

directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

ANCA Peer Consults: Engaging Organizations in Need

Larry Richardson
Board of Directors
Association of Nature Center
Administrators
Cleveland, OH

Every organization faces challenges along the long path to successfully fulfilling its mission. The world around us is ever changing. Nature centers, environmental organizations and residential programs constantly manage resources to address challenges and seize opportunities in the process of moving their missions forward in ever more powerful ways.

The Peer Consult process was created recognizing that professional counseling is expensive and



ANCA has provided Peer Consults far and wide throughout the U.S. – from Florida to Alaska (dot not shown) and many places in between. To date 86 centers have benefited from the experience and wisdom of ANCA's diverse and skilled membership.

that the nature and environmental education field is unique among the non-profit sector. Recognizing that the ANCA membership has

practical experience and proven success in applying best practices

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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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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 courtesy of U.S.F.S.



Director's Notes

Directions goes Electronic

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



We have made the decision to make *Directions* and all-electronic newsletter. There are pros and cons to both methods, and I am guessing that many of you have had this debate within your organization trying to determine which method is better for you.

Printed newsletters do not get lost in email inboxes and can be read anywhere. They are also expensive, require more resources, and can take weeks to arrive in the mailbox. Electronic newsletters require the reader to open a file, they can get lost in a crowded inbox, but they are fast, save money, and allow for more pages, in full-color, without additional costs. They can also be printed, all or in part, for more convenient reading.

The decision for ANCA came down to resources and demand. The cost for paper, printing, and mailing has increased significantly over the years and we do not want to increase member dues at this time to help cover these costs. In addition, demand for the PDF-only option has far exceeded demand for a print newsletter and we have fallen far below the post office's required minimum number of pieces to qualify for bulk mail rates resulting in a significant increase in postage to mail fewer newsletters.

One of the benefits to the electronic newsletter is the ability to post links to additional news and

resources. For example, have you seen the excellent and informative "Know Your Sector" video that is being circulated on the Internet? It is an excellent resource for nonprofit staff, board, and donors to better understand the impact of the nonprofit sector. It was featured as a lead story for a week on the Chronicle of Philanthropy's homepage, and an ANCA member created it! Ben Klasky, executive director of Islandwood, made the video to showcase the scope of the nonprofit sector. You can watch it by clicking here - *Know Your Sector*.

Another great resource is the ANCA Website Member's Only page that contains past issues of *Directions*, the current ANCA Member Roster, the current Reciprocal Membership Program roster (both in PDF and Excel), information on exclusive offers for ANCA members, the Summit Resources page, and the Sample Documents page. You should have received an Enews on September 16th with the new username and password to access the Member's Only pages. If you did not receive it, please email me.

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Notes

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Northwoods Summit a huge success!

Treehaven Environmental Learning Center did an amazing job hosting ANCA Summit XVI, the Northwoods Summit. One hundred and fifteen ANCA members, Summit Sponsors and Vendors came together to learn, share, network, and get rejuvenated. The staff at Treehaven was wonderful to work with and really made our stay in the Wisconsin Northwoods a memorable one. As always, the highlight of the Summit is the chance to be with fellow ANCA members, and despite the economic difficulties we have all faced in the past few years, the mood was positive and energetic. The ANCA staff came away tired of course, but also energized and excited to continue to support our members.


“Holy cow! This was the best thing that could have happened to me as a new ED. The whole experience was great – especially the people – and I’m looking forward to next year!” – first-time attendee, ANCA Summit 2010

ANCA is now on LinkedIn

One of the most valuable resources identified by our members is the ANCA list serve that can be found on Edgateway.net. It provides an online forum for sharing questions, resources, challenges, and successes with other nature center administrators. ANCA has been using this service for years and although it is easy to use and generates very little spam, the search capabilities are almost non-existent and great information gets buried in past posts.

We have been researching other list serve providers for alternatives, and LinkedIn was suggested

to us by a group of new directors at the Summit this year. These new directors created the ANCA Group on LinkedIn, and in addition have created a New ANCA Directors subgroup. So far, LinkedIn seems easy to use and it does offer the ability to search through past discussions so please consider helping us “test-drive” the service. Send your comments and suggestions to jenlevy@natctr.org. But don’t worry, we will continue to use the old list serve until a decision is made.

If you have not already and are interested, please join the ANCA group on LinkedIn! ANCA Group - click here. Not sure how it works? ANCA Member Beth Stephens, executive director of the Ozark Natural Science School, has written a great how-to article that can be found on the ANCA website under Resources/LinkedIn, or by *clicking here.* 

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within the field, the ANCA Board of Directors saw an opportunity to develop a program that fills a need among ANCA member organizations.

Beginning in 1992 an impressive list of organizations have engaged in and benefited from the ANCA Peer Consult process. Over these years the consult program has been refined and fine-tuned to assure meeting the contemporary needs of the profession and member organizations.

