

Directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators // Fall 2021

LEARNING FROM NATURE

SUMMIT REACTIONS

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

DISCUSSION FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

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Leadership
Awards**



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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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Cover photo: Fall scenery at [Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center](#) in Chattanooga, Tenn.

About ANCA

Founded in 1989, the Association of Nature Center Administrators is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers. Serving more than 700 members, ANCA is the leader in the profession.

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Director's Notes: Learning from ANCA Members

Jen Levy, ANCA Executive Director

Reflecting on the 2021 ANCA Summit and our upcoming surveys to inform ANCA's work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.



The 2021 ANCA Summit: *Looking Ahead, Recharge, Reset* provided an excellent opportunity to connect with our members and learn more about their challenges and successes.

As expected, many of the conversations centered around the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and how organizations were responding, but the Summit also offered an opportunity to discuss how we move forward as an industry and as leaders in a way that is more sustainable, allows for greater flexibility in how we operate, and centers the need to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Margo Farnsworth presented, *Biomimicry & Resilience – Moving Forward After a Pandemic*. Margo is a writer, biomimicry educator and consultant in strategic development for organizations. Her featured speaker presentation, available in the [Members Only](#) section of the ANCA website, introduced the concept of biomimicry and in the follow-up facilitated discussion, we explored ways to employ new solutions found in nature to move forward at a more sustainable pace. I have gone back to my session notes several times over the past few weeks as a reminder to shed the notion that we are going *back to normal* and to challenge myself to put into practice the ideas we discussed.

Brendan Ciecko, founder and CEO of Cuseum, presented a summary of the study his organization conducted in 2021 on revenue generation through virtual programs in the cultural sector. This is valuable data for our field as we think about the role of virtual programming in the future. You can watch a [recording](#) of a Cuseum webinar that shares the results of the

study and explores the long-term outlook of virtual programs.

In her featured speaker presentation, *Welcoming All*, Parker McMullen Bushman, spoke about micro-aggressions and how they affect individuals across identities and how they can make someone feel unwelcome in a space. It was an excellent presentation and challenged us to consider our own spaces and work to *Welcoming All*. You can learn more about Parker and opportunities to conduct presentations, educational sessions, and training workshops at your organization [here](#).

SURVEYS FOR EQUITY WITHIN ANCA'S MEMBERSHIP

While we have stated a desire to promote diversity, equity and inclusion within our membership and the profession in our Strategic Plan: *ANCA 2025*, we have struggled to quantify the data needed to provide critical feedback for improvement. Awareness of our strengths and areas of opportunity are critical to our growth as an organization and an industry. To that end we will be asking our members to participate in two surveys, *The Equity Audit*, and *The ANCA Culture Survey*. The data collected will provide much needed guidance for our next steps.

The Equity Audit will be sent to organization leaders and is used to assess organizational policies, practices, and performance measurement. We will use the information to decide how best ANCA can respond to the needs of our member organizations.

The ANCA Culture Survey will be sent to current ANCA members and will provide us with a benchmark of where we are as an industry in relation to overall organizational culture. ANCA members will be asked to share the culture survey with their staff giving us a better understanding of the differing experiences of

Director's Notes (cont.)

employees across demographics. The survey will provide insights to help us better understand the differing experiences of employees across demographics.

Establishing a benchmark will provide a clearer picture of where we are thriving and where we have work to do. The data will be securely collected and respondents will be asked questions about their experiences at their own organizations as well as their experiences with ANCA.

We are working with August Ball of **Cream City Conservation & Consulting LLC** to conduct this work. Cream City Conservation & Consulting works with environmental and community service organizations to address internal cultures and practices that contribute to workforce homogeneity. Through intensive exploratory sessions, interactive staff education and equity audits, they help their partners leverage their unique strengths to cultivate inclusive environments, develop intentional green career pipelines and harness the most effective team.

With your help, we will be able to identify and understand whether underrepresented groups feel that decisions are fair, their voices are heard, whether they see opportunities for them, and whether they feel a sense of belonging. I look forward to the work ahead and hope you will join us in this effort. 🌱

Sarah Reding has worked with ANCA as our Events Coordinator for the past two years, and is now departing that role. Here's a note from Sarah:

Thank You for a Great Two Years at ANCA!

