

# Directions

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

## Andrea Timpone Receives 2020 Nature Center Leadership Award

**A**NCA IS PLEASED to announce Andrea Timpone as recipient of the 2020 Nature Center Leadership Award. Timpone has led a remarkable career, and this award acknowledges her exceptional commitment and contributions to the nature center profession, as well as her invaluable leadership at [Elachee Nature Science Center](#) for 35 years.

Timpone began her career in environmental education in 1979, working as an interpretive naturalist at Panola Mountain State Park in Georgia. In 1981 she joined Tumbling Waters, a residential camp near Clayton, Georgia. In 1985 she became Elachee Nature Science Center's first employee as an instructor, six years after the organization was officially founded. In 1988 she became Executive Director of Elachee and later President/CEO; she has been in that

role since then.

Under Timpone's leadership, Elachee has grown from humble beginnings to an exceptional institution that serves approximately 35,000 schoolchildren throughout northern Georgia, encompasses Elachee Nature Academy that includes a Nature Preschool and Nature Kindergarten-1st Grade programs, hosts camps and public programs, and preserves over 1,900 acres while maintaining conservation projects that have earned the status of *National Audubon Important Bird Area* and part of the national *Old-Growth Forest Network*. In 1998, Elachee became the first nature center in the southeast to earn the prestigious status of SACS/AdvancED-accreditation (now Cognia), granted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Timpone has contributed strong-



Andrea Timpone

ly to the profession of nature and environmental learning centers; Elachee was one of the founding members of ANCA in 1989 and Timpone has proven generous to the ANCA community, serving on two ANCA Peer Consults and as a mentor in the ANCA Mentor Program. Under her guidance Elachee hosted the 2015 ANCA Summit, and has hosted or participated in multiple ANCA Southeast Region meetings.

Timpone has also demonstrated

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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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## *2020 Leadership Award (cont.)*

leadership within broader environmental communities, being a founding board member of the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia, and formerly serving as President and board member of Earthshare Georgia, an organization that provides funding for environmental organizations across the state.

Dick Touvell, retired executive director of Chippewa Nature Center and recipient of the 2016 ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award, writes of Timpone's career: "Elachee and Andrea's story is one of successfully pursuing opportunities, creatively adjusting to challenges and constantly being an innovator. She is the first to say she has been fortunate to be associated with committed staff throughout the years; however, the state-of-the-art facility now in place would not have happened without her extraordinary leadership."

Pat Welch, retired executive director of the Pine Jog Environmental Education Center and recipient of the 2009 ANCA Nature Center Leadership Award, commends Timpone for her achievements both at Elachee and within ANCA. "Andrea is a remarkable leader who strives for excellence, who thoughtfully visions the future and charts a realistic course to achieve



*Elachee Nature Science Center*

goals, and a leader who continuously involves her staff and peers in navigating the course to success," she says. "Andrea has distinguished herself with exceptional leadership at her nature center, within our profession and among her peers in the ANCA network."

Jerry Hightower, Environmental Education Coordinator for the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, mentions that Timpone's often-unseen work has impacted thousands of people, and echoes Touvell's statement. "I do not think that we would have the extraordinary Elachee that is so important to environmental education and interpretation without Andrea's indomitable creative spirit."

To recognize Timpone's achievements, ANCA will host an Awards Ceremony during the 2020 ANCA Virtual Summit, September 14-17. 🌱

## *Elachee's Chicopee Woods Aquatic Studies Center at Chicopee Lake.*





# Merica Whitehall Receives 2020 Outstanding New Leader Award

**A**NCA IS PLEASED to recognize Merica Whitehall, Executive Director of **Fontenelle Forest** in Bellevue, Nebraska, with the 2020 ANCA Outstanding New Leader Award. This award acknowledges Whitehall's achievements within the nature and environmental learning center field in organizational leadership, professionalism, professional development, and creativity.

Whitehall joined Fontenelle Forest in 2016 and has since led the Forest in engaging new audiences and building relationships within the region. Elizabeth Mulkerrin, Vice President of Education at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, speaks highly of Whitehall's beginnings at the Forest.

"The first two weeks as the executive director of Fontenelle Forest, Merica was reaching out to local museums, zoos, and nature centers to introduce herself to the community," Mulkerrin says. "Merica was very professional and gave us the impression of a very strong leader who was ready to take on her role as the leader of Fontenelle Forest, jumping into developing an understanding of the community and



*Merica Whitehall*

learning how we all collaborate as a community. Her strong presence and confidence helped form the bond between the zoo and the forest."

