



Directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators // Spring 2024

**DIRECTOR'S
NOTES**

**ANCA'S
GROWTH**

**EQUITABLE
COMPENSATION**

**UNDERSTANDING
VISITORS**



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CONTENTS

- 1-2 Director's Notes
- 3-4 ANCA's Strategic Priorities
- 5-10 Equitable Compensation at Nature Centers
- 11-14 Meeting the Needs of Nature Center Visitors
- 15-16 ANCA Annual 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.

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

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Cover photo: Redbud blooms at Lichterman Nature Center — part of the Museum of Science & History in Memphis, Tennessee — host of the 2024 ANCA Annual Summit, September 9-13.

About ANCA

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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Don't want to read on a screen? Print this issue — and then pass it onto other nature center staff!

Director's Notes: Embracing Opportunities for Growth

Jen Levy, ANCA Executive Director

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, when faced with losing a valued staff member, an ANCA board member told me to 'find someone better.' My initial reaction was to defend how great this person was and how much she had contributed to ANCA. But his comment did not reflect her job performance; she was great, or lack of contributions to ANCA; there were many. He said my job was to help us progress toward our vision for the future by hiring the next great employee with the skills needed to advance our strategic direction. Change can be challenging, but it also presents an opportunity for growth and expansion, a chance to bring fresh perspectives and new talents. As leaders, we need to rise to this challenge.

A significant change happened at the end of February when our Office Assistant, McKenzie Achatz, left ANCA to devote her full attention to her role as the

Assistant Manager of Utah State University's Aggie Creamery. McKenzie, with her unwavering work ethic and proactive approach, played a pivotal role in ANCA's daily bookkeeping, managing membership renewals, maintaining the ANCA Job Board, and supporting ANCA's three full-time staff. Her departure leaves a void that we will strive to fill with the same level of dedication and commitment. We are deeply appreciative of her invaluable contributions to our organization.

As a small organization, we understand that staff changes can be significant. Each member of our team often takes on multiple roles and responsibilities. This adaptability is a testament to our resilience and commitment to our mission. We are prepared to handle various tasks and take on additional responsibilities when necessary, ensuring our operations continue smoothly.

ANCA Executive Director Jen Levy speaks at the 2023 ANCA Annual Summit, hosted by The Ecology School in Saco, Maine.



Director's Notes (cont.)

At the ANCA Winter Retreat, the Board and Staff undertook a strategic approach to prioritize the creation of a new staff position. However, before we embark on this journey to "find someone better," we are meticulously evaluating our needs. We have crafted a comprehensive Action Plan to "assess and find support for new positions: Membership/Donor Coordinator and Contracted Bookkeeper." This plan ensures that our future hires align with our strategic direction and contribute to our growth. The desired outcomes of this Action Plan are as follows: 1) ANCA will outsource bookkeeping services, and 2) ANCA will add a new full-time, remote-eligible position by July 1, 2026.

Maintaining the books and financial reporting were priorities. We have successfully outsourced our bookkeeping services and are working with a Utah-based company specializing in non-profit bookkeeping. They have made some great suggestions to improve our bookkeeping, and we have set July 1 as the goal for updating our accounts, reports, and procedures.

Determining the next full-time staff position at ANCA involves an approach that aligns with our current needs and future goals. Our first step was to assess our organizational needs, including existing roles, responsibilities, and capabilities. As a staff, we underwent an exercise to identify gaps or areas where additional support or expertise is needed to achieve our goals and address emerging challenges. A priority need is a staff member dedicated to our membership and donor management. We also looked at how our current staff roles and responsibilities have changed and where opportunities for advancement exist.

Finding support for the new position will involve evaluating the financial resources available to support salary, benefits, and associated costs. This includes evaluating current funding sources, projected income, and existing expenses. As ANCA Director of Marketing & Communications Asa Duffee writes on page 5, we need to ensure that we are paying staff equitably to support inclusion in our field and retain talented staff. An additional budgetary challenge is the **Department of Labor's newly issued rule**, which increases the salary threshold required to exempt a salaried bona fide executive, administrative, or professional employee from federal overtime pay requirements. This significant overtime change will profoundly affect our industry.

The prospect of welcoming a new member to the ANCA team is filled with excitement. This addition will bring fresh perspectives and skills and inject new energy into our operations. It's an opportunity to enhance our capabilities and achieve our goals more effectively, and we are eagerly looking forward to it. 🌱

Change can be challenging, but it also presents an opportunity for growth and expansion, a chance to bring fresh perspectives and new talents.

