

# directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

## What is at the Heart of Excellent Programs?

Excerpt from *Director's Guide to Best Practices: Programs*

Richard Haley &  
Ken Voorhis  
Executive Director  
Great Smoky Mountains Institute at  
Tremont  
Townsend, TN

Determine and Build on Core  
Characteristics That Will Define  
Your Programs

What is at the heart of your programs? Asking yourself and your staff this question can help you clarify your approach to creating the programs that support your mission. The programs you offer represent who you are as an organization. It is important to consider the kinds of activities you are most interested in featuring at your center in order to understand the attitudes and beliefs they will reflect.



Photo by Scott Brennan, courtesy of North Cascades Institute

*An organization's unique culture is powerful in that it defines the organization and its values, and it influences and is reflected in programming.*

When over 20 center directors and directors of education were asked, "What is at the heart of your programs?" a number of common attributes emerged that are described below.

### Inquiry

Helping people to heighten their sense of curiosity about nature and providing opportunities to explore, investigate, and develop their own questions and seek answers is central not only to many programs for school groups, but more and more for adult and family groups. This

approach does not reduce the need for staff with expertise in natural science. Indeed, more expertise is desirable in order to have leaders who can help guide the participants through the inquiry process.

(continued on page 4)

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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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**2 Director's Notes:**  
**Strategic Planning**  
by Jen Levy

**12 From the Field:**  
**From the Tropics of Belize  
to Below Zero in the UP**  
by Bob Mercer

**14 Profile:**  
**The Marine Science  
Consortium**  
by Amber Parker



# Director's Notes

## Strategic Planning

Jen Levy  
Executive Director  
Association of Nature Center  
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Logan, UT

Welcome to Fall ANCA Members! It was a busy summer at ANCA as we prepared for the annual Summit. We owe a huge thank you to the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont for the exceptional job they did as hosts. I also wish to thank everyone who served as workshop presenters and session facilitators and of course to our 180 attendees who brought great questions, stories, successes, and lessons learned to the discussions. We have put together a Summit Resources page in the Member's Only section of the ANCA website with some of the handouts and presentations from the Summit, so be sure to check it out.


Recently, I attended a presentation recently by Patricia Bromley, Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department of the University of Utah. She teaches courses related to non-profit management in the Master of Public Administration Program. Her presentation was titled, "Strategic Planning in San Francisco Non-Profits: Who Plans? What Happens? And Why?" The presentation is part of a broader study that examines the infiltration of managerial practices into the charitable sector, using interview data collected from a random sample of 200 nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The research focused on strategic planning and used multiple methods to answer the following questions: 1) What characteristics make an organization more likely to do strategic planning? 2) What is the effect of planning on those that use strategic plans? 3) What



characteristics are associated with particular outcomes?

Forty-five percent of the organizations answered that they had a plan in place or were creating their first one. Results associated with the presence of strategic plans include larger organizations with more resources, more diversified funding stream, use of professional consultants and fundraisers, and participation in executive education. Of the organizations that plan, one-third express clear benefits attributed to planning, others described a routine process with a few clear outcomes. Although none felt planning led to negative outcomes, the interviews suggest some possibly powerful changes for the sector as a result of planning and similar managerial influences. One MBA-trained executive director of an all-volunteer led organization said, "Even though we are all volunteers, we are still a business."

What are the implications of this shift toward managerialism in the nature center world and the next generation of ANCA leaders? Do you think of your center as a business? Do you have "business-minds" among your board and staff? Do you have a realistic view of your organization's goals and objectives? What is the relationship at your center between nature and business? Do you have a plan? 

# ANCA Mentoring Program

## Join in Now!

Jason Kindall  
Board of Director  
Association of Nature Center  
Administrators  
Elkins, AR

At the ANCA Summit in August, against the backdrop of the clear, bubbling Middle Prong and the majesty of the Great Smoky Mountains attendees had the chance to sign up for a new mentoring program.

Members of ANCA can either take part as mentors, mentees, or both, and the team of Corky McReynolds, Ken Voorhis, Jason Meyer, and Jason Kindall worked to match participants up based on their career goals, similarities in nature centers, and backgrounds. Mentor/mentee pairs met over lunch and throughout the Summit to discuss goals and decide if they wished to commit to a year of mentoring.

Would you like to participate?

Perhaps you didn't get around to signing up for the program while at the Summit, or maybe you've decided after returning home that you'd like to participate after all. Perhaps you weren't able to attend Summit this year and don't want to miss out on this opportunity? Well, it is never too late. You can email Ken Voorhis (ken@gsmi.org) or Jason Kindall (jasonkindall@gmail.com) and get paired up with a mentor or mentee that matches your interests and goals.