It has been a great two years working with a wonderful organization that allowed me to begin working toward retirement but staying connected to the nature center and RELC community, which has been my whole career and love! Thank you to Jen, a great leader, and Asa my colleague, who has been a great team to be a part of!

I want to thank all of you for being so helpful to make our CONNECTS program and Summits a place for peer-to-peer learning and sharing. I will continue to be part of the ANCA community, which is made up of the best group of people one could ask to work with ... always willing to learn and share their challenges and successes!

Sarah Reding



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Dumsch Receives Premier ANCA Award

Drew Dumsch is recognized with the 2021 ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award for his major contributions to The Ecology School and the nature & environmental learning center field.

by Asa Duffee, ANCA Director of Marketing & Communications

“Life takes interesting turns,”

said Drew Dumsch, President/CEO of The Ecology School in Saco, Maine, at the virtual Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA) Leadership Awards Ceremony on August 25th. “If you’d told me 30 years ago that an English major from Big Rapids Michigan was going to get the national award for nature center leadership, I would have been *very* amazed to hear that.”

The Ecology School staff and community, however, were not so surprised — they nominated Dumsch for the ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award, knowing that he has led the organization to become a distinguished institution in the nature and environmental learning center field. Dumsch co-founded The Ecology School in 1998, and since then he has guided the organization from humble beginnings to its current status as a pioneer in sustainability that provides residential, day, and outreach programs for thousands of participants per year.

The ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award is the premier award for leaders of nature and environmental learning centers. The award recognizes an individual who in their role at the highest administrative level of an organization has made a major contribution to the success of a nature center, as well as important contributions to the field through professional organizations, and through the support and mentoring of other nature center leaders.

In addition to his work at The Ecology School, Dumsch has also been active in ANCA, the Maine Environmental Education Association, the New England Environmental Education Alliance, and the North American Association of Environmental Education.

DEVELOPING THE ECOLOGY SCHOOL INTO A MODEL OF SUSTAINABILITY

The Ecology School has undergone a remarkable transformation since its inception in 1998. Director of Programs Alex Grindle has been with the organization since 2002, and at the August 25th ceremony recounted that at first The Ecology School had three

year-round staff, a small office, and had programming for less than half of each year, all on rented camp facilities. Though the organization grew over time, it still operated on rented property through 2018.

Today the organization has nine year-round staff, a campus that is a global model for sustainability, and full capacity to host programs throughout the year.

At the heart of The Ecology School's current operation is its River Bend Farm property, which the institution purchased in 2017. Dumsch led the effort to acquire the property and then develop a campus featuring two new buildings; this was a \$14.1 million project, with a \$3.6 million capital campaign that Dumsch spearheaded.

Notably, the two new buildings — a dormitory and dining commons — are on track to be certified under the Living Building Challenge, an exceptionally rigorous sustainability certification that [ANCA has previously written about](#). The Ecology School is also the first entity in the world to submit a master plan for the broader Living Community Challenge certification. These accomplishments demonstrate how The Ecol-

An outside view of the new Poland Spring Education and Dining Commons at The Ecology School.

“Our centers should be the centers of healing and recovery coming out of the pandemic ... Our centers really are going to become places that catalyze new solutions.”

— Drew Dumsch





ogy School is leading a path toward a sustainable future, and also speak to Dumsch's leadership skills and drive to achieve the organization's vision.

CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF CONNECTION

Though Dumsch's responsibilities involve high-level strategic planning, organizational oversight, and project management, he has clearly maintained a grounded approach to engaging with The Ecology School staff. Through Dumsch's emphasis on internal and external organizational relationships, The Ecology School has developed a community based on meaningful connections.

Mallory Durkee, Program Manager & Development Assistant at The Ecology School, began her tenure at the organization as a seasonal educator, and wrote in Dumsch's nomination that she was impressed with Dumsch's commitment to building community within the staff.

"I did not expect to work with or let alone meet the founder, president, and CEO of the organization during that short time. However, on my first day of employment Drew had

met all 14 of the seasonal staff and knew each of our names," wrote Durkee. "This may have seemed like a small gesture to Drew, as I have now seen him do it season after season, but it set the stage that Drew truly valued our seasonal staff and wanted us to feel like a part of the larger team despite the short timeline."