ANCA ADDS NEW MEMBERSHIP BENEFIT

Do you want to find new funding sources to support your organization?

We've partnered with GrantStation so that ANCA members can now purchase an annual GrantStation membership — a \$699 value — at a discounted rate of \$95 per year. GrantStation offers tools, resources, and training you can use to find grantmaking leads and submit winning proposals.

GrantStation's website features a searchable database of private and government grantmakers throughout the U.S., Canada, and internationally. Beyond searching for grants, you can use GrantStation to organize your grants, use tutorials and models for writing grants, and attend trainings on a variety of grant-related topics.

To learn more about GrantStation, [see their website here](#).

If you're an ANCA member, claim your discounted GrantStation membership at \$95 per year by emailing ANCA Membership & Programs Coordinator Daniel Auer at membership@natctr.org. This is an ongoing benefit of ANCA membership.



Setting Priorities for Sustainable Growth: ANCA's Goals for the Year

With over 700 members throughout North America, ANCA's network of nature center professionals is extensive. Our work is also substantial: we offer regular programs (virtual and in-person), two unique Summits, a mentoring program, two discussion forums, annual leadership awards, peer-based consults, publications like the Directions journal, a job board, two email newsletters, and more.

We currently accomplish this work with a staff of three: Membership & Programs Coordinator Dan Auer, Director of Marketing & Communications Asa Duffee, and Executive Director Jen Levy. With this team we achieve significant results, and we have goals for growing our capacity and adding new projects — but we also want to ensure that our workload and growth are sustainable.

This aim informed an ANCA Staff and Board retreat in early March, where we met to review progress on [our strategic plan, ANCA 2025](#), and set strategic priorities for the next year. In setting these priorities, we sought to work toward growth while staying grounded in our current capacity.

Below, we share the twelve priorities from the retreat. These priorities complement our strategic plan and current operations.

As we share here, ANCA aims to continue its growth and further support the nature center profession. We are a nonprofit organization and rely on the generous support of donors. If you believe in our work and the impact of the nature center profession, please consider [giving to ANCA here](#).

Strategic Priorities for 2024-2025

1. Assess and find support for new positions

In order to expand our services, we need to grow staff capacity. As ANCA Executive Director Jen Levy shares on page 1, McKenzie Achatz left her position as Office Assistant at the end of February, and we are currently transitioning responsibilities to other staff and an outsourced bookkeeping service. Our goal is to add a new full-time staff position in 2026. This new position will be dedicated to ANCA's membership and donor management.

2. Develop and update staff compensation, benefits, and new personnel policies

ANCA has grown significantly in recent years, and we need to update our personnel policies and benefits accordingly. As an organization, we also need to ensure that we are paying staff equitably as a way to support inclusion in our field and to retain staff.

3. Grow prospects and set new goals for Annual Fund

We will need to expand and increase our fundraising efforts to achieve our strategic goals. This will include reaching new prospective donors, and increasing goals for our Annual Fund, which supports ANCA's operations throughout the year.

4. Review and update, as needed, current fee structures and timelines for programs

Our programs have significantly evolved in recent years. In particular, [the ANCA CONNECTS program](#) continues to grow, and we've been thrilled with the overwhelmingly positive response to these programs. To ensure that these programs are sustainable for our operations, we will evaluate program pricing and how we plan these programs for the nature center profession.

5. Plan for and fund a strategic planning process

We set our current strategic plan in 2018 and designed the plan to extend through 2025. As we approach next year, we will evaluate working with a facilitator/consultant to help us with our next strategic planning process.

6. Determine priorities for organizational relationships

We maintain connections with other national and regional organizations adjacent to the nature center profession. We also see growth opportunities in this area, and will outline how we can best intentionally cultivate relationships with other organizations.

7. Develop a new leadership transition plan

Planning for leadership transition is important for any organization. Our current leadership transition plan was established before ANCA hired remote staff across the US, and we have since changed significantly in our operations.

8. Develop programming about ANCA member organizations partnering with marginalized groups in successful ways

Many ANCA member organizations have partnered with groups or organizations from marginalized communities and identities (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled communities). We want to elevate these partnerships and share how other ANCA members may learn from them.

9. Review the ANCA Equity Audit and accordingly develop resources for ANCA members

In 2022 ANCA conducted an audit of equitable practices and policies at nature centers and outdoor schools throughout North America. We have previously [shared data from the ANCA Culture Survey & Equity Audit](#), and we now aim to develop resources for ANCA members specifically based on the findings from the Equity Audit.