Please don't be afraid to take part in this program as a mentor, mentee, or both. Part of the beauty

of ANCA is the open atmosphere and willingness of the ANCA family to help each other.

Whether you have 4 years in the nature center realm or 40, you have something to offer others.

The mentor-mentee relationship is intended to be a true two-way exchange built on given trust and shared goals, with just enough structure to give benchmarks and accountability to the group through periodic updates, surveys, and appropriate resources.

I hope that if you're not already a part of this program that you'll give serious thought to joining us. Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions or to get in the game! 🌿



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Mack Prichard has spent over 50 years as a naturalist with Tennessee State Parks. Here is a bit of his advice:

“We have an obligation to bring the parks to the people in such a way that leads them to the oohs and ahs - to the so whats? - to the whys? - and to provoke them in such a way that their eyes are open, their ears are tuned, their noses are twitchin’, and their senses are on reception for this great big broadcast of nature that is going on if they will only be still and tune in. I think that the most important thing that any interpreter can do is to just reach into the heart strings of people and pluck those strings so that they resonate from then on whenever that person has a similar experience and then they, by the same contagion, can share that enthusiasm.

Teach simple tricks of reading the landscape - to figure out what happened here. Give them a bird whistle, or a frog trill, or whatever else you can come up with. Give them some other voice of nature. If you can just teach them a different language and translate or interpret the values that are therein. Show them the other worlds and the other universes. Show them that these are not just little animals, they are travelers on the spaceship Earth with us, and if they can learn that planetary perspective, then they can go out and read their own landscapes and read the handwriting on the wall before their back is against the wall, which is a big problem we face today.”

Frequent Positive Experiences in Nature

Almost universally, interviewees for this publication cited multiple experiences as key to successful programs. Providing places, times and encouragement for participants to come back for additional experiences is a way to help people develop habits of interaction with nature, build positive connections, and affect their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.



Photo courtesy of Great Smoky Mountains Institute

*Nature centers have an important role in providing opportunities for people to develop their “sense of place.”*

Aullwood Audubon has such a program that connects with the city of Dayton, Ohio, school system. Executive Director Charity Kreuger describes their approach, “We feel at Aullwood that it is more beneficial to work with the same children multiple times, and so we have programs that reflect that. Children come twice a year during their six years of elementary school, and we visit those schools as well so those students get a balanced well-rounded approach to nature and farming. We spend probably 60% of our time with groups like that, our Aull-

wood Adventure Schools, and the balance with those groups that may come out just once a year.”

Aullwood Educational Director Tom Hissong continues, “We have kids who haven’t gotten out of their own neighborhood that may not view Aullwood as the most positive place. We need time to reassure them, make them comfortable with being in nature, and multiple visits are key.

Through Aullwood Adventures every grade comes out for two guided experiences each year. Those kids will have lots of experiences at Aullwood over their school career. If you could take one of those students and sit down and talk with Him/her about his/her perspective of their overall experience with Aullwood it would be very positive. We have a lot of kids with whom these multiple experiences have an incredible impact. We also become partners with teachers; they know our staff; and the kids get to know staff, I connect with the principals and get feedback with them. It is a powerful partnership.”

Amy Dawson, former Director of Randall Museum, San Francisco, emphasized the value of providing incentives that encourage school kids to come back with their families... e.g., coupons for free or two-for-one admissions to their centers. She said, “One of the most memorable experiences I’ve had was taking some teens to an overnight program in the beautiful Marin Headlands. When it was over, two of the kids needed a ride home – I drove them to one of the poorest parts of the city, but had to go all the way back because they forgot

(continued on page 5)

something. This was a great time to talk to them about the program, one which they obviously enjoyed, but had never experienced the likes of before. It became clear that they saw the experience as an anomaly in their lives, something they had no control over recreating, something only rich kids with cars or parents who would take them could go to. What stands out in my mind was the look on their faces when I told them they could take a city bus out there. They didn't believe me, so I showed them the transfer point at the Golden Gate Bridge, and the bus stop by the beach. They could now do this on their own. Priceless!"