Dumsch also promotes a work culture that Grindle describes as "joy and humor combined with professionalism," and he isn't afraid to have fun along the way. Durkee confirms this with an anecdote from her seasonal position.

"A highlight from my first term as an educator will always be when Drew participated in one of our pre-lesson 'preview' skits for the students. Drew committed fully to an accent and over-the-top mannerisms for his character," Durkee wrote. "As educators who had been participating in these skits multiple times a day it was such a joy to see our organization's president just as committed to the whimsical side of our work as we were."

RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC AND LOOKING AHEAD

The pandemic majorly disrupted all nature centers' operations, of course, but it particularly threatened residential environmental learning centers (RELCs) such as The Ecology School. As Dumsch noted at the award ceremony, "a business model based on people staying in dorms and eating meals together, is not a good pandemic model."

Though The Ecology School's programs radically changed in response to the pandemic, Dumsch's leadership kept the organization stable at its core. Even with drastically reduced program revenue, The Ecology School kept all of its year-round staff employed, completed construction on its new buildings, and achieved its \$3.6 million capital campaign.

At the ceremony ANCA Executive Director Jen Levy acknowledged that Dumsch's resilience to the pandemic is not only notable for The Ecology School's success, but also for his contributions to other RELCs. When the pandemic hit, Dumsch quickly worked alongside other RELC leaders to establish the *RELCs Are Essential* campaign, which strives to unite RELCs with common goals and advocates for state and federal funding.

"Thanks to Drew, the conversation turned very quickly from 'How are we going to survive?' to 'We can survive, and this is what we're going to do,'" Levy said.

Dumsch exemplified that resilience at the award ceremony, noting the role that nature and environmental learning centers can play in this unique time.

"Our centers should be the centers of healing and recovery coming out of the pandemic," he said. "Our centers really are going to become places that catalyze new solutions."

Dumsch is the twenty-second recipient of the *ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award*. The award began in 2000; recipients demonstrate significant contributions to their organization and to the advancement of the nature and environmental learning center profession. 🌱

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Past recipients of the ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award

2020	Andrea Timpone	Elachee Nature Science Center
2019	Ken Voorhis	Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, Yellowstone Forever
2018	Bo Glover	Environmental Nature Center
2017	Ken Finch	Environmental Education Consultant
2016	Dick Touvell	Chippewa Nature Center
2015	Dede Long	Briar Bush Nature Center
2014	Carolyn Chipman-Evans	Cibolo Center for Conservation
2013	Saul Weisberg	North Cascades Institute
2012	Sandy Bivens	Warner Park Nature Center
2011	Bob Mercer	Silver Lake Nature Center
2010	Bill Rose	Kalamazoo Nature Center
2009	Pat Welch	Pine Jog Environmental Education Center
2008	Jack Shea	Teton Science Schools
2007	Rich Patterson	Indian Creek Nature Center
2006	Gordon Maupin	The Wilderness Center
2005	Tracy Kay	Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education
2004	Dr. Corky McReynolds	Treehaven Environmental Learning Center
2003	Charity Krueger	Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm
2002	Mike Riska	Delaware Nature Society
2001	Dr. Robert Thomas	Loyola University Center for Environmental Communications
2000	H. Lewis Batts	Kalamazoo Nature Center

McKnight Leads Reflection Riding to Success, Earning ANCA Award

Mark McKnight receives the 2021 ANCA Outstanding New Leader Award based on his leadership at Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center.



by Asa Duffee, ANCA Director of Marketing & Communications

In 2016, Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center in Chattanooga, Tenn. faced major challenges. In the years prior, the organization’s revenue had dropped by nearly half, visitation was significantly down, and the Board of Trustees shrank in size. Adding to the difficulties, the nonprofit was still in the midst of a challenging merger of two separate organizations, after that process began in 2011. Though of course some stakeholders were working hard to sustain the nature center, the organizational trends were discouraging.

The trajectory clearly changed in 2017, with increases in visitation, engagement, and revenue that have continued since then. In 2020, **Reflection Riding** brought in roughly *five times* its revenue in 2016, part of an impressive rise in earned revenue, donations, memberships, and grants. New, dynamic leaders joined the Board and staff, which are both engaged and collaborative. The organization officially completed its merger at the end of 2018.

As an inherently collaborative institution, a nature center’s success can never be attributed to one person alone — but anyone in the ANCA community also knows that strong leadership is essential to organizational success. In Reflection Riding’s situation, Mark McKnight was the leader who transformed the organization.