10. Determine capacity for ANCA Peer Consults

A unique service in our profession, [ANCA Peer Consults](#) allow client organizations to receive expert guidance from ANCA members in the field. Demand for ANCA Peer Consults has increased since 2021, and this service requires a significant time investment from our small team. Moving forward, we will establish our capacity for how many Peer Consults we can provide within a year.

11. Develop new resources for Peer Consult team leaders and members

As Peer Consults have increased in number and more ANCA members are volunteering to contribute, we see a need to standardize and strengthen resources for team leaders and members.

12. Assess the costs and feasibility of updating the ANCA website

We built the current ANCA website in 2018. While the site remains strong for users, we need to update the technology on the back-end of the website. Our goal is to update the website this upcoming fiscal year, which begins on July 1.

Putting Values into Action: Nature Centers Work Toward Equitable Compensation

Asa Duffee, ANCA Director of Marketing & Communications

At a virtual ANCA CONNECTS program in January, facilitator Olivia Griset posed a question to participants: what was your first job in environmental education?

To dig deeper into that question, Griset — who is the Executive Director of the [Maine Environmental Education Association \(MEEA\)](#) — also asked, what resources did you need to get that job? What did it pay? And what did you have to do to grow your career?

These questions were part of a discussion about equitable compensation in environmental education, specifically based on a resource from the Southeastern Environmental Education Alliance (SEEA), [eeGuidance for Equitable Pay and Hiring](#). Referencing an SEEA survey from 2021, the *eeGuidance* shares that “entry-level pay in environmental education is 15-25% lower than in comparable fields such as forestry, tourism, and formal education.”

This low pay often does not stop at entry-level positions. The [nonprofit sector as a whole](#) faces low salaries and wages, and this can also apply to governmental mission-based organizations as well. As such, staff at all levels of nature centers, outdoor schools, and environmental learning centers can receive lower pay than comparable professions.

This lower pay has profound implications for our field.

Pictured: Wetlands at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes in Cleveland, Ohio.

Equitable Compensation (cont.)

Of course, low salaries and wages significantly impact working professionals’ lives in many ways, and can contribute to financial stress and challenges. But low-paying jobs can also mean that many individuals can’t take that job in the first place, due to a lack of resources or support. A 2021 study of informal science educators, [The Privilege of Low Pay](#), found that “Alarming, 70% of respondents said they would be unable to sustain their career in informal education without additional support. Written responses referenced living ‘paycheck to paycheck’ and relying on partners, roommates, parents, and generational wealth.”

Because of this reliance on additional support, such low compensation standards can contribute to existing inequities in our profession; this actively excludes individuals who do not have privileges like family wealth or partners’ income. [As blogger Vu Le has pointed out](#), too, professionals with financial privileges can unintentionally overlook inequities in the workplace.

Many organizations in the nature center profession are actively working to address low wages and raise compensation to equitable levels.

WHAT IS EQUITABLE COMPENSATION AND WHAT DOES IT SUPPORT?

Equitable compensation will naturally vary based on factors like geographic location. Some professionals cite a *living wage* as a goal, but others point out that the living wage is commonly defined

as meeting essential needs only. [MIT’s Living Wage Calculator](#), a popular tool to identify the living wage, estimates “the local wage rate that a full-time worker requires to cover the costs of their family’s basic needs.” This does not include saving money for emergencies, retirement, or large purchases such as home down payments, nor does it include paying student loans. The calculations also do not reflect any disposable income for leisure or entertainment; even dining at a restaurant once per year is not accounted for.

Some organizations instead aim for a *thriving wage* that would include these additional expenses and savings. While there is no standard definition of a thriving wage, Mala Nagarajan, a consultant who works on compensation equity, has proposed that the thriving wage [is double the living wage](#).

While equitable compensation supports professionals’ livelihoods and careers in the profession, it can also contribute to an organization’s

success by retaining staff. Replacing staff requires a significant investment of time and resources through hiring, training, and lost productivity during onboarding; [some experts estimate](#) it can cost up to two times an employee’s salary to replace their position. Ultimately, if an organization can retain talented and skilled staff, it will more effectively achieve its mission.

“If you’re hiring less, training less, and you have ... people who just love working in your organization, your work is going to be amazing,” says Griset.