The Peer Consults were not intended just to serve the issues confronting struggling organizations. The consults are designed to help any organization seeking to improve its value to and impact on the community it serves. In fact, a well timed ANCA Peer Consult can often circumvent the need for a consult “must”. ANCA Peer Consults are a great way to test innovative ideas or for exploring undiscovered opportunities that may not yet be understood.

Team Consults: Many Centers’ needs are best served by small teams of 3-5 selected ANCA professionals that include current or former ANCA Board members. Team consults normally take no more than three days but are uncommonly productive. The Team presents a preliminary report in person addressing the identified issues, and that is followed by a written and expanded report with recommendations (including action steps) for the organization’s consideration. Recommendations often include suggestions for additional and often free or low-cost professional services identified as needed in the consult. The final

report is delivered to the organization within 30 days of completion of the consult.

Why an ANCA Peer Consult?

1) ANCA Peer consult team members are skilled in best practices, but understand first-hand the many aspects and challenges of adapting, implementing and maintaining best practices in our professional field. ANCA Peer Consult team members are selected based on their experience and expertise in the issues presented by the organization seeking professional help. This greatly reduces time and saves money.

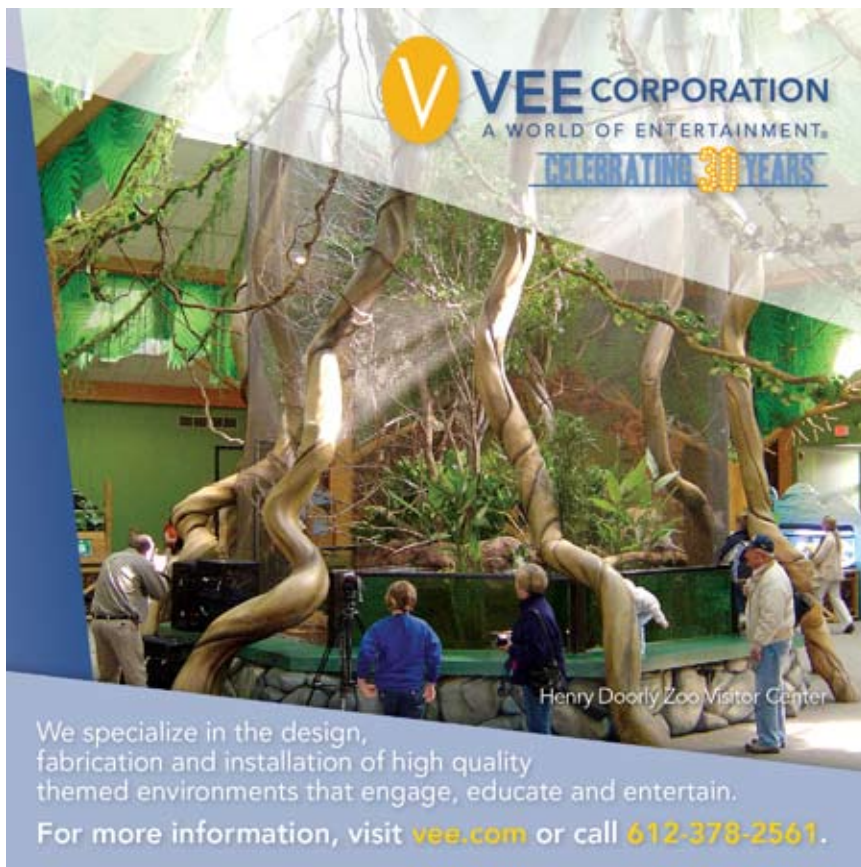
2) Peer Consults are the most efficient way for our member organizations to get solid professional advice. Peer Consults are structured to quickly and thoroughly assess the proposed issues, involve key participants and help the team make quality recommendations.

ANCA Peer Consults are coordi-

nated between a Team Leader and the host organization to bring as many organizational stakeholders together as needed to assess, diagnose and make recommended actions in a final report.

3) No consultant values your success more than the ANCA membership and leadership. The Peer Consult provides feedback, assessment and recommendations for the host organization to consider in the course of forging their future. The Consult Team submits a comprehensive report that articulates recommendations for the organization to address their identified issues. ANCA Peer Consults are fair, honest and impartial in their assessments and recommendations. The recommendations and suggested action steps are intended to provide guidance that allows organizations to take control their

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4) Both Consult process and reports can be enormously powerful. Many ANCA member organizations are, or feel as though, they are woefully alone in their quest for success. Just getting good, objective, outside advice during a consult and in the final report energizes the whole host organization. No matter how daunting the challenges may appear, participating organizations find themselves on better footing from the ANCA Peer Consult.