Marcie Oltman, Director of Tamarack Nature Center in Minnesota, spoke at length about the power of having frequent opportunities to experience nature and the potential for preschool programs to fulfill this goal. She said, "We did a mission analysis and cost/benefit analysis of a variety of program types centered around frequent, positive outdoor experiences with family and friends as the most important criteria. Preschool programs outscored all others in every category—revenue, frequency of experience, family involvement and influence on attitudes and knowledge. Part of our mission is to help make nature a

part of people's everyday lives at each stage of their life. Preschool programs help us influence attitudes as they are being formed instead of trying to correct neutral or negative attitudes and behaviors later in life."

#### Sense of Place

A number of those we interviewed spoke about the role that centers play in connecting people with the specific landscapes, flora and fauna, and history of their home places. While our ancestors were well connected to the places in which they lived, technology, urbanization and a highly mobile society has created people who are less rooted or have less "sense of place."

Nature centers have an important role in providing opportunities for people to develop that sense of belonging through programs and opportunities that guide them to experience and learn about the unique places where they are located. Sense of place can be developed through a wide variety of programs from in-depth natural history classes about native plants and animals, to arts programs that focus on the emotional and creative aspects that places influence, to programs that teach about local issues related to invasive plants or water and land use, to cultural programs that consider how people related to the land over time.

#### Repositories of Natural History and Environmental Knowledge

People look to our centers for information about the natural world. They come with descriptions of species and nature observations, questions and a desire to understand what or why something is. They also expect us to understand environmental issues and how to live in environmentally sensitive ways. They may come to us seeking guidance, best practices, and information on everything from feeding birds, to dealing with problem wildlife, to composting, to alternative energy technologies, to environmental issues of local or even international significance. It is important that as we provide the answers and guidance that our users seek, we do all we can to provide accurate and balanced information. In the naturalist tradition, inquiry should be something we encourage and nurture. Our programming should provide the inquirers with the tools, facts, experiences, or whatever resources are needed for them to make discoveries or develop skills and/or perspectives that become their own.

Formal programs can be designed to directly address any of the above topics, but programming goes beyond just those programs that we list on our calendars and

(continued on page 6)

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catalogs. Our bookstores, libraries, publications, trails, the groups we host, the ways that our facilities are designed, exhibit areas, signage, the practices that we put in place, and the opportunities for informal experiences at our centers are all important to consider as part of our overall program design.

Places That Model, Demonstrate, and Teach Environmentally Sensitive and Sustainable Practices

One of the best ways that we can reach our users with our message is through what they see modeled and practiced at our centers. Facility design has become a particularly important and useful place to demonstrate practices that are environmentally sensitive. Building with renewable and recycled materials, creating places that blend with nature and provide transitions from the built to the natural environment, utilizing energy—efficient materials and technologies, landscaping with native plants, and implementing new and effective ways to deal with waste and storm water—these are but a few of the ways that centers are putting their mission into practice and demonstrating to people ways in which they can use such practices themselves.

Tim Sandsmark Director at Lookout Mountain

Nature Center in Colorado said, “Our facility incorporated a lot of green design principles, but a conscious effort was made to use materials and technologies that people could replicate themselves. If people know that they can get the same materials locally and at a reasonable cost, they are more likely to incorporate them into their own homes.”

Many centers that have incorporated “green design” into their facilities also have done a great job of interpreting what they have done through signage, facility tours and even “how to” workshops on sustainable design. One example is Islandwood on Puget Sound’s Bainbridge Island. Throughout the facility, signage explains various materials and technologies. Recycled glass tile is used in the bathrooms there. Not only is there signage describing the use of recycled glass, but materials were purposely chosen where one can still see pieces of the bottles that were recycled. The result is green design that is attractive, practical and educational, examples of which are seen throughout the Islandwood facility.

In an interview with David Orr, he discusses the role that centers can play by using sustainable and green design to model and teach others about those principles. He goes on to pose a challenge to nature

(continued on page 7)

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centers to retrofit and prepare themselves to be able to react to societal and environmental changes that result from peak oil production and global climate change.

“My overall impression is that nature centers are among the jewels of American culture, uncelebrated, greatly loved, and well positioned now to do heroic kinds of things, in a kind of quiet and unassuming way. If there were ten or twelve directors of nature centers that you know, call them high performance places, in critical habitats. I’d call a meeting and say, ‘What do we do relative to climate change and peak oil?’ And quietly talk among yourselves about changing your mission, to becoming places that can speak to what will emerge as a huge public need for advice and information and help on energy systems, food, shelter, water, livelihood, and possibly healthcare. Landscape management generally. And there is going to grow up a new field I’m sure that will be called catastrophe ecology, because ecosystems are dramatically changing. How do you stabilize those to the extent to which you can stabilize them? What kinds of plants and animals etc., do we introduce in them to keep them as productive as possible? Begin to make necessary changes, but I would not make a lot of fanfare about it. I’d go about this quietly and slowly stock your bookstores differently and shift your programs accordingly.”