Naturally, people switch employers for many reasons, some of which are unavoidable. But equitable compensation reduces the likelihood that an employee will leave solely for a higher-paying job.

Increasing pay can also result in receiving a broader application pool for open positions. Peter Bode, President & CEO of the [Nature Center at Shaker Lakes](#) in Cleveland, Ohio, notes that for

Children play at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes.



SEEA’s research-based recommendations provide organizations who emphasize environmental education with a strong path forward in regard to equitable employment practices. By following this guidance, we can further support the next generation of environmental educators and ensure that our planet is in good hands.

— Ashley Hoffman, Executive Director of the Southeastern Environmental Education Alliance

a part-time position, the organization used to receive only a handful of applications. Once they posted the same position with an increased wage, they received over 50 applications.

USING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RESOURCES TO INCREASE WAGES

Raising wages across an organization is likely not a simple task. For some organizations, this can be a multi-year process that involves reviewing existing positions and job descriptions, seeking out compensation data for comparable organizations, and making a financial plan for increased costs.

Some ANCA members have achieved this using internal processes and resources. The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes recently raised salaries and wages across the organization, and Bode says that he was able to work with board members to calculate and enact the changes.

“I have an extremely strong board,” Bode says, “so we were able to lean on a couple [board members] for the expertise that they had.”

Other ANCA members have increased compensation levels with the help of external consultants. This can be particularly valuable when significant changes are being made, or when the organization is large.

ANCA Board President Kristin Smith was involved in an organizational wage analysis and increase in her

former position as Recreation Manager at the **Tualatin Hills Parks & Recreation District** in Beaverton, Ore. Smith says that external consultants were useful to work with, especially because this analysis impacted hundreds of staff.

“The sheer volume of work is a lot for somebody to take on solely internally within an organization,” Smith says, and adds that the consultants were able to offer an independent perspective using best practices from the field.

IDENTIFYING WHAT’S EQUITABLE FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION AND AREA

One challenge of setting compensation levels is the wide range of cost of living in different geographic areas. To best set equitable pay levels, it’s important to research wages and cost of living in your specific area.

“We did a baseline assessment of the industry, but mainly the local industry more than national,” Bode says. “So we looked at what comparable organizations and nonprofits of similar size were paying people, and we tried to be on the high end of that.”

The scope of comparable organizations may go beyond looking at solely environmental organizations. For the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, Bode reviewed compensation data from other arts and culture organizations to have a better understanding of pay within the region.

A view of Green Canyon in Logan, Utah, where Stokes Nature Center hosts programs.



SEEA’s *eeGuidance* also encourages benchmarking compensation outside the environmental education field, because the field as a whole has low pay rates: “Benchmarking pay against like organizations in a sector that is known for underpaying people is an unspoken agreement that the practice is acceptable.”

ANCA Organization Member **Stokes Nature Center** in Logan, Utah, has worked to raise compensation in recent years, and Executive Director Kendra Penry notes that this geographical consideration in pay is often very specific. When setting wages at Stokes, Penry had to factor differences in cost of living from an hour away.

USING COMPENSATION AS PART OF NEW ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

At the Maine Environmental Education Alliance, their recent work on equitable compensation involved more than slight adjustments to salaries and wages. The compensation changes began with an interest in both shared leadership and equitable organization models more broadly.

“It became pretty clear early on that pay and compensation was one of the places that could really trip up shared leadership approaches,” says Griset. “Because if people don’t have a good understanding of why they’re being paid, what they’re being paid and how that’s determined, that can be a really big problem when folks move into shared leadership.”

As MEEA was exploring how it could operate as a more equitable organization, it also became apparent that compensation was an integral part of that journey.

“We’re going to take actions that actualize equity in ways that aren’t just a statement,” Griset says. By



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implementing equitable compensation, MEEA was putting its values into action.

MEEA worked with [Blue Swallow Consulting](#) to develop a new compensation model — based on work by [Vega Mala Consulting](#) — that set a base pay rate for all employees, then added compensation for responsibilities and experience.

“It’s not rooted to titles,” says Griset. “It’s rooted to roles and the work you actually do.”

This model results in a rubric where there are three levels of responsibility in an area of the organization, such as programs or management. If the employee holds more responsibility in that area, they will earn a predetermined amount more. These levels of additional compensation also apply to professional and lived experience that relates to the organization.

In addition to being designed for thriving wages, this structure also allows transparency for all employees, so that they fully understand *why* they earn the amount they do. In hiring new employees, it eliminates any subjective negotiation — instead, the new employee can review the rubric of responsibilities and discuss which level of responsibility they will have.

