

Directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators // Fall 2020

Promising Principles to Enhance Distance Learning in Environmental Education

By Eileen Merritt, Marc Stern, Bob Powell, and Troy Frensley

THE PANDEMIC HAS INITIATED an abrupt pivot for many environmental education (EE) providers toward distance learning. Our research team responded to this pivot by conducting a systematic literature review to identify promising approaches for designing virtual field trips and online EE activities. Through an extensive search of the last decade of published research (2010-2020), we identified 32 peer-reviewed articles that empirically measured environmental literacy outcomes of online EE programs. We carefully reviewed program descriptions, study results and authors' conclusions to identify key principles that appear commonly linked to better outcomes for participants related to environmental literacy.

Several promising principles emerged for potentially enhancing the success of EE distance learning programming for students in grades K-12. We divide these principles into the following three broad categories commonly linked to better environmental literacy outcomes for participants:

- Participant engagement (how to engage participants in online settings)
 - Promote student autonomy
 - Facilitate social interactions
 - Encourage active involvement
- Designing content (what content to emphasize and how to design it)
 - Focus on relevant topics
 - Make socio-ecological connections
 - Highlight role models
 - Use multiple modalities to make content accessible
 - Challenge students to use higher cognitive processes
 - Use positive framing
- Supporting participants (how to facilitate learning)
 - Prepare them to succeed
 - Provide feedback

CONTENTS

1-4	Principles to Enhance Distance Learning
5-7	Director's Notes
8-10	Irvine Nature Center's FERN Boxes
11-13	Urbana Park District & Climate Change
14-15	Highlights from the Google Group
16-17	Reflecting on the Virtual Summit

The *Directions* journal contains news and trends in the nature & environmental learning center profession, as well as relevant resources and stories of innovative leadership. ANCA members receive each *Directions* by email and can always see back-issues via the member portal on the ANCA website.

If you are part of the nature center profession and wish to receive *Directions*, see [ANCA membership levels](#).

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Participant engagement

As you consider platforms and tools for your distance learning programs, begin by thinking about how participants will interact with the content and each other. Look for interfaces and develop activities that allow for *student autonomy*, *social interactions*, and *active involvement*. Can students make choices within the activities? Can they create or develop their own products to share? How might they work collaboratively? Can two-way communication strategies (either real-time discussion or asynchronous responses to posted comments) be included? Most importantly, how can students be induced into active participation and thought?

Multiple platforms provide easy means for polling or sharing ideas. Breakout rooms allow students to discuss ideas and brainstorm together. Platforms such as *FlipGrid* or *Zoom* allow students to pose questions and respond to each other's ideas. Some organizations lead activities with materials that are easy to find at home or provided in a kit. Autonomous tasks, such as journaling, scavenger hunts, art activities or contests can also be engaging. Annie Kilby uses an open-ended drawing task to help students imagine themselves visiting and experiencing different life zones at Grand Canyon National Park (Figure 1).

Designing content

Our literature review revealed the value of demonstrating the *relevance* of content to learners' lives, *challenging* learners so that they employ 21st century skills and go beyond just learning facts, making *socio-ecological connections*, using *positive framing* and *role modeling*.

As a major theme in [ANCA's Blue Ribbon Report](#), *relevance* is a goal that we all strive for. Deciding what's relevant for online programs can be rather complex, because participants can connect from anywhere around the country (or world!). When designing programs for local groups, leverage what you know about them from prior work. For broader audiences, issue-based programs that include clear actions and consequences to human communities can often enhance relevance, as can activities that engage participants to create or investigate issues of personal interest.

Role models help to put a human face on otherwise abstract issues and can enhance relevance. Stories and examples shared by others can motivate

Figure 1: Using a drawing prompt. Photo by Kim Popek.



students to become interested in topics, learn new skills or fuel motivation to take action. What expertise do people at your organization and within your wider networks have to share, and what stories can they tell about their lives or work that will inspire students?

Socio-ecological connections relate ecological systems to human systems. The depth of exploration of these connections can influence program outcomes. For example, is the program focused on aquatic wildlife with a brief mention of ocean acidification or is it focused on how a changing climate impacts people and wildlife in coastal areas? One way to help make these connections visible is to document and share visual evidence of environmental change. Changes are often hard to see when you only visit a place once, but photographs and videos (e.g., glacial melt, water levels, pollution) can make them concrete for students in distance learning programs. For example, educators from the Gulf of Maine Research Institute use images that span across 30 years to engage students in reflecting on how temperature changes influence available lobster habitat (Figure 2).

Including *multiple modalities*

(visual, audio, kinesthetic) makes content accessible to diverse learners with different levels of background knowledge. As you design your program, use of both words and images to explain complex concepts can increase understanding (Mayer, 2008). English language learners, in particular, comprehend content better when provided with sensory (pictures, objects, activities) and graphic (tables, charts) supports and through discussions with others (WIDA, 2014). Which modalities (audio, visual, textual, etc.) are most useful for your intended purpose, and how might they be combined to optimize learning?

In our literature review, programs that pushed students beyond factual recall, toward higher order learning (e.g., formulating and testing hypotheses, considering multiple possible futures, debating opinions or courses of action, applying knowledge to a specific problem), tended to yield more positive outcomes. Can you guide students to pose interesting questions or hypotheses? Design ways to investigate them? Analyze data? Draw conclusions? Evaluate possible solutions to a messy problem? How might students use their

ANCA will host an ANCA Member CONNECTS meeting, Dec. 15 at 12pm MT to discuss the research in this article. Keep an eye out for registration!

knowledge and skills to advocate or educate others as part of their learning experience?