McKnight joined Reflection Riding as President/CEO in 2017 and has since led the center to thrive. His leadership has not only stabilized the institution from its tumultuous years, but he has also worked to develop a new vision of the organization’s growth, as seen in its recent **A Framework for the Future** plan.

For his remarkable work at Reflection Riding, ANCA recognized McKnight with the *ANCA Outstanding New Leader Award* at the 2021 ANCA Leadership Award Ceremony on August 25th. This award acknowledges McKnight’s achievements within the nature and environmental learning center field in organizational leadership, professionalism, professional development, and creativity. ANCA Awards are peer-nominated, and the Reflection Riding staff and community nominated McKnight for this recognition.



Above and below: fall scenery at Reflection Riding.

BRINGING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET TO THE TABLE

McKnight's success at Reflection Riding is also significant given his professional history. Prior to his current role, McKnight gained over fifteen years of experience in the outdoor recreation industry, having served as Marketing Director for outfitting company [Rock/Creek](#) and co-founder of [RootsRated](#), a media startup that connects its audience with outdoor experiences.

Santosh Sankar, Chair of Reflection Riding's Board of Trustees, introduced McKnight at the Leadership Award Ceremony, and said that McKnight's entrepreneurial background is evident in his leadership.

"You can see that in the style of how he is able to lead the teams, articulate his vision, set goals, but also manage all the different stakeholders in order to realize a grand vision," Sankar said.

"Mark McKnight embodies the creative leadership we all aspire to ... He is a change agent and his flourishing organization is a testament to his leadership and professionalism."

— Kitty Pochman, ANCA Board President and Executive Director of the Linda Loring Nature Foundation in Nantucket, Mass.





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Reflection Riding staff members agree that McKnight’s business experience has helped invigorate the organization’s new direction. Writing in McKnight’s award nomination were Heather DeGaetano, Managing Director and General Counsel; Tish Gailmard, Director of Wildlife Conservation; Corey Hagen, Director of Education.

“Mark doesn’t shrink from a challenge; he plans, works hard, builds the team he needs, and then gets things done,” the three staff wrote. “He brings an entrepreneurial mindset to everything he does. And the entire southeast Tennessee region benefits from his leadership.”

DeGaetano, Gailmard, and Hagen also listed McKnight’s major accomplishments since he joined in 2017 [this list has been edited for conciseness].

- A valued, enthusiastic team of leaders: a reconstituted, engaged, collaborative board of directors, a committed group of advisors and an enthusiastic leadership staff team.
- Strong, durable partnerships with organizations, businesses, government and funders from across the region.
- A completed successful merger of the Chattanooga Nature Center and Reflection Riding Arboretum after years of past inaction.
- A completed strategic planning process with a five-year plan in place, that is now more than half completed.
- A comprehensive master planning process — complete with broad community input, even during a pandemic.
- A conservation easement transaction to permanently and legally preserve all 300 acres of our property, through a partnership with the National Park Service and the American Battlefield Trust.

Dr. Christian Keller has provided veterinary services for Reflection Riding for more than three decades, and also praises McKnight’s contributions.

“Mark is also an enthusiastic change-agent and he has quickly and thoughtfully elevated this organization and its future as a regional hub for environmental learning and outdoor access. His focus on building a bold future for our work has been inspiring to watch, especially as we worked through first a thoughtful strategic planning process and, then, an innovative master planning process,” Keller



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Past recipients of the ANCA Outstanding New Leader Award

2020	Merica Whitehall	Fontenelle Forest
2019	Ann Wasser	Severson Dells Nature Center
2018	Chad Truxall	Marine Discovery Center
2017	Haley Breniser	Grass River Natural Area
2016	John Myers	Indian Creek Nature Center
2015	John DeFillipo	John Bunker Sands Wetland Center
2014	Jason Meyer	Blandford Nature Center

says. “After 30 years working with this organization, I have never felt better about our trajectory. Mark is largely responsible for this.”