For Griset, this new pay structure allows MEEA to grow as an organization while operating with a shared leadership structure.

“There’s a lot of different shared leadership models out there that you can experiment with, but I think this compensation structure allows us to try any of them,” she says. “Because while we’re experimenting

and iterating on those pieces, our compensation can stay stable and transparent and understood.”

BUDGETING FOR INCREASED PAY

Of course, raising salaries and wages means that the organization needs to increase its income on some level, and this is likely not an easy feat — nor is there one method that will work for every organization.

At the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, the organization’s recent funding was bolstered by the Employee Retention Credit, a tax credit for organizations that retained staff during the pandemic. This allowed Bode

to increase salaries and wages as part of a three-year plan. Moving forward, the nature center will focus more fundraising efforts on growing general operating funds.

MEEA’s plans for increased compensation developed over a year and half, and during that time the organization was able to prepare accordingly. Griset says that growing the operating reserves was essential for transitioning to the new pay structure. Now that the new model has been implemented, she

has increased fundraising efforts and is specifically being transparent about the model and MEEA’s commitment to equitable compensation.

“So far people are really being understanding of that and excited about it,” she says. Because of this transparency and commitment, some funders have even increased general operating support.

Penry of Stokes Nature Center also emphasizes the importance of understanding the actual costs of

“Until we are taking this on as a sector, our work will stay kind of on the sidelines too, because we’re not being valued for our work,” Griset says.

Additional Resources on Equitable Compensation

Southeastern Environmental Education Alliance
[eeGuidance for Equitable Pay and Hiring in Environmental Education](#)

This document explores pay and benefits, position design, recruitment, and hiring processes, and provides standards for employers to implement.

Fund the People
[Six Practices for Embedding Equity in Nonprofit Compensation – with Mala Nagarajan, Vega Mala Consulting](#)

A podcast episode about how nonprofits can de-link privilege and marginalization from salaries, and reconstruct compensation in a way that is equitable.

CompassPoint
[Reimagining Compensation: It’s Time to Stop Building on Inequities of the Past \(Part 2\)](#)

How a capacity-building nonprofit approached structural changes in compensation.

American Alliance of Museums
[Museums and the Living Wage: How Filoli Developed a Bold Pay Equity Initiative](#)

The CEO of Filoli, a historic site in Woodside, Calif., shares how the organization transitioned to pay equity.

The Center for Effective Global Action
[A new approach to compensation](#)
How and why the Center for Effective Global Action adopted a transparent pay equity model, and what’s required to sustain it.

providing programs and services, both to communicate with funders and to set prices accordingly. This includes fully accounting for staff time, utilities, and other administrative costs.

“The first step was understanding the true cost of what we do, because if we don’t know it, we can’t expect the community to know it,” Penry says. “Then setting an appropriate program fee that is not unattainable for people, but at the same time, adequately expresses the real value of our work.”

Penry is also investigating how the organization might grow its major donors to help support increased operating expenses. She says that the nature center is proud of its largely grassroots fundraising — but that as the organization grows, it’s looking to expand how it approaches fundraising as well.

VIEWING THE COMPENSATION PACKAGE AS A WHOLE

Compensation packages are more than salaries and wages, and any competitive package will include benefits like health insurance, retirement plan contributions, and paid time off. In addition to these important benefits, organizations can also consider how they might add value to the package without adding significant costs.

Kitty Pochman, ANCA Board Member and Executive Director of the Linda Loring Nature Foundation (LLNF) in Nantucket, Mass., suggests that nature centers can offer flexible work hours and generous time-off policies as valuable benefits to staff. As an example specific to LLNF, staff can require medical care off the island, which could take over half the workday due to commuting by ferry. The organization doesn’t require staff to take this as personal time off.

Penry offers that nature centers can partner with local business-

es to provide discounts to staff, especially for outdoor businesses. In mountainous northern Utah, an example might be giving staff discounts on ski lift tickets — though obviously that will look different in other landscapes.

RAISING STANDARDS IN THE FIELD

As SEEA’s findings indicate, our profession needs to raise standards for compensation. Doing so will welcome a broader range of professionals and will enable those professionals to have a sustainable career in our field.

Griset shares that while MEEA has made progress in paying more equitably, it’s an ongoing organizational journey, and they’re still learning. She also emphasizes that every organization has its own path, and what works to implement equitable pay at one organization

may not work at another.