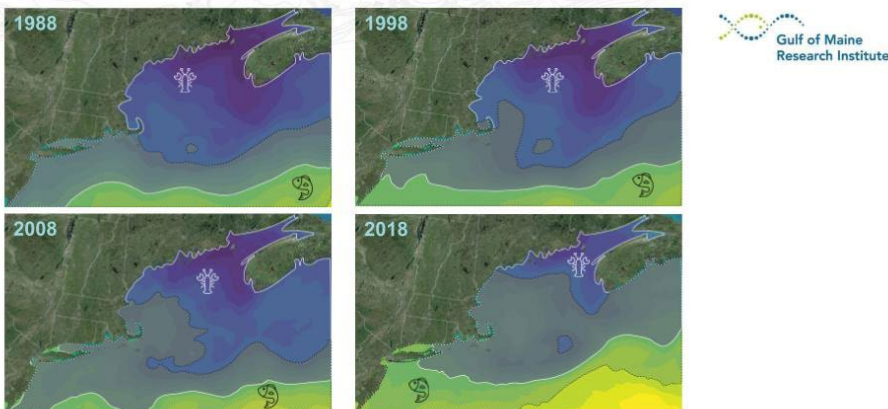
A recent article by Ben Eldredge exemplified *positive framing* in his words and story about fostering civic engagement in his community. He opened the article saying, “we are involved in a long game, and we are definitely making a difference” (2019, p. 12). These words remind us that EE matters, and we are all in this work together. Studies in the literature review provide evidence for the importance of positive framing (e.g. Kleinhenz & Parker, 2017). To remind students of *their* agency, share examples of local solutions involving youth, individually or collectively, that are working. Communicate hope and empowerment, not doom and gloom.

Supporting participants

What do students need to know to be able to succeed in distance programs? Are there technology tools and features that you need to draw their attention to up front? Are there certain vocabulary or concepts that need a quick review before explaining more complex ideas? Brief audio or video intros can be helpful. We might also consider sending some content ahead and/or partnering with school teachers or others to ensure students feel sufficiently prepared when they embark upon programs.

Providing students with *feedback* can help keep them engaged and on track. Feedback can be provided by peers, instructors or even

Figure 2: Using visual evidence. Image by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute.



What is happening to lobster habitat in the Gulf of Maine over time?

Type your answer in the chat box!

technology tools. Some platforms such as *Canvas* and *VoiceThread* have tools that enable feedback to students through text, audio or video. This feedback can be brief and immediate or can occur over time. For example, Caitlin Stone-Webber, a naturalist at Huron County Nature Center, recently initiated a [pen pal project](#) to keep students thinking about science while they were learning at home. She asked students to send letters to her with questions, and she responded with answers (Stone-Weber, 2020). These letters advanced their knowledge and validated their curiosity and ideas. Other meaningful forms of feedback might include simple badge icons or automated praise for advancing through a program, pre-programmed feedback if students appear to stray from learning objectives, or live encouragement in synchronous settings.

The path ahead

There is no clear road map for distance learning; many environmental educators are entering uncharted territory. However, the principles we've just described appear to have positive impacts on learner outcomes. We therefore put forth the list of principles

as a reference for distance learning providers. While not all are necessary for a successful program, incorporating those that feel feasible may enhance participants' experiences.

Distance learning opens new doors for students, and may have special appeal to students who are digital natives. Technology can do things that can't be done in person, such as observing changes over time or introducing role models from distant places. The lessons we learn about how to do distance learning now can help enhance pre- and post-visit experiences for field experiences and connect with new audiences who cannot make it to our sites. Collectively, if we all invest our best into distance learning, we can inspire and enable youth attending our programs to help solve the socio-ecological problems we face in society today. 🌱

[See our website](#) to learn more about our current research. The research in this article was partly funded by a grant from the North American Association for Environmental Education.

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Eileen Merritt is a Research Scientist at Virginia Tech whose scholarship is broadly focused on environmental and sustainability education, STEM education and digital learning. She aims to advance pedagogies such as garden-based and place-based learning, environmental service-learning, and nature journaling through her research, writing and teaching.



Marc Stern is a Professor at Virginia Tech whose scholarship focuses on environmental education, communications, and human behavior in diverse environmental contexts. His most recent book, *Social Science Theory for Environmental Sustainability: A Practical Guide*, published by Oxford University Press, translates key principles from social science into practical applications for environmental education and more.



Robert B. Powell is the George B. Hartzog, Jr. Endowed Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Clemson University and the Director of the Institute for Parks. His research and outreach program focuses on environmental education, interpretation, and sustainable tourism and he is the new co-editor of the *Journal of Interpretation Research*.



Troy Frensley is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington in the Department of Environmental Sciences whose scholarship focuses on environmental education and interpretation, informal STEM learning, program evaluation, and citizen science. He also manages the master's degree concentrations in environmental education & interpretation and marine & coastal education.

Director's Notes:

Let Us Unite Around Nature

WHEN I WAS A KID I loved the 4:30 Movie's *Monster Week*. My brother, sister, and I would sit on the couch in the den with our hands covering our eyes peeking out at the screen. I was young and *Godzilla*, even the classic 1954 version, was scary! I have been reminded of that feeling everyday for the past ten months, especially when I wake up and peek at the news. Some days the news is much scarier than the giant sea monster whose attack on post-war Japan triggered fear of nuclear holocaust.