### Community Based

An active nature center is becoming more and more important to people as a vital component of a vibrant community. Along with good schools, a public library, and recreation centers, nature centers can help define a community and what it values. As such, programs at nature centers should provide opportunities for people to gather, hold meetings, relax, and retreat. Programming does not just involve lectures, walks and talks, and exhibit tours. Programming can be as simple as making suggestions to people on how they can effectively use the trails, or times set aside for gathering by specific groups, or materials such as a family exploration day-pack, or a creative arts tool kit that can be made available for people to participate in self-guided experiences. A vital nature center is directly linked and involved with its community. The center’s presence and outreach should facilitate community involvement and can be an important catalyst for action.

Determining what level of community interaction your center is willing to take on or how those activities

take shape are important program decisions. Will you host birthday parties? How about rentals for weddings? What will your priorities be in terms of who uses your space? Rental opportunities can bring in needed income for other programs and also introduce individuals and groups to your center who might never have come on their own. How do you do that in ways that won’t compromise other programs? How can you best reach the people in your community? What can you take to them? There are centers that are addressing these questions and doing all of these things and more. Visiting those places and learning from others’ successes and failures will be time well spent.



Photo by Michael Matzo courtesy of Great Smoky Mountains Institute

*A well-planned educational program, activity, or lesson will have solid objectives that point to measurable outcomes. To be effective, those outcomes will contribute to an organization’s mission.*

### Nature Center Special Interest Clubs

At the Wilderness Center in Wilmot, Ohio, executive director Gordon Maupin has developed a successful model for operating Community Clubs out of his nature center. These special interest clubs are based on topics related to the center like astronomy, birdwatching, nature photography, and fly-fishing. The clubs use the center facilities but are organized and run by the members themselves. They conduct and lead programs open to the public. Many raise funds for their activities, maintain a bank account, and give back to the center in a variety of ways.

Gordon says this about their community clubs, “The nature center gets a corps of people who feel ownership of the nature center. Club members volunteer happily for things totally unrelated to their club as well. The nature center gains more members through the club itself and increased level of overall activity at

(continued on page 8)

the center. Clubs can be dynamic and provide leadership to the organization. We never would have had an astronomy program at its current level without the astronomy club. We would not have had big telescopes donated; we would not have built an Astronomy Education Building with a planetarium and observatory.”

Experience and the Sense of Wonder

Education staff often speak in terms of providing a spark or inspiration to program participants, regardless of the audience age. This can come from the weekend program that triggers a lifelong hobby for a participant, the sudden realization on the part of a child of the variety of creatures that live in a pond or stream, the first sight of Saturn through a telescope, or any one of the awe and wonder inspiring encounters that can be pro-

vided by guiding people to a place and time they can have a “Wow!” experience.

Many educators refer to Rachel Carson’s description of the sense of wonder, especially when speaking of providing experiences for children.


“If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupations with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such help from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy,

excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted on the one hand with the eager, sensitive mind of a child and on the other with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by a life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge. In a mood of self-defeat, they exclaim, ‘How can I possibly teach my child about nature – why, I don’t even know one bird from another!’

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the

(continued on page 9)



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emotions have been aroused – a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, or love – then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.”

One of the questions we asked in our interviews was about how nature center directors got into this field and what influenced their passion and connection to this work. You can imagine what we heard. Early experiences with nature and the out-of-doors and, like Carson describes, adults who were filled with wonder themselves who were willing to share and nurture that wonder played a critical role.

Mack Prichard called these “threshold experiences,” those magic moments that will never be forgotten and that have the potential for leading someone to a life-long passion for the natural world. It is not only important for us in our work to provide opportunities for these kinds of experiences for as many people as possible, but to keep a keen eye out for those individuals who are deeply touched by those experiences and provide ways to nurture them.

I hope that every child who comes through our programs can walk away with a positive memory or an “oh wow moment.” I don’t expect that, as a result, they will all become Rachel Carsons or John Muirs. If, however, we can

nurture the wonder in the few who really catch it – fan that spark by giving them other opportunities with us, and providing programs that give them a chance to grow – who knows where they may go?