“You have to do the work of going through the process,” Griset says. While the process may not be easy, she encourages other organizations to prioritize equitable pay, no matter where they currently stand. “We just have to ... start working on it and help each other out to do it.”

She adds that this is essential for our field to become more broadly equitable, and to demonstrate that our work matters.

“Until we are taking this on as a sector, our work will stay kind of on the sidelines too, because we’re not being valued for our work,” Griset says.

ANCA Board President Smith agrees.

“All of us have a responsibility to raise the value of the field,” Smith says. 🌱



Meeting the Needs of Nature Center Visitors: Lessons from Research

David Catlin
Principal, David Catlin Consulting LLC

When I first launched my business as an independent nature center consultant back in 2015, I frankly had some free time on my hands. Clipping grocery store coupons didn't seem like the most profitable way to invest that time, so I spent some of it catching up on reading related to our profession. One of the authors I stumbled across changed my entire perspective on how nature centers can best meet the needs of their visitors.

That author was Dr. John Falk, who—together with a handful of colleagues, most notably Dr. Lynn Dierking—has spent a career exploring free-choice learning and the interactions between visitors and museums. Falk and various co-writers have produced a number of research papers, but the most enlightening works to me were two books: *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions*¹ and *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*². In these works, the authors focus

especially on how visitors' self-determined identities mold their needs and experiences when they visit museums and similar cultural institutions—including, I'm sure Falk would agree, nature centers.

In his research, Falk interviewed dozens of visitors to museums, aquaria, zoos, and similar venues. He ultimately concluded that there are only five types of motivation for their visits and that, while individuals may have different primary motivations during different visits, typically one motivation will predom-

Nature Center Visitors (cont.)

inate during any one visit. He assigned each of these five motivations a sort of archetype:

- The *Explorer* visits because of “curiosity or a general interest in discovering more about the topic/subject matter of the institution.” *Explorers* read exhibit labels, ask questions, and in general are pretty sophisticated consumers of the museum experience.
- The *Facilitator* comes “in order to satisfy the needs and desires of someone they care about other than themselves,” typically children, grandchildren, students (in the case of teachers), or out-of-town company. *Facilitators* see themselves as the stewards of someone else's experience.
- The *Professional/Hobbyist* has “a strong knowledge and interest in the content of the institution” and comes “with an eye toward enhancing [their] profession, avocation, or hobby.” Bird-watchers, photographers, and gardeners are three of the most common examples we see at nature centers. (During most visits, nature center consultants fall into this category, too!)
- The *Experience Seeker*, often someone from outside the area, is motivated to visit “primarily to ‘collect’ an experience, so that they [can] say they've ‘been there, done that.’” They are often driven by the expectations or recommendations of other people. *Experience Seekers* are the folks who take selfies in front of whatever they consider iconic and post them to Facebook and Instagram.
- The *Recharger* visits “in order to reflect, rejuvenate, or generally just bask in the wonder of the place.” *Rechargers* are getting away from the hectic pace of their daily lives. Falk originally called this group “Spiritual Pilgrims.”

For the purposes of my work with nature centers, which generally differ from most museums in having significant land, I add a sixth category that I call *Exerciser*, since it is a motivation not typical to the museums that Falk studies but occurs wherever there are trails (though I think Falk may well consider many of these users *Rechargers*, since they could exercise anywhere but often choose to come to the nature cen-

ter for reasons other than fitness).

Falk and his coauthors didn't stop at describing these various types of visit motivations. They went on to suggest ways that the administrators of museums could better meet the needs of their customers based on those motivations—practical tips like offering customized, behind-the-scenes experiences for *Professional/Hobbyists* and providing instructions for *Facilitators* on how to interact with the children in their company.

APPLYING FALK'S RESEARCH TO NATURE CENTERS

I realized in reading Falk's work that it could profoundly impact the design and functioning of nature centers. Most of the consulting I do with centers is in one way or another related to planning: designing new facilities, developing strategic and business plans, and evaluating existing centers. My consulting frequently involves doing surveys of the people who visit the centers that are my clients; lots of it is essentially market research. I decided to examine how the motivations of those visitors matched up with Falk's archetypes. So, I inserted a Falk-inspired question into my surveys:

Thinking about your most recent visit to _____ Nature Center, which ONE statement BEST describes your main reason for visiting?