5) ANCA Peer Consults are only one aspect of support available with ANCA Membership. ANCA publishes Director's Guide to Best Practices: Examples from the Nature and Environmental Learning Center Profession. This best practice bible written by profes-

sionals in our field for their peers is a great supplement to the ANCA Consult and included with each consult. ANCA has published a number of subject-specific Monographs available for purchase through the ANCA Administrative office.

The ANCA membership can also be wonderful resource that is only a phone call, a click or text away. There is no better way to make contacts and to get to know people that you can relate to than attending the annual ANCA Summits.

When is the best time for a Consult?

The best time for a Peer Consult is when you need it. Planning is every organization's safety net and implementing the plan is the proof of good planning. A good approach toward seeking any professional service is to look at where

you want to be and what you need to help you get there from where you are. An ANCA Peer Consult is a great way to help you understand where you are and what you need to incorporate in your plan for the future.

There is no right or wrong time to schedule a consult. It is easy to say that paying for consulting in a bad economy is not a priority. I would challenge organizations to consider the value of seeking professional help even when finances are a concern because the advice you seek may prepare your organization for better times. It is an organization's purpose to always position itself for times of both prosperity and economic challenges.

What are common issues covered in ANCA Peer Consults?

(continued on page 6)

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What kind of results can an organization expect from a Peer Consult?

Every organization is unique. Every organization has varying resources and institutional assets and challenges. How and when an organization acts upon consult recommendations varies. Some organizations see immediate positive results and begin implementing action steps recommended by the Peer Consult Report almost straight away.

A more likely scenario is that once a report is received the results are shared with stakeholders, and action recommendations are prioritized based on financial capacity and resources available to take appropriate action. Once an implementation plan is in place organizations may see results for months and years beyond.

What is the most important first step in getting professional, cost-effective help from professionals within the nature education field?

Contact the ANCA Office for more information on ANCA Peer Consults.

As a tenured Nature Center Executive Director my career and my nature center benefited substantially from ANCA membership. ANCA provides many services and opportunities for members and member organizations to succeed. I currently serve on the ANCA Board of Directors and served as VP of Professional Services.

I know of no better investment than ANCA membership and those who remain active in the ANCA organization will see surprising professional results. ANCA Peer Consults are an important tool in your ANCA membership tool box. If your organization needs professional help, make the Peer Consult a high priority. 🌿

Larry D. Richardson is a Graduate of The Ohio State University with a bachelor of Science in Natural Resources. He has worked

in the private sector corporate world, served as a Park Ranger, State Park Manager, Program Coordinator for the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District and as Park Director of Arcadia Lake Park in Edmond, Oklahoma. Larry served as the Executive Director of Lake Erie Nature & Science Center near Cleveland, Ohio for the last 21 years. Larry recently retired from the non-profit center and is continuing to serve on the ANCA Board of Directors.

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Peer Consults

Helpful, Challenging, Invigorating!

Audrey Eisenhauer
Executive Director
Margaret & H.A. Rey Center
Waterville Valley, NH

The Margaret and H.A. Rey Center in Waterville Valley, NH was the fortunate recipient of a 2010 ANCA Peer Consult Scholarship. While the Peer Consult itself was a whirlwind of a few days with schedules running from morning to night, the results were an experience for our staff and board that allowed us to take the time to reflect on our organization, and a report that will allow us to carry the expertise of our Consult Team forward with us as we continue on the strategic planning path that we started down with our ANCA Peer Consult.

Our experience began well before the actual dates of our Consult with several phone conversations with our Consult Team leader to give him background about our organization and to define the “key questions” that we wanted the Consult Team to address. Pre-consult conversations and emails also served to develop our agenda and schedule for the days of the consult.

The Consult Team spent two and a half days with us, and during that time they met with Rey Center staff, board, and key stakeholders. The input from community members and partners gathered during stakeholder sessions has been very informative for the Rey Center as we take a strategic look at our organization and plan for the future. The Team also led a working session with staff and

board to get the organizational strategic thought process started.

The Consult ended with a presentation by the Consult Team summarizing their observations and recommendations in response to the “key questions” that we focused on, followed by a potluck dinner to celebrate.

The full written report prepared by the Team arrived a couple weeks after the completion of the Consult.

Although some of the subject matter that we had the Consult Team focus on dealt with serious organizational challenges (for which the Consult Team had some very helpful and applicable advice), after all was said and done, the staff and board were left feeling invigorated and very hopeful for the future of our organization.

As a young nonprofit, we greatly benefited from the combined expertise of the Peer Consult Team, and are so grateful that they volunteered their time to share that with us. 🌱

Audrey Eisenhauer received her BS in Wildlife Biology from Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA and her MS in Natural Resource and Environmental Education from Utah State University in Logan, UT. She worked at Stokes Nature Center in Logan, UT and the Squam Lakes Natural Science Center in Holderness, NH before joining the Margaret and H.A. Rey Center staff as the Education Program Director in 2007. She became the Center's Executive Director in 2009 and appreciates the guidance and support of ANCA now more than ever!