### Hands-on Learning

People learn by doing, and nature centers provide a myriad of opportunities for just that. Programs that focus on engaging the learner with their subject have



Photo by Benjamin Drummond, courtesy of North Cascades Institute

*What is at the heart of your programs? Asking this question can help clarify your approach to creating the programs that support your mission.*

been shown to be more effective. Hands-on can take more time, staffing and resources, but it is one of the important things that brings people to our programs. Nature centers must demonstrate evidence to our formal education partners that hands-on learning is extremely effective.

### Science

People often speak of science as being at the heart of their programs in two ways. One is making sure that the information people receive as part of programs is accurate, based on the most up-to-date scientific understanding of the relevant ecology, life histories, interrelationships, and just

plain interesting facts about plants and animals and other organisms, as well as geology, hydrology, astronomy, and other fields that nature center programs often touch upon. “Natural history” is something that used to be dominant at nature centers and was the basis for the “nature study” movement out of which many of them grew. The two great challenges for administrators here are finding staff with a solid ground-

ing in multiple science fields and in providing avenues for staff to keep their knowledge up-to-date and to improve their knowledge in fields where they are weak. As college level programs that teach natural history or field-based science diminish, some nature centers may be able to fill that niche through training programs that they provide. Master Naturalists and other similar certification programs may also help

to fill this void in training and be good sources for finding qualified instructors.

The other way in which nature center directors described science as being at the heart of their programs is the sense of teaching the process of science. This is especially true in programs for school-children and teachers. The basic steps of observing and asking questions can start with programs for pre-schoolers and elementary students. Programs that encourage students to follow the steps of the scientific process are often put together for older elementary, middle school, and high school grades. Middle and high school

students can be involved in actual research through involvement in citizen science programs, field study programs, or independent science projects.

Citizen Science is being effectively incorporated into a number of nature center programs. Engaging students and the public as participants in research projects requires equipment, good protocols, training and expert leadership. It is, however, an extremely effective methodology for engaging people. Some centers may have research as part of their mission, but most do not. In this case the research becomes an extremely effective vehicle for education.

A separate monograph on best practices in Citizen Science is available through ANCA as well.

### A Place to Play

As free play in the out-of-doors has become more of a rarity

for today's children, some nature centers have begun to consider how they might promote frequent unstructured time outdoors. This may have little to do with getting kids to come to nature centers unless they live nearby. Rather, it has more to do with finding ways to encourage play in natural areas in their own neighborhoods and overcoming many of the barriers in today's world that keep them from doing so.

In terms of free play on the nature center grounds, most centers were established to preserve and

protect a natural landscape, and as such, have policies about staying on trails, picking vegetation, and other activities that could be harmful to the resource. Can free play and exploration be encouraged that doesn't damage what we are trying to preserve as well as look out for the safety and welfare



Photo of Richard Haley by Paul Super, Grand Canyon National Park

*Providing places, times, and encouragement for participants to come back for additional experiences is a way to help people develop habits of interaction with nature, build positive connections, and affect their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.*

of the children? One way that this has been addressed is by selecting less sensitive areas and providing materials and environments that encourage exploration and free play. 🌿

*Richard Haley's first nature center job was at Laughing Brook Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, a Massachusetts Audubon Society nature center in Hampden, Massachusetts — just a few miles from his family's home in the suburbs of Springfield. Since then his programming experience*

*ranged from conducting a "one man show" with limited resources at a small nature center to overseeing the activities at centers of various shapes, sizes and configurations across the state of New York in his position with New York Audubon. He was active with ANCA in numerous capacities and was an important contributor and facilitator on many ANCA peer consults. In July of 2006, Richard met an untimely death in an auto accident while returning home from a trip to the Grand Canyon with friends. This monograph was in process at that time and represents just one piece of the legacy to nature centers that Richard left behind. Richard Haley was an incredible naturalist, manager, leader, and friend to many of us in the nature center community.*

*Ken Voorhis attributes his beginning in this field to an early exposure to the outdoors through scouts and camping with his family. In high school, a formative experience was the opportunity he had to work as a volunteer and then junior staff member at the Dayton Museum of Natural History where traditional nature study was modeled and taught. Ken has served on the ANCA board and served on numerous consults, especially those that involved residential centers. He has been working with residential environmental learning centers since 1977 and currently serves as the Executive Director of Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont where he has worked since 1984.*

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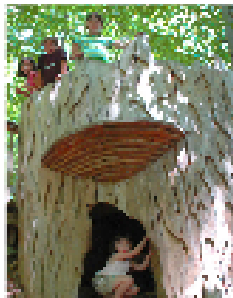
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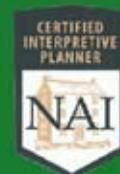


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# From The Field:

## from the Tropics of Belize to Below Zero in the UP: Professional Development by Sleeping Around

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

ANCA has a long tradition of teasing. The more one is involved in ANCA the more likely one is to do something that becomes an *ANCA Classic*, it becomes an inside joke to all that person's peers. Unfortunately, those new to the organization are outside of that loop. Maybe this article will help those present at this year's Summit to better appreciate the experience and learn from it.