- *I wanted to explore and learn new things about nature, history, and similar topics.*
- *I was with someone else (children, grandchildren, students, out-of-town visitors, etc.) and wanted them to have a good experience.*
- *I heard that _____ Nature Center is an important place to see in [name of the city or county].*
- *I was pursuing a professional interest or personal hobby (birdwatching, wildlife photography, research, geocaching, etc.).*
- *I went because _____ Nature Center is a good place to reflect, recharge, and just get away from day-to-day life for a while.*
- *I went mostly to get some exercise.*

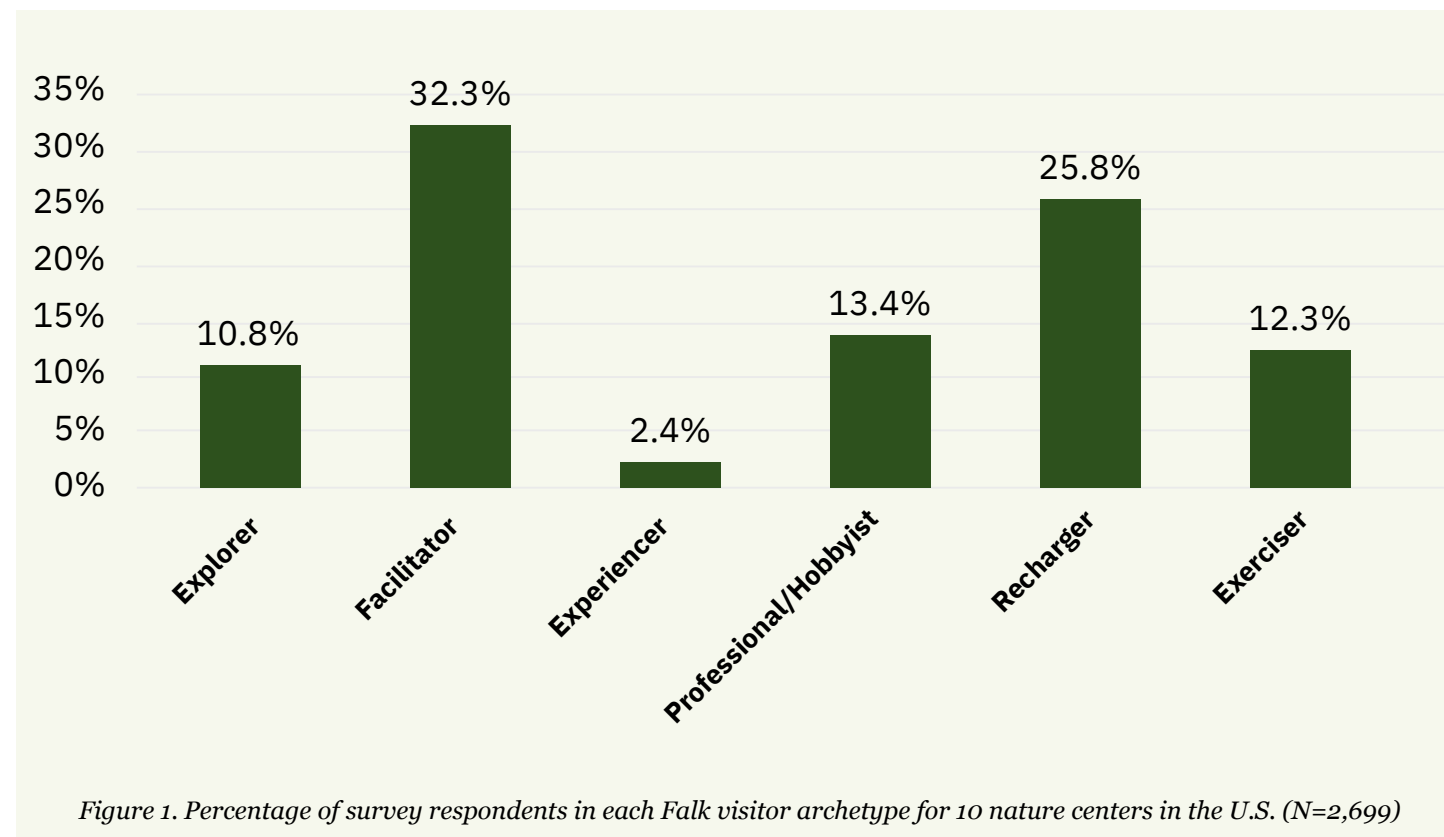
I have now asked that same question at 10 nature centers all over the U.S., and 2,699 people have answered it.³ As a frequent exercise, before revealing the

¹ John H. Falk and Beverly K. Sheppard, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions*, AltaMira Press, 2006.

