest in learning about a wide variety of topics.

A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says “free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact - essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.”

All these studies support the huge body of evidence gathered by Richard Louv, in his watershed publication *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. And, this growing body of evidence indicates that parents need to take seriously all the needs of their children, including, love, nutrition, education, and contact with the natural world.

Play is the work of children. And, there is an instinctive curiosity in children to explore the natural world. My experience with adolescents in psychiatric hospitals was that volunteering at local parks was sometimes more therapeutic than standard psychotherapy. When kids work on conservation projects and feel their own worth, they are less obsessed with their own personal dramas.

It is a lot more likely that kids will go outside and play if the parents do. Parents who spend time outside can create the atmosphere for adventure, or drudgery, or fun, or worry. Parents can join with friends to create outdoor play cooperatives, have cool backyards, and go on field trips to places of adventure, which might even include vacant lots and ditches – and, of course, nature centers.

If you are interested in further exploration of these issues, I recommend the web sit of the National Wildlife Federation Green Hour: www.greenhour.org. Another interesting google is “No Child Left Inside.”

Nature playscapes are intentionally designed areas that promote free play in nature. A great variety of playscapes were discussed, from the very

sophisticated and expensive to the simple and affordable.

Lydia Toth of Shaw Nature Reserve introduced the *Learning with Nature Idea Book*, published by the Arbor Day Foundation (see www.arborday.org/kids). The Nature Explore program actually certifies outdoor education areas that encourage creative expression in young children. Components include:

Entry features

Open area for large-motor activities

Climbing/crawling area

“Messy materials” area

Building area

Nature art area

Music and movement area

Garden and/or pathway through plantings

Gathering area (A separate area, or one of the other larger areas could be used as a gathering area.)

Storage area (This could be a single area, or storage could be included within each area as needed.)

Supplemental areas (optional)

Water area

Dirt-digging area

Sand area

Wheeled-toy area

Area for swings or other dynamic equipment

Greenhouse

Hunter Mohring of the Boxerwood Education Association discussed their new playscape, with water feature and many fascinating elements like balancing logs with mulch cushioning, and a 31-acre play trail.

Other possible elements for a playscape were discussed, such as water pools and baby pools, water hand pumps and peddle powered pumps, a canoe filled with water and toy boat making materials, built-up hills for children to roll down, treehouses, leaf and mulch piles, camouflage nets, sand boxes, river-rock boxes, sand sifting equipment, chain-sawed log furniture, wheel-barrows, buckets, and balancing logs.

Finding good consultation was

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discussed. Suggestions included Peer Consults from ANCA, the Arbor Day Foundation, or professional landscape architects.

Other issues discussed were:

Site size (Examples ranged from 1/3 of an acre to the 31-acre play trail.), master planning, vandalism concerns, and safety regulations for playgrounds.

Carrying capacity: the popularity of this kind of attraction can actually overwhelm a nature center in a highly populated area. Note that one center reported a 90% jump in attendance by non-members with children.

Hazards such as heavy snake populations, chiggers, ticks, poison ivy, etc.

Community involvement in planning and fundraising.

Safety – treehouses must be close to ground or try to abide by playground standards with railings, etc.

Findable objects, such as bones, feathers, rocks.

The importance of having a “parent comfort zone” was a popular one – having enclosed play areas for younger children allows parents to relax, and become more patient and permissive with the explorations of their children.




photo courtesy of Cibolo Nature Center

“GreenMan” engages children in nature through stories, props, and enthusiasm.

Some centers have “Play Rangers, volunteers trained in conflict management with children.

Some centers prefer more structure to their play zones, such as zones that promote teaching points, like what makes a habitat a habitat, what is decomposition, etc.

All agreed that nature centers must help prepare the next generation to inherit the earth, and to do this, they must have a way to get to know her. 

Brent Evans is an advanced clinical practitioner in psychiatric social work. With over 40 years experience in counseling, Mr. Evans has developed numerous innovative programs for creativity, stress management, and mental health in natural settings, including workshops for psychotherapists in nature and therapeutic gardening programs in nursing home settings. He and his wife, Carolyn Chipman-Evans, founded the Cibolo Nature Center in 1988, and have authored The Nature Center Book, published by the National Association for Interpretation. He was awarded the top award in Texas for volunteerism in conservation in 2006. He often appears as “GreenMan” at the Cibolo Nature Center.

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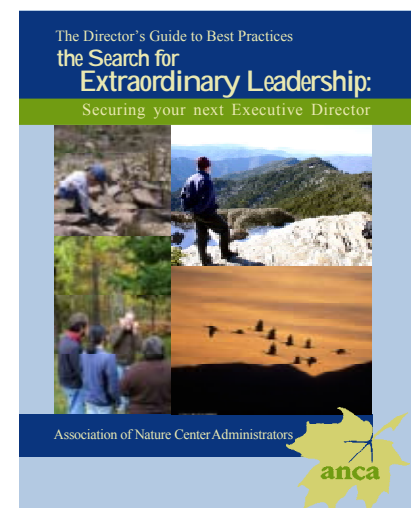
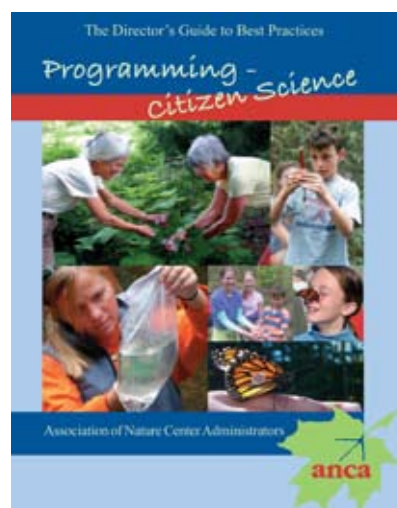
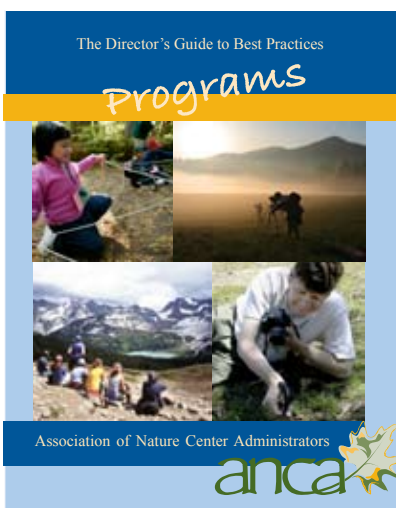
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larryr@lensc.org