There has been so much fear and uncertainty lately and I have had to challenge myself to focus on what I know to be certain and to remain hopeful. Recently the Governor of Utah declared a state of emergency due to the increasing cases of COVID-19 and the burden on our healthcare system. It was a sobering reminder of the virus that has upended our lives and the fear and uncertainty we have been living with since early March. Also in the news was the announcement that early data shows a COVID-19 vaccine is more than 90% effective. Of course we have many months to go in testing, production, distribution, and administration of a vaccine but it feels good to have hope. So we need to persevere in the face of difficulty...and we need to have hope.

Two things I am certain of and that give me hope are the vital role nature education institutions play in the health of our communities and the work you are doing to persevere. In a meeting of leaders of residential environmental learning centers recently I heard someone



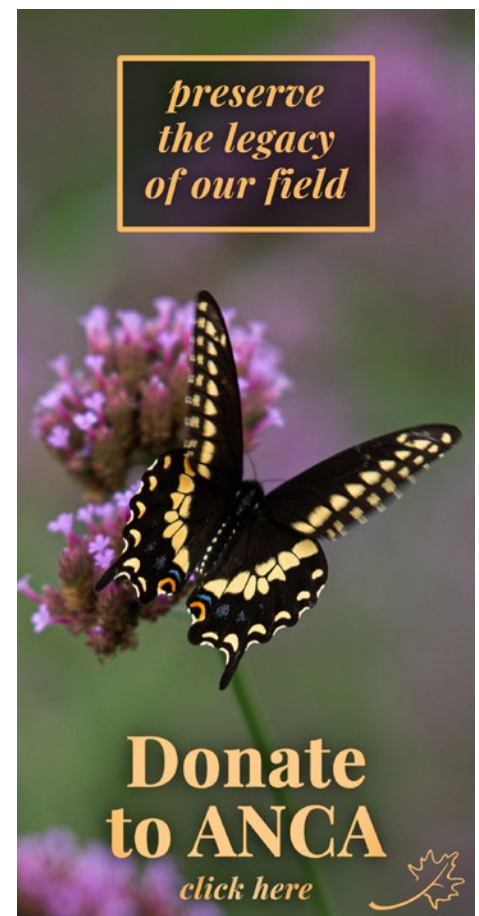
**Jen Levy, Executive Director
ANCA – Logan, UT**

say, “We are not *nice to have*, we are *need to have*.” This I am certain of.

We can unite people around the idea that nature and outdoor spaces are critical. If you fill a room with people on both sides of our much divided nation you can find common ground with three questions. The questions can vary but examples include, “*Did you ever stop what you were doing to simply watch the sunset? Did you climb trees or build forts as a kid? Do you enjoy spending time at the beach, in your local park, or at a nature center?*” Does this sound familiar? In 2003, ANCA Summit Attendees were challenged to address the *extinction of experience* – a loss of interactions with nature originally introduced by author Robert Michale Pyle and later referred to as *nature deficit disorder* in Richard Louv’s 2008 book, *Last Child in the Woods*. Both were making the case for the importance of unstructured time in nature and for the work of our industry. Fast forward to 2020 and the pandemic has deprived all of us of many activities, events, and social interactions, and people have turned to nature to take a breath and heal. A new question to pose to make the case for nature, “*In the past ten months, have you been drawn to outdoor spaces*

after weeks or months of hunkering down at home?” Based on what I am hearing from ANCA members across the country the overwhelming response is yes, and many people are escaping to your facilities. You, your organization, and your work are ‘*need to have!*’

So I am going to stop shielding my eyes from the news, face the monsters, and focus on the work ahead to support what is needed.





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Director's Notes (cont.)

In our most recent strategic plan, ANCA 2025, the board prioritized the need to explore and define our voice toward relevant advocacy and civic engagement. Pre-pandemic, we worked with a committee to develop a policy and procedures to identify and address relevant issues and support our members in their efforts. The myriad issues facing both ANCA and our members was daunting and we were not in agreement where to focus our efforts. This became much clearer when in March we joined other national and regional organizations asking Congress and the White House to consider the needs of nature and environmental learning centers in COVID-19 economic relief legislation. Then in April the Lawrence Hall of Science [Policy Brief](#) made the case for promoting the value of outdoor learning as safe, engaging, effective, and essential. We are now finalizing our *Public Policy and Advocacy Strategy* and have a better understanding of our role as the voice of the profession and to elevate and advocate for the field. Our plan and strategies will focus on actions that impact the ANCA community at large and will include calls to action when we need our members to perform an action to call attention to an issue.

We are expanding our program offerings for both members and the nature and environmental learning center field at large. The *ANCA Member CONNECTS* program was launched in March in response to the need to connect our members at the start of the pandemic. We have been pleased with the response and the opportunity to meet so many new members who have not been able to travel to in-person events in the past and have made *CONNECTS* a permanent addition to our members-only benefits. More information can be found [here](#) including upcoming *CONNECTS* meetings for residential centers and new ANCA members. Future ANCA Member *CONNECTS* topics include the benefits of risk management assessments, teaching visitors to recreate responsibly, and stress relief in challenging times. In early 2021, members of the ANCA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee will host a discussion on implementing a community-based approach to program development to attract new audiences. We are also planning a discussion about the 2020 Virtual Summit session on [Evidence-based Practices for Designing Online EE Programs](#), which is based in the literature review by Eileen Merritt, Marc Stern, Bob Powell, and Troy Frensley.

We have decided to move away from organizing ANCA *Region* Meetings and instead offer ANCA *Peer* Meetings throughout the country. The change is subtle — instead of the work that went into trying to organize regions, we will instead focus on the meetings themselves bringing nature and environmental learning center leaders together throughout the country, and providing those leaders the opportunity to discuss what is happening in their region, share program updates, tour facilities, and network with peers. For now, these meetings will be offered virtually, and we will resume in-person *Peer* Meetings as soon as we can. These meetings are open to members and non-members; find more info [here](#).