CONTRIBUTIONS BEYOND ONE ORGANIZATION

McKnight’s commitment to the nature center and environmental fields goes beyond his work at Reflection Riding. Since joining ANCA in 2017, he has contributed

to the nature center community by participating and facilitating at ANCA Summits, serving on the ANCA Marketing Committee, and [sharing organizational processes in the *Directions journal*](#). He also serves on the boards of Lula Lake Land Trust, Chattanooga Design Studio, and Chattanooga Lion’s Club.

McKnight is the eighth recipient of the *Outstanding New Leader Award*. The award began in 2014

to recognize individuals with the potential for future impact within the field of nature center administrators. Award recipients demonstrate leadership, professionalism, professional development, and creativity within the field of nature and environmental learning centers, while holding less than five years of experience as the director, executive director, or leader at the highest administrative level at an organization. 🌱



FROM MARK MCKNIGHT

I am incredibly fortunate to have found this profession. So few people today can say that they’re doing deeply meaningful work that the world really needs, but we in this field can.

In 2017 I had walked away from a long-term dream of owning the outdoor retailer where I made my career. I left a startup I had co-founded. I had no idea what was next but vacation seemed like a good place to start. Swimming in the clear blue waters of the Caribbean cleared my mind and I formed two conclusions. First, it was time to be the chief executive in order to create the humane work culture I knew could succeed. Second, I needed to find deeply meaningful work.

Back in Chattanooga I started connecting with my contacts locally and across the country. I talked with a tourism marketing agency, a bike manufacturer, a yoga gear startup. I even helped a friend write a business plan for an Indian food startup. I didn’t have the kind of money it would take to stop working but I didn’t have to settle for anything less than the perfect job either.

I didn’t know it yet, but that job was already finding me. On the surface, moving to CEO and President of a nonprofit land trust and nature center might seem like a career change. But in reality the skills I learned in entrepreneurship were exactly what Reflection Riding needed at this time. My first boss recruited

me to come meet the board and learn more about the problems the organization wanted to solve. I fell in love with the complexity of the issues at hand and immediately went to work. Six months later the board actually agreed to hire and pay me which was a nice bonus.

I called in over a decade’s worth of favors. I leaned on friends and neighbors for opinions and time. I met with all the major foundations to see what they thought about the place and what my role might be.

On day one a lot of the initial visioning had been done. We hit the ground running and spent six months transforming the place. With the fantastic existing staff and board we crafted an ambitious but credible vision for what this 300-acre oasis in the city could do for our growing community. We set out to diversify our base of supporters, our board, and our staff. Within a few years we were able to hire some of the world’s best landscape architects to craft a vision that honored the rich history of human engagement with this special place.

Along the way I met some of the best colleagues and have been inspired by your various centers. I’ve visited and proudly stolen ideas from the Cincinnati Nature Center, Linda Loring Nature Foundation, Estero Llano Grande, Santa Ana, Quinta Mazatlan, South Padre Island, Ijams, and others.

If you’re new to this profession and reading this I encourage you to engage with ANCA. Join us at the Summits which will be in person again soon. There’s nothing like meeting your peers and experiencing their programs in person.

As I tell my team, this is the best work. Enjoy it.

What Can We Learn from Nature?

Nature centers typically *teach* about nature, but the profession is balanced by *learning* from nature as well. Here, we explore how nature centers can use natural systems as inspiration for structuring their work.

MARGO FARNSWORTH is a writer, educator, and consultant in strategic development for organizations, and at the ANCA Summit in August, Farnsworth spoke about biomimicry — the emulation of strategies and systems in nature to solve human challenges. More specifically, Farnsworth posed the question that in the context of the pandemic, what can nature center directors and staff learn about resilience from nature?

In other words, we've faced a massive disruption in our personal and professional lives. Biomimicry would then ask, how does nature recover from disruption, and how can we apply such natural solutions to nature centers?

ANCA members Nancy Patterson and Glenna Holstein were part of the discussion that followed Farnsworth's speech, and were enthusiastic about applying biomimicry concepts to their work. Here, we asked them about how they envision using these concepts, and how nature centers more broadly might learn from biomimicry.

Nancy Patterson
Director of the
BLM Campbell Creek Science Center
in Anchorage, Alaska

LIFE IN ALASKA is a constant, dramatic cycle of change. Living creatures perform a delicate dance with the environment. Alaskans mark daylight and phenology, planning for when the salmon are running, what berries are ripe, where the caribou migrate, how thick (and safe) the ice is, and how to pass through impenetrable alder to get a clear view of the landscape. Surviving winter is paramount. Just like brown bears, Alaskans go into hyperphagia — cramming in summer activities and storing reserves for the long, dark months ahead. Alaskans prepare, adapt, and survive.