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Peer Consults

Rooted in Experience. Reaching for Excellence.

Tina Popson
Education Program Manager
Hitchcock Nature Center
Honey Creek, IA

When ANCA recently unveiled this new tag-line, I felt that it also provided a picture-perfect synopsis of our own environmental education program. After undergoing eight explosive years of program expansion at Hitchcock Nature Center, we have certainly had our share of noteworthy successes. However, those successes did not come without growing pains. Following a period of such rapid growth, we found ourselves facing a variety of strategic and logistical challenges as we looked forward to the future of our program. When I learned of ANCA Peer Consults and the opportunities they provide to work with national experts on issues at the local level, it seemed like the perfect fit.

As anyone working in a government organization knows, funding is often in short supply. The same was true for our county-sponsored nature center. Believing that the assistance provided by the ANCA Peer Consult would be worth the extra effort, I chose to look for outside funding. The process was not an easy one, and my initial attempts were not suc-

cessful.

However, patience and perseverance paid off in the end when a local entity, the Iowa West Foundation, agreed to provide the necessary funds for the Consult. Finding a partner whose mis-



photo courtesy of Hitchcock Nature Center

Hitchcock Nature Center staff used creativity and perseverance to secure outside funding for a Peer Consult which is scheduled to occur in winter 2011.

sion aligned with the objectives of the Consult was key. A primary component of the Iowa West Foundation mission is to improve lives and strengthen communities – with a special interest in education. Our nature center has partnered with Iowa West in the past, so the foundation was aware of the educational successes we had achieved in recent years. Our application focused on our need for serious strategic growth planning in order to continue delivering our unique nature-based educational message to an ever-broadening audience. The ANCA Peer Consult will help determine the future di-

rection of our program. Since that direction will not be known until the conclusion of the Consult, the most challenging part of the grant application process was defining quantitative objectives by which the success of the grant could be measured. Where this had been a major sticking point other potential funding sources, I believe that Iowa West's familiarity with our

past educational successes helped bridge this gap.

I realize the challenges ahead of us and look forward to continuing to Reach for Excellence. 🌿

Tina Popson earned a M.A in Museum Studies/ Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and a B.A. in Anthropology from Grinnell College. She has worked in the field of informal education at the State His-

torical Society of Iowa, Museum of Northern Arizona, and University of Nebraska State Museum. Prior to her position with Pottawattamie County Conservation, Tina was the Director of Education for the Salisbury House Foundation.

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Peer Consults

The Team Leader's Role

Dave Catlin
Senior Director of Field Support
National Audubon Society
Springfield, MO

I have participated in five ANCA Consults; I've only led one of them. On the basis of that admittedly limited experience, I can say this about leading a consult: it's a lot of work, but it pays well.

The work begins early when you're a Consult Team Leader. You are responsible for setting up all the details with the host organization—determining the scheduling, organizing the travel and lodging logistics, helping to select the other members of the Team. You also have to work with the host organization—the client—to refine the question the Team will address.

Ah, the question! As Trinity says in *The Matrix*, "It's the question that drives us, Neo. It's the question that brought you here."

You might think the question part would be easy, but often it is not. Sometimes the client has only a general idea of what they want: "We're trying to start a new nature center and we're not sure where to begin." Sometimes they are asking the wrong question altogether: "What can our staff do to get more donations?" Sometimes they have a pretty good idea of the help they need, but there are too many questions to address reasonably in one consult. A key job of the Team Leader is to focus the effort. Thoughtful questions are more likely to produce thoughtful answers.

The next period of work comes during the consult visit. The leader is a facilitator and, to a certain extent, a taskmaster. He or she is responsible for keeping the Team on schedule and on task. The typical consult visit consists of a lot of questioning, a lot of listening, and a lot of observing . . . followed by a short but intense period of Team discussion and, at the end of



Contact the ANCA Office to schedule your Peer Consult today - your Team is ready!

the visit, a summary presentation made to the client.

Finally, the Team Leader drafts the written report, solicits feedback from the other Team members, revises it, and gets a finished version to the client within 30 days of the site visit.

A lot of work, yes. And did I say well paid? As Princess Leia said to Han Solo, "If money is all that you love, then that's what you'll receive." Team Leaders actually do get a \$500 stipend in recognition of all the extra hours they put in. But that isn't the real compensation, of course. The true value of being a Team Leader comes from the exhilaration of working with enthusiastic, seasoned colleagues on a worthwhile

project, marshalling their diverse strengths to come up with a vision that might actually make a very big difference for a nature center in need.