² John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, Left Coast Press, 2009. See Falk, J.H. & Dierking, L.D. (2014) *The Museum Experience Revisited* for an updated version of this work.

³ The surveys are typically distributed by sending a link to the email addresses on the nature center's mailing list, by posting it on their websites and social media platforms, and (at some centers) by handing out paper copies to program participants and walk-in visitors.

Picture, top left: A “Recharger” at Runge Conservation Nature Center in Jefferson City, Missouri. Photo by David Catlin.



results of the survey to my clients, I often ask them to predict how their center’s respondents have answered it. “What percentage of your customers will fall into each category?” I say. They rarely guess correctly.

Figure 1 summarizes the survey results of visitors for all ten nature centers.

As you might expect, the results from individual centers vary. However, in all 10 surveys, either *Facilitator* or *Recharger* was the most common response, and in nine of the 10, the other came in second. (*Exerciser* nudged out *Recharger* at one center.)

It is significant that staff members were rarely able to predict these results. They often picked *Facilitators* as one of their most frequent visitors, but the prevalence of *Rechargers* has usually come as a surprise.

THE EDUCATOR BIAS

Why might most nature center staff underestimate the prevalence of *Rechargers* among their users? One reason is that they don’t see them. *Rechargers* who use nature centers generally spend their time on the trails, often not coming into buildings at all, or only doing so to use the restrooms. They don’t interact with staff—indeed, sometimes they intentionally *avoid* staff because they prefer to be alone and undisturbed.

Another reason *Rechargers* could fly under the radar is something I call “educator bias.” Most nature

center staff, including most administrators, have education-related roles. They see it as their job to “connect people with nature,” and they tend to assume that that is the reason people visit their centers. They might also assume that people *need help* connecting to nature. It is an attitude epitomized in the popular Baba Dioum quote, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”

One center educator I worked with unintentionally demonstrated this bias. When she realized just how many people were using the trails and not interacting with either her staff or the building exhibits, her first reaction was, “We need to get interpretive signs out on those trails!” In fact, not only do most *Rechargers* not read interpretive signage, but some are offended by its presence—just one more human-concocted intrusion on the peaceful experience they seek!

Given this bias, educators can mistakenly discount the value of visitors *creating their own connections* with nature. Do you want to improve the experience of *Rechargers*? Install a bench out of the flow of heavily trafficked trails where they can sit quietly and reflect. Or take that recharge a step further (as I saw the Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s Philip Merrill Environmental Center do a few years ago) and stash a hard-cover journal and a pencil on a shelf under

the bench seat, with a note that encourages people to write their reflections and read those of others.

RECHARGERS CAN BE YOUR BEST FRIENDS

Despite the fact that we are not “educating” *Rechargers*, they may very well be our most passionate advocates. They have made very personal spiritual and emotional connections with our centers, after all.

One center director I worked with told a story that illustrates this point. A piece of property that adjoined his center’s boundary and overlooked its best feature (a small lake) was proposed to be re-zoned as a subdivision. The director went to the public hearing required to review this proposed change and was surprised to find a room packed with re-zoning opponents. He didn’t know these people as nature center volunteers or program attendees, but he did recognize the faces of people he would see on his early-morning, before-work trail walks. They were his center’s *Rechargers*, there to protect the place they cared deeply about.

Unless you levy an admission fee that requires *Rechargers* to come into the building and give you their money (and contact information), you may not even

know who your best friends are. That may be another practical tip inspired by Falk’s research: Figure out a way to connect with your *Rechargers*.

A FINAL THOUGHT

I participated in a discussion a couple of years ago that included Dr. Falk, and the conversation turned to why professionals in our field can be slow to apply things that research reveals. Falk’s take was insightful: “One of the challenges endemic to this free-choice community [is that] historically there hasn’t been a ‘front door’—most everyone comes [to the profession] through the ‘back door.’” Most nature center leaders, in other words, have arrived in their jobs via careers as conservation managers, nonprofit administrators, park naturalists, and other pursuits. Falk believes there is a good depth of literature in this field, but most practitioners are not familiar with it.

I don’t take as much time now to keep up with the research as I once did. But reviewing my notes from that discussion with Dr. Falk inspires me to dig into some more current literature. The coupon-clipping can wait. 🌱



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