The privilege of being honored with the ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award exposes the honoree to a polite and affectionate roast where one's *ANCA Classics* may be revealed. Those members who attended this year's fabulous Summit at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont learned my secret—I sleep around.

As the fun and teasing flew at the Summit and the definition of "slept with" got looser, expanding from shared a room, to shared a living space, to shared an extended time together, even if in separate rooms, it dawned on me that it was all true. I am proud of the fact that

over the years I have "spent the night" with some of the brightest people in the profession. Let me give some examples.

- At my very first ANCA board meeting in 1991, I did share a room with Pat Welch and Loren Lustig (talk about two people with androgynous names). We slept on

out between two easy chairs pushed together to make a "bed."

- I did go to Belize with Bob Thomas, spending an incredible week with him and his students learning about tropical ecology.

- I did spend time with Ann Rilling after a board meeting on a delightful trip to Sault Ste. Marie

in Michigan's UP, where Dick Touvell had arranged for us to spend time with one of Michigan's premiere birders. I scored a couple life birds, and I believe Ann also got several, but they were not the same scores.

- I did lead a consult in Texas, where it was three lovely ladies and myself sharing a house for several nights.

- Because I am thrifty (Eileen,

my wife, calls it cheap), whenever I travelled to a Summit (all but one) or a consult (18 so far), or a board meeting, I let fate choose a roommate. Either a lot of different people chose not to share a room with me more than once or fate played funny tricks, allowing me the privilege of sleeping with a wide assortment of my professional peers.



the floor of the nature center's exhibit room because ANCA was too young and too poor to get us hotel rooms, and we were too cheap to pay for a room ourselves.

- The entire board did go, not once but twice, to a small hunting lodge in Louisiana. We also shared a house in Tennessee (envision Tracy Kay and Bob Thomas, both well over six feet, sleeping in kids' bunk beds—feet dangling off the edges, or Tim Merriman stretched

(continued on page 13)

Sleeping (continued from page 12)

The examples could go on and on, but at each occasion, the conversations, the sharing of knowledge, and the vast array of life lessons I learned helped me to be a better supervisor and administrator.

Serendipitously, I uncovered a new style of professional development, one I call, "Professional Development by Sleeping Around." This is nothing like "Management by Walking Around" nor "Sleeping Your Way to the Top." This professional development style brings people together for full-day and well-into-the-night interaction where there is ample opportunity to carry on an intercourse including topics such as staff, board, finances, new programs, great ideas, how to improve the profession, etc. The educational value is priceless.

You too can take advantage of this delightful form of professional development; just get involved in ANCA. Come to the Summit and if you do not have a roommate, open yourself up to sharing with someone you do not know (you may want to bring earplugs just in case—I never travel without them). Volunteer to serve on a consult and be open to sharing a room.

Other options: Plan to come to the Summit in Virginia next year and, before you arrive, find someone you want to know better. See if they want to spend an extra day or two exploring Chincoteague and Assateague Islands, enjoying the wonderful seafood, the spectacular birding, and the quiet beaches. Another way to get around is to outbid my wife, Eileen, at the Summit Live Auction and make a trip to Nebraska or the Cascades or British Columbia or any of the other auction items

where you spend time at one of our member's centers.

My advice to ANCA members who want to grow and become more professional—stop sitting on your duff, get out there and start sleeping around!

*Bob Mercer is Director-Naturalist at Silver Lake Nature Center in Bucks County, PA where he started work in 1975. He is active with the Bristol Rotary (serving on the board from 2006 to present), Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, the Association of Conservation Executives (current president), and Association of Nature Center Administrators (serving on the national board from 1991 to 1998 and again from 2003 to 2009). He is the recipient of the 2011 ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award. Bob has traveled to (and slept around in) forty-five states in the contiguous US, five Canadian Provinces, Costa Rica (twice), and Belize.*

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# Profiles:

## the Marine Science Consortium: A Phoenix Rising from the Ashes

How revitalization happened to a campus and a program through the magical combination of funds, vision, and partnerships

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

**T**he Marine Science Consortium is a residential environmental learning center and field station located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, just across Queens Sound from famous Chincoteague and Assateague Islands (ever read *Misty of Chincoteague?*).