At least, that was my experience. If I may be permitted one more movie reference, it was kind of like leading a bunch of mutants with crazy super powers, like Professor Charles Xavier in *X-Men*. And I do hope I get to do as many sequels. 🌿

David Catlin has worked for 10 years for the National Audubon Society, providing advice and support to the organization's nature centers across the U.S. and specializing in the establishment of new centers. Prior to coming with Audubon, he planned nature centers for the Missouri Department of Conservation and then ran the Springfield Conservation Nature Center in Springfield, Missouri, for 10 years.



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Peer Consults

Being Part of the Team

Amber Parker
Executive Director
The Marine Science Consortium
Wallops Island, VA

To paraphrase a famous shoe ad, if you're asked to be a part of an ANCA consult team – just do it!

When asked to participate in my first ANCA consult my initial thoughts were about the amount of time away from my center, whether I have enough knowledge to be helpful, and other equally negative thoughts. However, having heard many positive things about consults from former participants, I also knew that I would learn something in the process. So, as ANCA had faith in me, I thought the least I could do was to “trust the process” and hope I would be helpful.

I still hope that I was helpful, however I KNOW that the experience left me in awe of the value of this program for both the organization that requested the consult as well as for the consult team.

Being a part of a process in which all members are wholly focused on a positive outcome for an organization was inspiring. Learning from my team members as well as the organization and its stakeholders was exhilarating. The experience was challenging, requiring much of all involved, however it returned two-fold what we gave, both in knowledge and fellowship.

It was truly satisfying to sink deeply into our field of work with colleagues who are fighting the same good fight and to apply our

knowledge of our craft to the benefit of a sister organization. So, if you are struggling with an issue at your center or are lucky enough

to get that email from Jen or Ann about serving on a consult team... just do it! You and your organization will benefit greatly.

Amber Parker is the Executive Director of The Marine Science Consortium, a residential environmental learning center and field station located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Prior to her move to The Eastern Shore, Amber worked with the talented folks at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont in TN.



photo by Audrey Eisenhauer

Dave Toman, Kim Skylander, Amber Parker, and Corky McReynolds made up the Team for a consult at The Margaret & R.A. Rey Center in Waterville Valley, NH.

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Profile: Cincinnati Nature Center

Making Nature Personal: Part 1 why CNC changed its program focus

Connie O'Connor
Director of Education & Visitor
Services
Cincinnati Nature Center
Cincinnati, OH

Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC) recently challenged its Board Education Committee to clarify its strategic direction. Since programs and services emanate directly from the mission, the work of this committee took an organizational perspective. Reflecting on what nature centers like CNC can and cannot accomplish and using research on social marketing theory, human behavior, and psychology, the committee generated a powerful document that has changed the way CNC approaches its mission while energizing and uniting staff and board.

The new approach places strong emphasis on the nature center community and on an ethic of mentorship and social influence among three key audiences: CNC adult members, children, and school teachers/community mentors. None of the ideas within this document are completely new: Schlitz Audubon Center suggested that nature centers act as community centers several years ago; Robert Bixler has written many articles about the need to “support the choir”; and Doug McKenzie-Mohr has trained non-profits on the relevance of social marketing for years.

But the way the pieces fit together to provide direction for CNC is new and, we believe, worth sharing. The first of a two-part series discusses adult mem-



photo courtesy of Cincinnati Nature Center

bers. Part two will discuss children and their mentors.

CNC's Adult Members:
Preaching to the Choir

The mission of CNC is: *To inspire passion for nature and promote environmentally responsible choices through experience, education, and stewardship to ensure a sustainable future.* Because environmental problems are complex and cannot be separated from social and economic issues (Hawken, 2007), it is often difficult for a concerned person to prioritize among actions. With hundreds of behaviors and choices that can be labeled “environmentally responsible,” the degree to which CNC influences a sustainable future is impossible to measure. People need to understand, visualize, and use their collective resources to solve problems and therefore do not respond well when problems are addressed with “ten small steps you can do today” (Clayton & Myers, 2009). On the other hand, people don't voluntarily visit nature centers to be confronted with the complexities

of environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, research indicates that people can have positive values about nature and a fair degree of knowledge, yet not act in “environmentally responsible” ways (Bixler, Floyd, & Hammit, 2002; Ham, 2007).

When environmental organizations provide general information about a broad range of problems and solutions, behavioral change cannot be expected. If an organization chooses to target behavioral change, it must identify a very specific behaviors, identify barriers and motivations for those behaviors, and develop a strategy to remove barriers and provide motivations (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999).

Few nature centers are willing to devote resources to this focused effort, an approach best left to organizations with a more specific mission such as soil and water conservation districts.