Director's Notes (cont.)

We have a brand new ANCA Member benefit in response to a question that was posted in the ANCA Google Group in August. Mark McLaughlin asked if anyone was interested in sharing their Zoom-based programming announcements to boost attendees. Someone suggested ANCA host a 'national share program' and as soon as the Summit wrapped in September, we got to work putting something in place. The ANCA Virtual Program Exchange is an online calendar, hosted on the ANCA website, where Professional and Organization members of ANCA can post their live virtual programs. We will market this widely as an opportunity for people across the country to explore different ecosystems, learn from experts across the country, and meet the greater ANCA community of nature and environmental learning centers. We are hopeful that when travel is safe again these programs will inspire people to visit the new places they have been introduced to virtually. More information about this new program [can be found here](#).

We want to continue to build programs and services that benefit the work you do. Join an upcoming ANCA Member CONNECTS or ANCA Peer Meeting, reach out through the ANCA Google Group, or send me an email at jenlevy@natctr.org and let me know how you are and what you need. Keep up the great work, wear your masks, and remember to find the time to escape in nature. 🌱



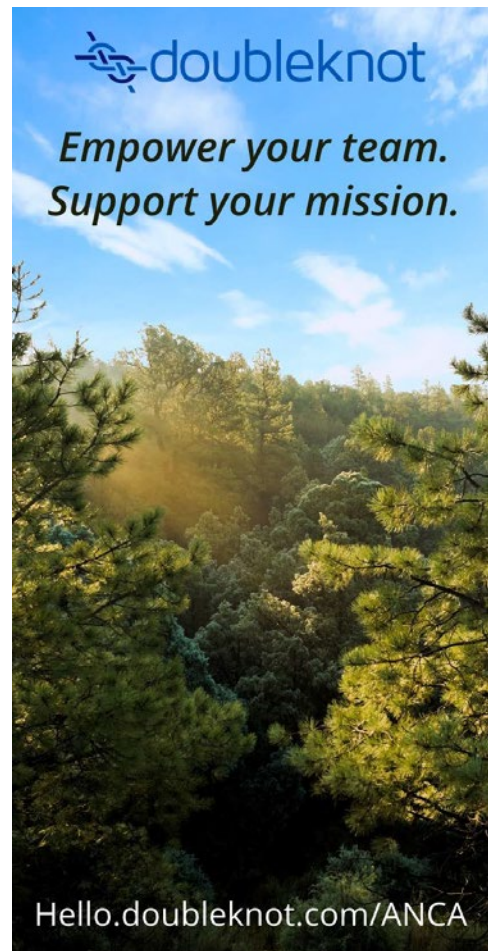
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Outside (and Inside) the Box: The Story Behind Irvine Nature Center's FERN Boxes

*Emily Ludy, Rental/Program Coordinator
Irvine Nature Center — Owings Mills, MD*

WHEN IRVINE NATURE CENTER decided to close the center to the public on March 16th, 2020 the naturalist team started to come up with some alternative ideas as to how programming would continue. Our ever-so-popular Summer Nature Camp had to be canceled to be as safe as possible. Alternatives to summer camp started to arise as we wanted to continue our relationship with the families that had already signed up.

Developing a box program

The idea of a box program was our go-to option, but the execution took some more planning. To help guide us, we came up with the title FERN Boxes, in which FERN stood for Families Engaging Remotely with Nature. From here, we decided to move forward with a subscription-style box based on the surge of popularity of other subscription boxes such as plants, wine, and even underwear! This was the best option due to a continuous revenue source and supplied activities for the duration of the summer just as our regular summer camp would have done.

The next factor was pricing, which was chosen based around the research of other subscription boxes and supply costs. We valued each box at \$35 per month with a special pricing of \$30 for the three

months of the summer deal. This was to entice families to get the subscription box for the summer at a discounted price. We also decided to include membership discounts to further the family's involvement with the organization.

We were able to utilize supplies that we already had and that would fit into our most popular themes based on previous summer camps. Extra items were then purchased based on the theme of the month to enhance the box's perceived value. These items ranged from general nature supplies such as guides and fact cards to theme specific items including astronaut ice cream and nature journals.

With the supplies figured out, we wanted to include an interactive/

virtual component in the form of Zoom meetings and YouTube links. These videos would act as the participants "virtual teachers" who would be able to guide the children through some of the crafts and activities given in the box.

Once we had all the decisions made, we were ready to market our new box idea to the public. Our main audience that we focused on was previous participants associated with the following programs: summer camp, afterschool programs, and public programs. We also advertised to our social media followings on Facebook and Instagram as well as our newsletter email chain. Then we waited anxiously to see what the overall results were going to be!

Irvine Nature Center's FERN Boxes, ready for the mail.



Overall, the program was very well received by our audience with a total of 700 boxes sold. We were able to get great feedback from the subscribers through a survey link sent out which included questions such as what your favorite activity was, what items did you like best, etc.

Challenges along the way

While we had great success, we also faced many obstacles. One of the main hurdles we had to jump over was the supply aspect. We had a tough time figuring out exactly how many supplies to get, how to bulk order certain items, and hoping that items would arrive on time. We also had to keep and update a budget to make sure our board members were informed on the cost of the program versus revenue.

Another unseen hiccup was the amount of paper and ink needed to make the boxes as self-sufficient to the recipient as possible. Due

to many of the crafts and activities being included with worksheets and instructions, a massive amount of printing, paper-clipping, and assembling took a lot of staff time from our limited staff and one printer.