The team at the Bureau of Land Management's Campbell Creek Science Center recently described a shared value of having a growth mindset. We think like scientists — using curiosity, wonder, observation, and creativity to share public lands with visitors. We assess, plan, and improve. Like nature, we adapt.

Growth mindset has made biomimicry a natural concept from which to discuss organizational change. We use nature-based language to assess the state of the team. We routinely ask, "what Alaska animal do you feel like today?" This question provides a neutral, safe way to express emotions, which creates opportunities to discuss needed adaptations.

What Can We Learn from Nature? (cont.)

Currently, we are preparing for a new fiscal year (a new “cycle”) and have used biomimicry to create dialogue:

- The mycelium layer of soil indicates the health of the environment. What is the health of the CCSC’s mycelium layer — our mission, guiding principles, and team culture?
- What does the new ecotone of blended in-person and virtual programs look like?
- Geese form Vs to lead and rest from wind resistance. How do we lead and shelter each other?
- Ungulates shed antlers, snakes shed skins, trees shed leaves. What does the CCSC need to shed?

In the past 18 months, the CCSC has grown thick tree rings — filled with distance learning and self-guided resources for a completely offsite (and largely digital) audience. Our audience now “migrates” to Alaska through virtual programs. We have burn scars from trying, failing, and surviving. Like a V of geese, we traded the lead to ease resistance and to show the way. We developed thicker roots and assessed our organization’s mycelium layer.

The CCSC team now needs a cycle of rest. We recognized this in our theme for the year: *Nature is a healing force*. Biomimicry empowers us to find that balance to adapt and heal as individuals, teammates, and as nature-based learning providers.

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Glenna Holstein

Membership Manager at the **Urban Ecology Center**
in Milwaukee, Wis., and member of the ANCA Board of Directors

I'VE BEEN THINKING a lot about racial equity and justice efforts across the environmental field, and how the natural world might guide us in that work. One of my favorite mentors often says, “there’s nothing you need to know that you can’t learn in a garden.” So, here are some things my garden has taught me about diversity, equity, and justice. (My garden is, by the way, full of very tenacious weeds, but it is ever-so-gradually becoming more of a native habitat):

- **Diversity = resiliency.** We know that a more biologically diverse ecosystem is more resilient to changes in the environment. The same is true for our human systems -- the more diversity of experience and thought we have around the table, the more able we are to adapt to the changes happening in our world.

- **In order for beauty and nourishment to take root, you must first decolonize.** In nature, this means clearing weeds and preparing soil. In racial equity work, it means deconstructing long-held ideas about who our work is for, and examining our own potential biases. Without this critical step, our minds and our spaces will not be ready to nourish the beauty of a more equitable and diverse community.
- **The work of decolonizing is hard and you must be relentless,** whether it applies to your garden, your mind, or your society. Those “weeds” will try real hard to grow back, and the everyday maintenance is just as important as the big initial efforts.
- **We’re in this for the long haul — don’t give up!** On some days it is hard to believe that the work you’re doing will make any difference, and on other days a hummingbird might visit the cardinal flower you have nourished lovingly for a whole season, and your heart will nearly burst with joy. Similarly, it can sometimes be difficult to see the results of our efforts around equity and justice, but trust me: we are working toward a joyful outcome!

Want to learn more about biomimicry? We’ve added a recording of Farnsworth’s speech in the **Member Portal** on the ANCA website.

First-time Summit Participants Reflect

IN August we hosted the 2021 ANCA Summit as a virtual experience, and we were excited to welcome 56 first-time participants, who made up over a third of this year's attendees. We checked in with three such participants to briefly ask them about their experience and what it meant for their work.

**EB — Emma Balazs, Director of Maine School Programs
Chewonki Foundation in Wiscasset, Maine**

**DB — Dan Brannen, Executive Director
Strawberry Hill Foundation, Inc. in Fairfield, Penn.**

**SW — Samuel Wegner, Environmental Stewardship Program Manager
Lower Phalen Creek Project in St. Paul, Minn.**

What was the most useful session that you attended, and how was it useful?