Nature centers should be realistic about behaviors they can

(continued on page 13)

influence and target. Some environmentally responsible choices are expensive (grass-fed beef, hybrid cars, green buildings and appliances), so it might seem logical to focus only on people affluent enough to make “green” choices. But looking at a broader context, it is the moral character of the people in a society that gives them determination and creativity to make the world a better place. A recent study reports that exposure to nature stimulates people to value community and relationships and increases feelings of altruism (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2009).

As early as the 1800s, industrialization was blamed for making people physically weak, uninspired, and depressed, and nature was seen as refuge from this blight (Armitage, 2009). Recently much has been written about the positive benefits for children who play frequently outdoors, including resilience to stress, increased creativity and ability to concentrate, better scores in school, improved fitness and coordination, and overall health (Louv, 2005).

Nature can make us healthier, happier citizens, who will perhaps want to promote sustainability. Such a viewpoint justifies CNC’s role as a place for personal enrichment: it is not selfish to enjoy nature for personal reasons—it could be critical to the planet.

Nature centers can build and support a community of people

who have a common interest in nature but who approach this interest from different perspectives. While serving the needs of each subgroup with diverse programs and services (the interpretive rule of reaching the audience “where they’re at”), we now also



photo courtesy of Cincinnati Nature Center

CNC serves as a place that informs members about environmental issues, deepens their environmental ethic, and supports them in sharing their convictions.

seek ways for these subgroups to interact.

CNC members may already have awareness, knowledge, and positive values related to the environment, but they might not have a social network of friends, co-workers, neighbors, and extended family who share their environmental values. Social groups protect and reinforce group interests (Bixler, 2001).

CNC can serve as a place that informs members about environmental issues, deepens their environmental ethic, and supports them in sharing their convictions. Research shows that people are more likely to take collective action if they have strong social ties and higher social status. Social ties contribute to the likelihood that

individuals will move beyond their diverse self-interests toward mutually beneficial collective action (Bandura, 1997) such as global sustainability.

The field of environmental socialization studies how interactions among social subgroups such as recreationists, hobbyists, and environmentalists influence each other’s behavior (Bixler, Floyd, & Hammitt, 2002; Bixler & James, 2005). Why is this interaction important? As they share ideas and form new ones, their commitment to the environment grows.

Social marketing theory tells us that the most effective way for people to be encouraged to make a commitment to ongoing behavioral change is by face-to-face conversations with people they trust, coupled

with a public declaration that they have a certain belief or value and therefore are acting in ways to support their belief or value (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Thus non-members would be much more receptive to information and influence from a member whom they know, than from staff at CNC. Our organizational efforts should therefore be focused heavily on supporting our members.

By providing support for people who already have environmental values (“the choir” of CNC members), we inspire them to share their environmental experiences, knowledge, and values with others. This effect expands the influence of CNC well beyond its 5,000+ members. Outputs (pro-

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grams, services, publications) can be evaluated to determine if they are providing the kind of support each subgroup needs. CNC must identify what “support” looks like for each member-interest group and provide it for them. One difficult question is how to determine social carrying capacity for the land: at what point are the trails too crowded or events too large to provide the experiences our subgroups seek and how do we mitigate conflict between user groups?

The potential impact is immeasurable, but one can assume from research on social marketing that supporting our members, and thereby supporting their interactions with non-members in their communities, is the best way CNC can help promote environmentally responsible choices. CNC is working on new ways to solicit and evaluate ongoing input from members to determine if they feel supported by our programs and services. We believe that interesting site features, diverse and well maintained trails, and a wide array of programs and services are essential in supporting our members. Providing facilities that allow for more casual social interaction is also important.

The volunteer program takes on a new dimension in this model, as a critical component of building social capital. Our Volunteer Coordinator position has changed to a “CNC Community Coordinator” position. The concept of “giving back” to the CNC community and “sharing one’s passion, knowledge, and values” is becoming a key message for all members. CNC staff are beginning to see themselves as talent scouts, ever alert for members who might like to share their knowledge and

passion for nature with others. By leading people slowly into the process of volunteering rather than asking them to commit to regular hours on a weekly or monthly basis, we can build social capital one step at a time.

New opportunities to provide members with avenues to share their passion, knowledge, and values with others are being created. Member Naturalist programs, member-based clubs, and Nature Mentor workshops can turn a hobbyist into a volunteer. Special events may provide a platform for a member to share his/her hobby as a presenter. Parents will be offered training as “nature play facilitators” and may continue volunteering long after their children have outgrown our new Nature Playscape. Volunteers are not seen as a means to an end (program delivery) but as an essential component of CNC’s social capital, as role models and mentors for all visitors.

CNC realizes that we succeed even if “all we do” is provide a place where people feel refreshed and restored. John Muir wrote, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul.” And Edward Abbey reminded us, “It is not enough to fight for the land...it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it’s still here.” 

Connie O’Connor oversees CNC’s Education Team, facilitates nature education programs for all ages, and is liaison for school partners.