Besides making and printing the worksheets, it took even more time and effort to fully assemble all the boxes. We were limited on space in the building and we had to maintain quality control on the items we created and were providing.

The last issue we faced was having to get a large quantity of the shipping supplies such as boxes and tape ordered and assembled before we were ready to ship out the supplies. We had to schedule pick-ups for these boxes, due to the high volume that otherwise would have needed dropped off at the post office.

Though we faced many obstacles, we were still able to get all of our boxes out on time and with little disruption to our participants.

Funding and partnering

Funding this large-scale project went rather smoothly, as we were fortunate enough to have some grant money originally for our scholarship summer camp participants that we were able to switch over to our summer camp subscription boxes.

We partnered with other organizations who provided either virtual experiences or craft supplies for the boxes. These organizations included The National Aquarium, Ladew Topiary Gardens, the Annapolis Maritime Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Industry, Phoenix Wildlife Center, the Maryland Science Center, and Robinson Nature Center.

To connect with our closest community, we reached out to Title I schools in Baltimore County, and partnered with Reisterstown and

Inside a FERN Box.



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Glyndon Elementary Schools, who chose 30 of their students to participate in the camp box subscription at no cost to the families.

Continuing the program

As the summer came to an end, we wanted to continue our subscription box concept into the fall. We decided that the best program to adapt into a box-based program was our afterschool Eco-Explorers program. This program typically occurs after school at one of our many different elementary schools within the Baltimore County region. Due to schools being remote this fall, we figured the box idea would be a perfect way to stay connected to the K-5th grade community.

For our new Eco-FERN Club, we took popular elements of our summer camp box subscription and

molded it into an afterschool program. We continued sending boxes with various supplies and themes and partnered it with a weekly virtual meeting where the students can log on and learn a 30-minute lesson from a Naturalist together with other students in the area.

We have learned greatly from our trial and error — and success — with these boxes and are constantly growing and adapting to the ever-changing learning environment with our local school systems. We are excited to continue with the afterschool Eco-FERN Club boxes and we have used our newfound virtual skills to pivot into virtual teaching with our Nature in the Classroom programs. As the pandemic continues, constantly changing and morphing, the Irvine Staff stand ready to adapt to the situation and encourage people to explore, respect, and protect Nature. 🌱



Emily Ludy is the Rental/Program Coordinator at Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills, Maryland. [Check out Irvine's website](#) to learn more about their mission to explore, respect, and protect nature!



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The Time to Act Is Now: Urbana Park District Addresses Climate Change

*Savannah Donovan, Environmental Public Program Coordinator
Urbana Park District / Anita Purves Nature Center — Urbana, IL*

THE NEED TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE is evident, and our desire to act was already there, but it was a simple conversation that accelerated the Urbana Park District's organized effort to combat climate change.

In the fall of 2019, Executive Director Tim Bartlett called me with a message of encouragement. He wanted to explore how the District could more aggressively act on climate change, and he wanted me to know that he would support my role in making it happen.

Today, the District is in the process of writing its own climate action plan that will direct its environmentally-responsible practices and policies into the future, and we have expanded our networks of internal and external support to help ensure our success.

A history of environmental action

The Urbana Park District is fortunate to have a decades-long culture of environmental awareness and stewardship. The District began organizing education and volunteer programs in natural areas in the 1970s, at a time when community-led environmental groups were also forming. A volunteer, Anita Purves, began with a cart of natural materials that quickly expanded to become a classroom called the Environmental Awareness Center. Today, the District manages 595 acres of public lands, and its Anita Purves Nature

Center (named in memoriam) has been curating environmental education and interpretive experiences for schools and the public for more than 40 years.

The District's story of climate action is more recent and complex — so much of our progress has seemed to unfold simultaneously over the past year. And this story can be only halfway told; we are still in the process of gaining a deeper organizational awareness as we start confronting climate change. My hope is that by sharing our story, you might feel inspired — even pressured — to initiate your organization's formal acknowledgement of and action against climate change.

Creating a culture to address climate change

Based at the Anita Purves Nature Center, my position at the Urbana Park District is coordinating environmental public programs. Over the past few years I have been actively seeking out more opportunities to incorporate climate change into my programs, but with some hesitation. I admit I was afraid that I, or the District, would be perceived as taking a political stance and apprehensive of potential backlash from the public.

Knowing that I have the full support of the administration has made all the difference in my confidence in approaching climate change issues through public programming. The truth is that deniers, who are the

Solar panels sit atop Anita Purves Nature Center. The Center installed the panels in March 2019.



minority in most populations, tend to be more outspoken than those who accept the reality of climate change. We need to make climate change a topic of everyday conversation in order to make lasting changes in our behavior.

The Urbana Park District's success in addressing climate change has come through a key combination of internal structure and involvement, and external networking and support. Over the past five years, the District's internal "Green Team" committee has been encouraging all staff to make environmentally-responsible choices in their daily work. The team is made up of staff from all facilities and departments. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of challenges and opportunities across the District.

Making a formal plan

Promoting conservation and community health, contributing to the attractiveness of neighborhoods, and improving the quality of life of its citizens are at the heart of the District's mission. In the last five years, we have installed solar panels and bioswales, restored wetlands and other natural areas, and decreased overall energy consumption and waste. It became evident that a formal plan of action would help to coordinate our efforts to decrease our greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint,

anticipate and respond to the local impacts of climate change, and effectively communicate about the importance of action.