Created more than 40 years ago by faculty from several universities who were seeking a field station for their marine science programs, the Marine Science Consortium (MSC) operated for most of those years out of WWII Naval housing barracks repurposed as classrooms, dormitories, cafeteria, offices, maintenance shop, and you name it.

For over 40 years college students have visited for weekend field trips or stayed for three week-long summer courses, school children attended the residential Coastal Ecology program and came to camp in the summer, and Elderhostel participants kayaked, learned about the famous “wild” ponies of Assateague Island, and about our marine resources. All the while the facilities crumbled and with them so to

did MSC’s program attendance. By 2006, what was once a thriving education center was teetering on closure due to lack of financial resources and poor facilities.

At that time, The Marine Science Consortium’s plight was brought to the attention of the

on its track towards the future:

- Planning began for MSC’s new campus.
- The presidents of MSC’s member universities dissolved MSC’s existing board of directors, which consisted of faculty from each member university, and reformed the board with the presidents as its members.
- An Academic Advisory Committee was created to give the faculty a voice in the planning of college level programs.
- The board hired an executive director for MSC (prior to this MSC was managed by a faculty member from 5 hours away).

Late in 2008 things began to move very rapidly. Construction began on six new buildings - maintenance, dormitories, staff housing, and a Silver LEED Certified Education Center. Demolition began on nine existing buildings. All construction and demolition was scheduled to allow MSC continuous operations.



photo courtesy of The Marine Science Consortium

*Students use GPS and basic tools to gather information about marshes included in the coastal mapping project.*

presidents of several of its member universities. These visionary people saw beyond the crumbling facilities to the potential of the program and the potential of partnerships. Which is why, two years prior to the nation’s “financial meltdown,” the presidents obtained \$15 million in bond money from Pennsylvania to be used to revitalize MSC’s campus, located in Virginia. Following this several key events happened to put MSC

continued on page 15

However, new buildings weren't the only things needed at MSC. It was crucial that the organization invest in a strategic plan, overhaul existing programs and develop new ones, realign all administrative and facilities management practices, get MSC's brand out there, and strengthen and build partnerships.

This had to happen fast as MSC needed to increase its program revenues to cover the costs of operating the new campus. Thankfully, the member universities are securing/paying the debt service on the buildings (~ \$1 million a year) until at which time MSC can begin to repay. It is understood that that will be years from now.

The first step was to undergo a full strategic planning process. This would build consensus amongst MSC's many constituents, engage key partners and rebuild MSC's reputation, which was tarnished by years of poor management and bad decisions. Almost second to these incredibly important outcomes was the actual strategic plan.

Once the strategic plan was complete it was time to move forward with restructuring all other aspects of MSC's program and operations and to begin growing partnerships and realizing their true potential.

Over the course of two and a half years, MSC's programs have grown, and grown, and grown. Attendance for summer camps has increased by 20%, and Road

Scholars (formally Elderhostel) has grown 13%. In addition, the development of a brand new series of adult and family programs has shown the most dramatic growth; from zero programs in 2009 to 671 participants in 2010 and ap-



photo courtesy of The Marine Science Consortium

*Dr. Pablo Delis, Shippensburg University, is researching the reptiles and amphibians of NASA's Wallops Island. Students LOVE working with Pablo!*

proximately 800 in 2011 and from 2010 revenues of \$52,000 to 2011 revenues of \$100,000. This was a critical addition to our program revenue mix as the funds from our adult and family programs covered the loss in revenues from schools that canceled due to loss of funding.

However, MSC's partnerships and the educational opportunities they are creating is the real sexy stuff. A long standing partnership

with NASA-Wallops Flight Facility allowed MSC and its participants access to Wallops Island, a barrier island where NASA's launch pads and the Navy's facilities occupy the southern end and pristine marshes, beaches, and maritime forests the northern end.

MSC uses the northern end of the island as field site, giving students of all ages the opportunity to study barrier island ecology in an uninterrupted setting. In addition, MSC's fleet of research vessels are moored in NASA's boat basin. However, recently MSC and NASA expanded the scope of their partnership in a multitude of ways.

Along with NASA, MSC partners with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service who jointly manage Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR) and Assateague National Seashore. MSC uses the island natural resources for classes and research while the government agencies count MSC's educational hours in their reports. Until this last year, that was the scope of MSC's partnership with CNWR, but a recent Memorandum of Understand between

NASA, USF&WS, and MSC has opened up a variety of research and educational opportunities for MSC and its member universities.