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photo courtesy of Cincinnati Nature Center

CNC offers training for parents to be “nature play facilitators.” Many of these volunteers continue to help out after their children are no longer in the program.

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From The Field:

IMLS Grants – Lessons Learned

Bob Mercer
Director - Naturalist
Silver Lake Nature Center
Bristol, PA

At the recent ANCA Summit in Wisconsin, an eager group tackled the issue of what makes a good grant application.

A key premise drove the session: A request will fail if it does not meet the needs of the reviewer. To understand the process from the reviewer's perspective, participants each reviewed several Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grants that had been submitted by ANCA members. Some had been funded and others had not.

In the mix were several model grant proposals from the IMLS website. Participants were given a scant 15 minutes each to read and evaluate—on a scale of one to five—three of the 11 grants. After the reading time had passed, each grant was discussed by a panel of reviewers. Did they like it? Did it meet the grant criteria? Was it clear? Would they have recommended it for funding?

A good reviewer reads a proposal not just once, but multiple times; but that first reading creates a visceral reaction—I like this proposal or I do not like it. Subsequent readings work to dispel or confirm that instant analysis. This workshop only gave time for the participants to gain that first reaction.

The scoring and comments exposed how people with biases and little or no knowledge about a proposal must make assumptions

before they can make a decision.

The results of the day's reviews: Every proposal had at least one proponent, someone who thought it was well written and compelling, and every proposal had at least one opponent, someone who thought it was poorly written, vague, and not worthy of funding. Even the model grants were considered flawed by at least one reviewer and frequently multiple reviewers. Typically, the scores for each specific proposal ranged widely. This led to a discussion of strengths and weaknesses of proposals, the challenges of pleasing a grant reviewer or review team, and how to use this knowledge to prepare a better grant.

The following list of suggestion

was generated.

- Make your grant proposal engaging – It is highly probable that the people reading your proposal look at tons of grants and are comparing your proposal to other requests. If it engages them and is easy to read, they will respond favorably.

- Maintain a logical flow – Follow the stated guideline, but make sure the grant text flows and is cohesive from start to finish. A reviewer who finds a grant rambling, unclear, or vague in the first reading starts with a negative impression.

- Send only what you want to be considered – Every piece of information sent is used by the reviewers to understand the proposal and becomes part of their impression. If you do not want something to be part of the review process, do not include it. If you are not proud

(continued on page 16)



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of it, what makes you think it will impress a reviewer?

- Don't assume the reviewer(s) know or accept anything – The only things reviewers know about your organization and your plans are what they see in writing. The information and supporting documentation needs to be clear, complete, and relate to your request (see above).

- Use clearly written facts that can be and are justified— “Attendance will rise” or “grades will improve” are not fact. “Attendance rose 10 percent” or “A study by foundation X in 20XX demonstrated that grades will improve” are facts.

- Remove all slang or jargon – While a grant needs to be engaging, it also needs to be written professionally. Writing in a folksy style, using poor grammar, inserting words or concepts our profession understands and recognizes, but may be foreign to a reviewer from another field, can weaken a proposal. For example, do not assume everyone has read *Last Child in the Woods* or shares our profession's interest.

- Check for errors in spelling, math, facts, etc – Every error, no matter how small, detracts from the professionalism of your proposal and undermines the reviewer's confidence in your ability to manage the grant.

- Manage repetition – You have a limited amount of space, so give the reviewer new information that strengthens your proposal. Yes, offer an introduction and a summary, but don't repeat sentences over and over. Use a fresh approach and keep the reviewer's interest.

- Have someone impartial review your proposal – A good editor

is important. Have someone not familiar with the organization or the proposal, someone who will be objective, review the grant. Have him/her read it for clarity, completeness, accuracy, etc.

It is not uncommon for most grant proposals to fail. Don't take it personally. Every agency and foundation receives far more requests than it can possibly award. Rejection does not mean there is no value to the request. Often, once a grant is rejected, an organization throws that grant out as flawed and works on a completely different proposal.

Most grantors provide comments on the strengths and weaknesses of a grant application. Take their recommendations to heart. If there is value to the proposal, tweak the grant request to address the shortcomings and resubmit. Revising is nowhere near as much work as writing a totally new grant. A resubmitted proposal will most likely be reviewed by a completely different set of reviewers to whom it will be new. Just don't forget to change any dated material.

There are no guarantees that a grant will ever be accepted, but by writing a proposal that is thorough, well conceived, and well written so that it is a pleasure to read, increases your chances. Grant reviewers are people after all. 🌿

Since 1975 Robert Mercer has been the Director of the Silver Lake Nature Center, a facility of the Bucks County Department of Parks and Recreation and supported by the non-profit Friends of Silver Lake Nature Center. He served on ANCA's Board from 1991 to 1998 and then again from 2003 to 2009. He has served as an IMLS Field reviewer for three years and IMLS panel member for two years.