The Green Team chairs organized a thirteen-person steering committee of several team members plus some additional internal stakeholders — staff who will be integral to the ultimate implementation and success of the plan. This committee has been meeting monthly since September 2020 and aims to have the plan complete for final public release by Earth Day 2021.

These plans come by many different names depending on their focus; there are sustainability and resilience plans, green infrastructure plans, climate action plans and more. Before COVID, members of the Green Team had already started collecting, reading

and evaluating plans from other cities, park districts, and forest preserves. Themes from other plans that most pertained to the District's mission were teased out and organized into our plan's three primary pillars:

1) Communicating Climate Action incorporates both *internal* communication and education and *external* outreach and partnerships.

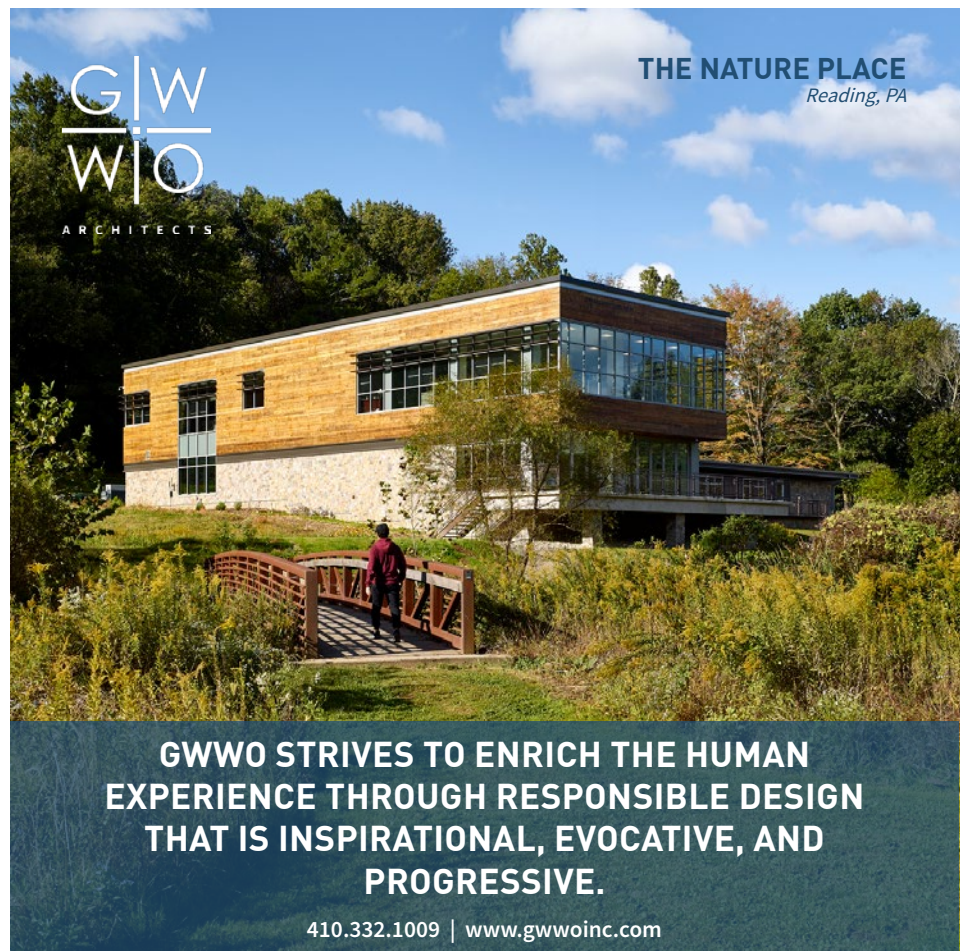
2) Protecting & Strengthening Natural Environments focuses on supporting natural areas, natural resources and biodiversity.

3) Conserving Resources examines how the district can reduce waste and conserve energy.

The plan's final name was suggested by the District's Facilities Maintenance Supervisor and



The District's Green Team logo is used for internal messaging.



received overwhelming support: the Urbana Park District CARES (Climate Action, Resilience, Education & Sustainability) Plan.

Our next step was to interview external advisors--individuals from other agencies who have worked on sustainability plans or their implementation. Eight interviews were conducted, and we gained expert advice about how to make our plan realistic and achievable. We also opened the doors for preliminary feedback by introducing the project in its early stages to the district's citizen advisory committee, Natural Areas Committee, and board of directors.

These individuals, plus all 50 full-time staff at the district, will be asked for their input in drafting the plan's values statement and primary topics or goals. Once the CARES Plan is halfway complete, a draft will be shared with the community for review and feedback.

Building a coalition

Following my conversation last fall with the District's Executive Director Tim Bartlett, we arranged a meeting to learn what other community organizations were doing to address climate change issues. We invited individuals from the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, the City of Urbana, the University of Illinois, the teen-led Climate Justice Forum, and other local organizations to meet. Together we discussed how we could amplify our work through collaborations and coordinated outreach. One year later, the Champaign County Climate Coalition (C4) has evolved.

Our peers in C4 are an ideal group to review and assist with the development and eventual implementation of the CARES Plan. The mission of C4 is "to empower individuals and groups in Champaign County to create equity and resilience through education, relationship-building, and responsive action to counter climate change." The Coalition is working toward hosting climate change discussions, planning collaborative community programs, and encouraging the adoption of climate action plans with similar standards across organizations. I like to call it "the power of positive peer pressure."



The Champaign County Climate Coalition meets every two weeks to address climate change in the community.