EB: The discussion on Neurodiversity was my favorite session. It was very well facilitated and the discussion included many different voices. I appreciated how the facilitator, Ann Wasser [Executive Director of Severson Dells Nature Center], structured the session to consider the topic in the context of students/program participants, volunteers and staff.

DB: Probably the discussions regarding “animal ambassadors” — the efficacy and the ethics of utilizing animal partners in an organization’s programming (and marketing at times). For Strawberry Hill, these discussions have helped us understand that a balance can be reached in terms of ethical animal care and program/community/educational impact ... which, for us, is inspiring stewardship of our natural world.

SW: I enjoyed every one of the sessions I attended, but *Nature Centers and Climate Change: Communication, Stewardship, Planning, and Research Opportunities* was particularly valuable. Located squarely within the historic floodplain of the Upper Mississippi River Valley, the ecosystems we work within are vulnerable to shifting phenological timelines, decreasing regeneration rates for otherwise climate-resilient species like the cottonwood, and a host of other climate-related issues. It was especially helpful to our work in stream restoration to hear from facilitators and fellow participants about a variety of water quality monitoring resources and programs from across the country. This workshop was an encouraging reminder that although climate change will manifest in unique challenges to distinct geographic regions, ANCA member organizations can learn from one another — sharing data, strategies, and more — to combat these changes together.

Summit Participants Reflect (cont.)

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

EB: For me, the Summit reinforced what a wealth of resources ANCA and its members have to offer. I will be paying even closer attention to ANCA newsletters and exploring the website more as the year goes on.

DB: Being a new executive director in the nature experience sector, I will put together my many pages of notes and communicate some of the inspirational stories related during the many workshops. The stories relating to the challenges and triumphs of nature centers through the pandemic as well as those strategic decisions made regarding how to better impact the local communities we serve — more educational opportunities, more direct experience with nature and more understanding of our relationship with nature, and in the bigger picture, with our climate and climate change.

SW: The ANCA summit was the perfect primer for Lower Phalen Creek Project ahead of the organization's 2023 opening of the Wakáŋ Tipi Center. With construction slated to begin in October 2021, curriculum and exhibit development, user guides, accessibility, and a range of organizational infrastructure considerations are all at the top of the list. In specific sessions, breakout rooms, and even in learning more about other ANCA member organizations via the Padlet hubs, I gleaned so much valuable information — content to model, words of wisdom, and the strength of a growing network! 🌱



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Discussion Forum Highlights

The ANCA Discussion Forum is an important conversation space for the ANCA community, and continually exemplifies the collective wisdom of nature center leaders. The following are some recent conversation topics that received high engagement. We've provided brief descriptions, but feel free to click the topics and continue the conversation there!

Staffing and Holidays

What are your plans and policies regarding holidays? This thread contains two separate surveys from ANCA Members (not ANCA itself) about holidays and business hours. The results are still visible in the discussion, so you can see how other organizations are approaching these topics.

CIT Programs and the Like

Counselor-in-training (CIT) programs are common for nature center camps, where a teenager assists the camp counselors. When it comes to compensation, though, practices vary widely; some organizations consider CITs campers, others volunteers, others interns. This discussion explores how nature centers manage CIT programs, as well as what compensation levels should be for seasonal staff.



ASK ANCA

Do you have a question for leaders in the nature & environmental learning center field? Ask the Discussion Forum! Over a thousand people in the ANCA community are on the forum, and you don't have to be an ANCA member to join.

[Learn about joining the forum here.](#)

New Nature Center Plans

“If you could build a brand new [nature center] today, what would you do differently?”

This question started a brief exploration of nature center design, and how to consider audiences, exhibits, storage, and multipurpose space in the design process. We especially appreciate that the discussion includes a wide variety of perspectives, so it's a good starting point for thinking about how nature centers effectively utilize space.

PBS Tote Bags

This discussion is not, in fact, all about tote bags themselves, but rather about the membership benefits that nature centers offer.

Membership programs are a common topic among ANCA Members, and for good reason — they're a powerful way to cultivate personal and financial investment in an organization. This conversation delves into why members give, and what incentives they actually want.



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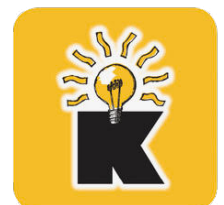
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