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at IslandWood on Bainbridge Island

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The RELC Conference is a biennial gathering of directors of centers that offer residential environmental education programs. The conference is also appropriate for program directors and coordinators who have responsibility for, and a particular interest in, leadership issues.

Recently, the scope of the gathering has broadened to include directors of graduate residency programs whose nontraditional programs largely take place at residential environmental learning centers.

PURPOSE

The RELC gathering advances the field of residential environmental education through the thoughtful exploration of current issues that are relevant to our work. The purpose is to increase the effectiveness of current and next generation leaders in the field.



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Residential Environmental Learning Center Director's Conference 2011

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The topics for RELC workshops, except for the keynote speaker's, are jointly selected by the attendees during the initial Thursday night Open Space Planning Session. This strategy recognizes that this is a gathering of peers who are the leaders of their field; whose ideas, challenges, and expertise provide the greatest opportunity for their mutual professional development.

EXAMPLES OF OPEN SPACE SESSIONS FROM PREVIOUS RELC GATHERINGS INCLUDE:

From the 2009 gathering at Camp McDowell, Nauvoo, Alabama

Grant Writing Process • Working with Local Foods • Animal Collections

Billing Strategies • Surviving the Downturn

Additional conference proceedings can be found at <http://www.campmcdowell.com/cmec/RELC.htm>

From the 2007 gathering at Teton Science Schools, Jackson Hole, Wyoming

International Collaboration Strategies • Program Evaluation • Instructor Development

Partnering to Achieve the Bigger Picture • Curriculum Theory for Graduate Programs

How to Schedule Schools Fairly • Quality vs. Quantity • Adult and Family Programs

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ABOUT THE LOCATION FOR THE GATHERING:

This year's gathering of Directors of Residential Environmental Learning Centers (RELC) will be held at IslandWood on Bainbridge Island, Washington – a short 35-minute ferry ride from Seattle. IslandWood's unique site is only part of the story of our commitment to sustainable teaching and learning. IslandWood's 255-acre campus provides a complete outdoor classroom setting from forest to bog to marine estuary. The unique educational facilities include a wet lab, computer lab, Living Machine (water treatment facility), two tree houses (one ADA accessible), a 140-foot canopy tower, 190-foot suspension bridge and garden/greenhouse.

Our campus features comfortable accommodations; each room is equipped with a private bathroom. The lodges have a community feel with common shared living rooms. IslandWood's exceptional food service staff is responsive to diet restrictions. The campus has wireless internet throughout, and a range of meeting spaces and resources to serve the needs of our gathering.



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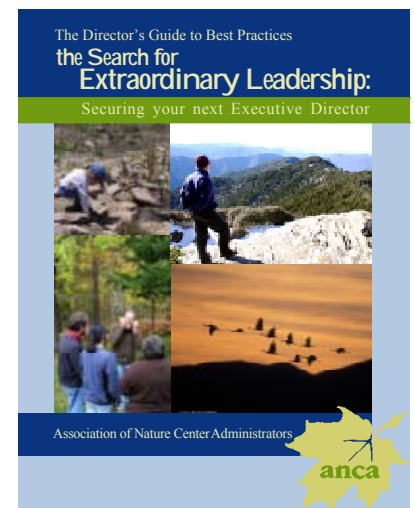
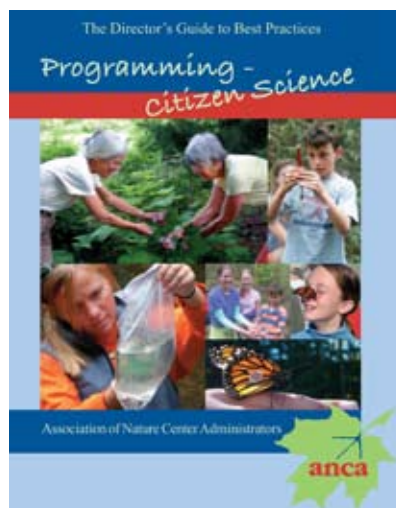
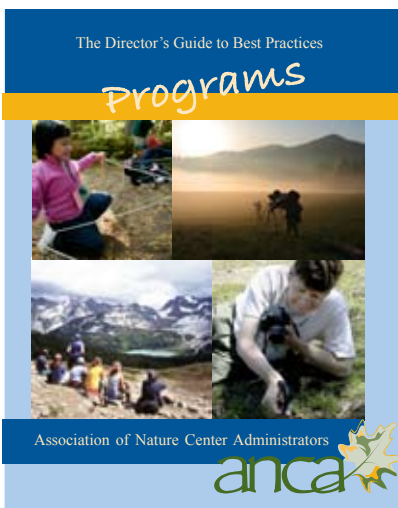
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