We must act now

It's not serendipitous that the Urbana Park District has the encouragement of C4 as we develop the CARES Plan and take our first major strides toward fighting climate change head-on. We sought out external support through new partnerships, and these relationships are invaluable resources. But what has further accelerated our District is the administration's support and empowerment of its staff. If you are an administrator of a nature center or similar agency, I encourage you to talk to your staff about the importance of addressing climate change. Make that call to action.

The Urbana Park District's battle against climate change is long from over. We see the road ahead, and there will always be more to do, but our momentum is strong. As Tim best said to me, "The time to act on climate change is now. Many organizations will look back and wish they had acted sooner." 🌱



Savannah Donovan is an environmental program coordinator at the [Anita Purves Nature Center](#), part of the Urbana Park District in east-central Illinois. She serves as the district's Green Team co-chair, leads meetings for the [Champaign County Climate Coalition](#), and is a certified [Climate Reality Leader](#). Check out the [Urbana Park District's Green Initiatives Page](#) for information and resources.

Highlights from the Google Group

ANCA BELIEVES THAT the collective wisdom and diversity of our peer network is our greatest resource, and the ANCA Google Group continually exemplifies that belief. Of course we encourage you to keep up with the discussions there, but we also want to highlight some of the recent conversations that received high engagement. Below we've linked to the specific discussions and included the first post that started them off. Feel free to click the topics and continue the conversation there!

Nature Centers as Refuges from Information Technology

I hope you will indulge me in posting a sort of philosophical question.

I've been thinking about all the ways and reasons why nature centers should embrace technology: use CRM software to personalize communication with constituents, provide free wifi to support meeting space rentals and visitor preferences, ensure cell phone coverage over the entire property to create a feeling of safety, etc. But is there, in fact, a market for the opposite approach? Are there market segments that would actually welcome a nature center that purposely EXCLUDED technology, and advertised themselves as a REFUGE from modern intrusions? A place where the outside world can't reach you (or your spouse)? An exhibit area where parents are not checked out on the phone while their kids play unsupervised? A trail where people aren't walking along with their heads down, texting?

In other words, might there be a niche for a "Mackinac Island" approach to a center? (Mackinac Island, Michigan, does not allow motor vehicles. You have to leave yours behind at the ferry dock.)

Have you ever seen such a place? Or been asked by constituents to provide one?

David Catlin
Principal, David Catlin Consulting



Spinning off a for-profit LLC

Does anyone have a private, for profit LLC that is under the umbrella of your 501c3 or know of any examples?

Thanks!

Corky McReynolds, PhD, CPF
Principal, LeadTeam, LLC

E-newsletters

I'm curious about other nature centers' e-newsletters. Does anyone mind sharing how often you put out an e-newsletter, if you always do it a particular day and time of the week, and what's your general open rate and approximate number of subscribers?

We are just getting going with a regular e-newsletter, and most of the information I can find online is focused towards businesses that are selling things. I'm especially curious as to a "typical" open rate in our environmental non-profit world.

Thank you,

Jenica McEvoy
Board Member, Southern Vermont Natural History Museum

Awe Moments

Hi Everyone. I would love to take a break for a minute and share with each other what makes us pause and experience moments of awe. Have you been able to take a break recently, even for a moment, and allow a little wonder in your day? I hope so because we all need it!

For me, the first snow that really sticks in our valley is a favorite awe moment! It happened this morning and I stared out the window a few extra minutes just taking it in.

I challenge you to go outside, even for a few minutes, and share an awe moment with the group.

Thanks,

Jen Levy
Executive Director, ANCA



Reflecting on the Virtual Summit

THE ANCA VIRTUAL SUMMIT premiered in September and was the first of its kind for ANCA. Though we know a virtual event will never replicate the experience of being in person, the ANCA team organized this Summit to maximize the benefits of a digital space, and it clearly succeeded in aiding the nature & environmental learning center community. We are grateful for the positive feedback from our members, with no attendees rating the Summit below “good” or “excellent” on our feedback form, and the vast majority rating it “excellent.”

ANCA Member Corky McReynolds, who has attended every Summit since they began in 1994, said of the Virtual Summit, “I was surprised how intimate the experience felt with the only thing missing was physical hugs.” We asked three other attendees some questions about their experiences, and recorded their responses here.

SJ — *Sara Jose, Preserve Manager at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve & Learning Center*

LJE — *Lari Jo Edwards, Director of the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program*