An example of this is a project involving mapping of barrier islands and back bay areas managed by USF&WS and NASA for the purpose of projecting how sea level rise will affect these areas. For this project, NASA flew mul-

tiple parallel flights over the area during which they used LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology to measure small changes in the topography. This raw data was then given to faculty and students from Millersville and East Stroudsburg, two of MSC's member universities who created elegant maps showing the fine topographical changes in the landscape. The maps were then given to USF&WS who overlay models showing various levels of sea level rise which will help them plan for future migratory bird feeding areas. This data is then ground-truthed by MSC students in citizen science style projects and is used for other purposes.


One great example of an unexpected outcome was that while ground-truthing some of the measurements notes were also made of the locations of piping plover nests. It was soon realized that piping plover, a federally endangered species, consistently locate their nests on specific sides of very small, almost undetectable ridges in the sand. It is hypothesized that the sites chosen are in the lea of the ridge related to prevailing winds, which creates a cooling affect for the nests. This bit of information is now spawning research that may assist with piping plover conservation.

This type of amplification of a primary resource is possible because The Marine Science Consortium serves as the connection for its partners and other user groups. High school students connect with scientists from universities as they participate in field science. Government agencies connect to university students via MSC's rela-

tionship with their faculty. NASA is learning how Wallops Island will be affected by storms based on research done by faculty and their students and, in turn, MSC is able to use this data in lessons for its school program.

The effect is a web of connections between higher education, schools, federal agencies, and the public. And, of course, more connections equal more partnerships, equal more education and research, equal more funding opportunities. Everyone profits.

This is, in a very small nutshell, how an organization can, in three years, go from pending dissolution to being a thriving financially sound educational institute. Yes, the buildings were a catalyst that

sparked recognition and interest. However, the real change came by the careful cultivation of partnerships. Through the sharing of resources, identification of opportunities, and always the drive to seek new opportunities and connections The Marine Science Consortium is navigating through the tough economy towards a very promising future. 

*Amber Parker has served as executive director at The Marine Science Consortium since 2008. Amber has been involved in environmental education for more than 18 years, working in programs in North Carolina, Tennessee, and now Virginia.*

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970-375-7090  
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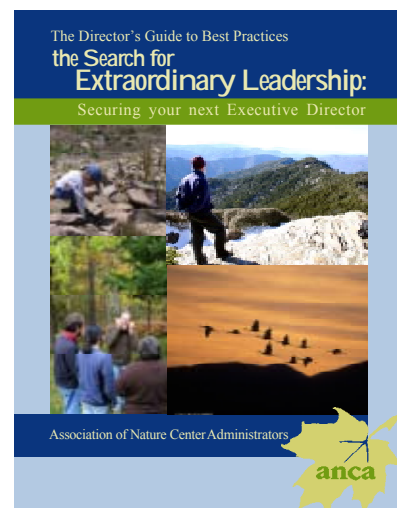
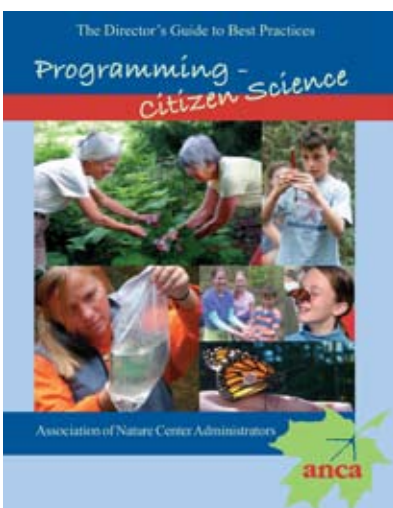
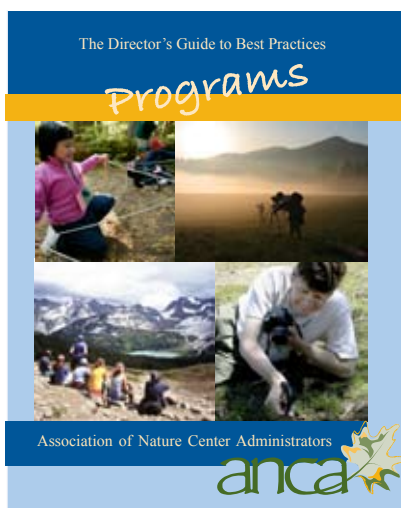


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