TS — *Tim Sandsmark, Education Supervisor at Jefferson County Open Space*

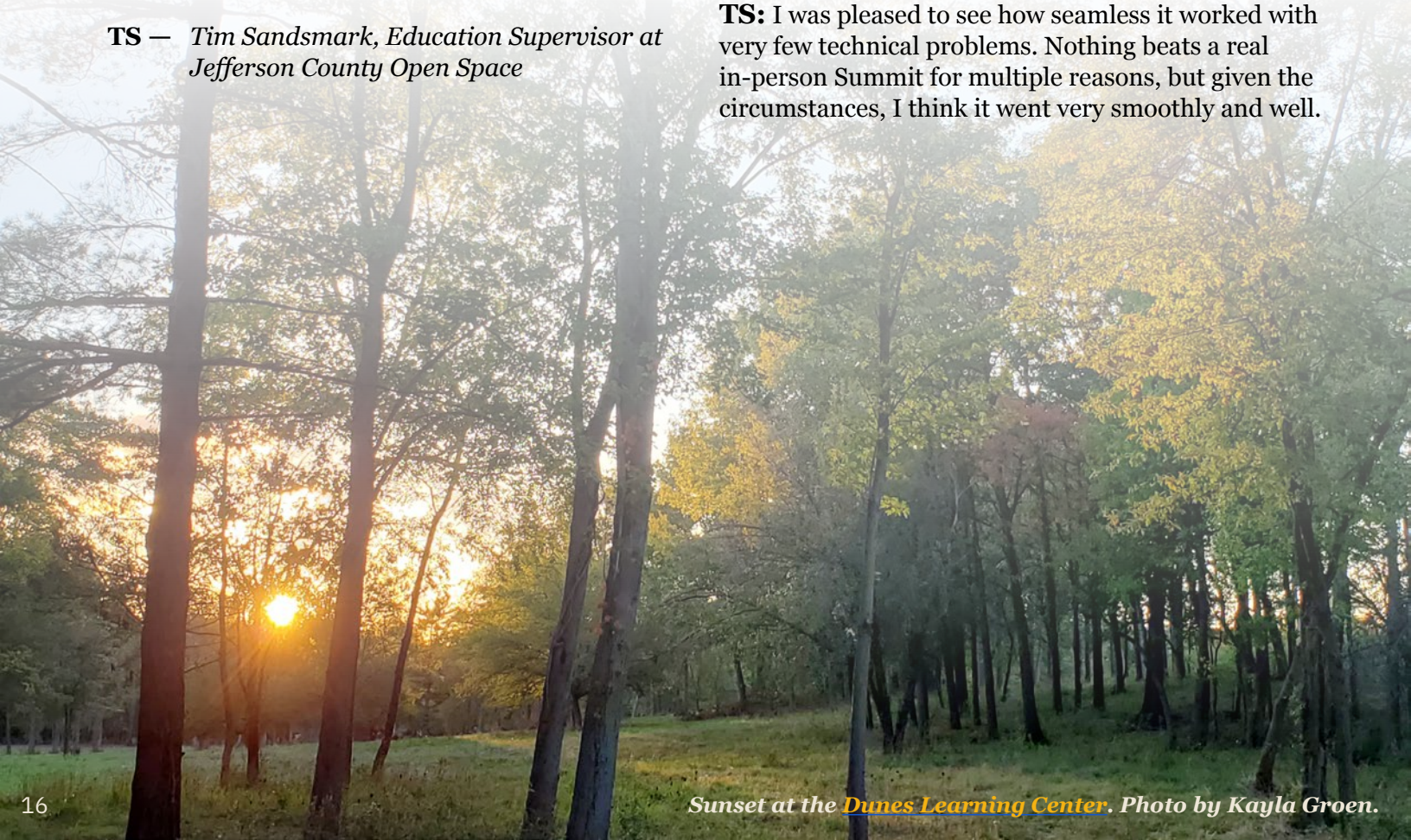
What surprised you the most about your Virtual Summit experience?

SJ: The Virtual Summit was my first ANCA Summit and I went in with the assumption that I would learn interesting information, but not feel like I got the benefit of being able to network. After the first set of facilitated discussions this was completely flipped upside down! I was so impressed by how well everyone shared the virtual floor and made sure to include everyone in sessions. As a new participant, I felt welcomed, included, and even made a few contacts to continue conversation with after the conference.

It was very apparent that ANCA is a group of peers who think highly of each other, form long-lasting relationships, but also are eager to bring new people into the fold. I’m looking forward to my first in-person summit thanks to this experience, instead of worrying I’ll be the new kid on the edges of the room and conversation.

LJE: I was surprised at the fact that the conference didn’t overwhelm! I loved the networking time as well.

TS: I was pleased to see how seamless it worked with very few technical problems. Nothing beats a real in-person Summit for multiple reasons, but given the circumstances, I think it went very smoothly and well.



**What was the most useful session that you attended?
How was it useful?**

SJ: I think the Keynote session by Dr. Marc Stern will be the most immediately useful for my site. Unlike many other nature centers, we did not dive into virtual field trips during the COVID shut down but instead focused our efforts on other programs. Having the insight into what does and doesn't translate well to a virtual field trip environment can help us make smarter and more effective decisions if we decide to move to the virtual world for our classroom engagement.

I am also appreciative that his facilitated discussion on the topic is available on the Summit website so that I can go back and watch it soon, as well as share it with our team. This is a benefit that may not have been available during a traditional conference.

LJE: *Reopening Your Center.* The information in that session helped us better tweak our plan to host field trips as schools open back up.

TS: I facilitated a couple of sessions and thought those went well. I got the most out of the informal sessions at the end of the day. It was nice to see many old friends and new faces, and to take part in the discussions and the camaraderie that always occurs when ANCA peeps get together, even if it was through a computer screen.

What will you do or change at your organization, based on what you learned at the Virtual Summit?

SJ: Immediately after finishing August Ball's session, *Recruitment & Hiring for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*, I made some changes to our onboarding process for the Preserve. Our site is a part of a municipal government so there are limited changes we can make in the early part of the process, but we can absolutely ensure everyone gets a more welcoming start to our particular site.

We've also already reworded our accessibility question in our registration software based on feedback in the *A Healthy Dose of Nature* session on asking if visitors would benefit from adaptive equipment.

LJE: We have begun rewriting our SOPs and adding sections to include COVID precautions and Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion. Our advisory councils will begin meeting in January to rework these sections.

We are going to participate in the EE21 Survey with our online classes.

Taking time to go out on the property and remember why we do what we do is part of the monthly training session now. We spend the first 10-30 minutes out on the trail simply observing and connecting with place.

TS: My education coordinator helped facilitate a session and participated in many others. This was her first experience with ANCA and she was very complementary and enjoyed the sessions she was involved with. She came out of it with some new ideas for handling programs and also helped reassure her of some of the successful things she was doing with our programs already. 🌱

**Marshall
& Sterling**

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