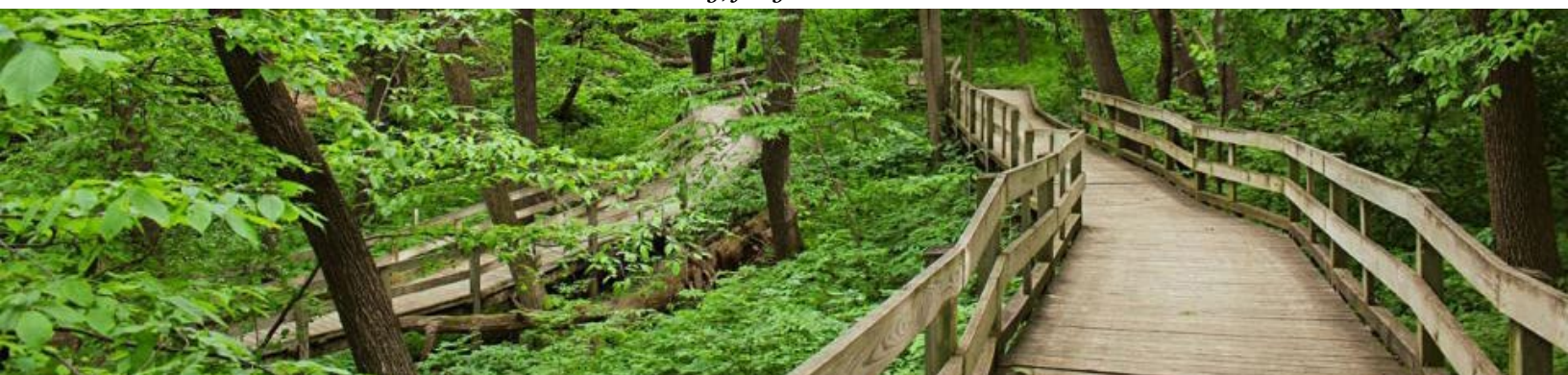
Denise Lewis, Director of Raptor Recovery at Fontenelle Forest, echoes Mulkerrin's sentiment. "When Merica was hired as the Executive Director ... I was immediately impressed by her sense of community, leadership, and creativity," she says. "Her creative vision is professionally communicated to all members of the community, from our Executive Board

Members to our part-time seasonal staff. She is often seen in the parking lot speaking to members of the public. She truly listens to all sides before a decision is made on any level."

Among Whitehall's accomplishments as director, she has been instrumental in the creation of TreeRush Adventures at Fontenelle Forest, an adventure park that includes bridges, zip lines, and swings between the trees of the Forest. Kema Geroux, Director of Community Relations for TreeRush Adventures at Fontenelle Forest, writes, "Without Merica, I'm not sure TreeRush Adventures at Fontenelle Forest would have opened in July 2019. With integrity and respect, Merica introduced the notion of partnering to build an adventure park to board members and to community stakeholders ... Throughout park construction and opening preparations, Merica inspired trust in the adventure park vision."

Whitehall has led a diverse professional career that includes executive level nonprofit management, teaching in higher education, and managing a nationally touring

*Fontenelle Forest Nature Center is home to a mile-long, fully ADA-accessible boardwalk.*





performing arts company. Beyond her responsibilities of Fontenelle Forest, she has been active in ANCA by presenting at multiple ANCA Summits, serving on a Peer Consult team, writing for *Directions*, and contributing as a member of the ANCA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. Catherine Demes Maydew, Treasurer on the Fontenelle Forest Executive Board, notes that Whitehall is actively involved in the community:

“Locally, five of the Omaha area’s major foundations have recognized her leadership by inviting her to participate in exclusive leadership opportunities. She has also found the time to volunteer on the boards of the Nebraska Land Trust, Back to the River, Opera Omaha, and the Offutt Advisory Council.”

To recognize Whitehall’s achievements, ANCA will host an Awards Ceremony during the 2020 ANCA Virtual Summit, September 14-17. 🌿

*Below: Opened in 2019, TreeRush Adventures at Fontenelle Forest is a four-acre adventure course between the trees of the Forest.*

*Bottom: Opened in 2016, Raptor Woodland Refuge houses non-releasable raptors in a unique educational display thirty feet above the forest floor.*



#### **FROM MERICA WHITEHALL:**

It is a great honor to be recognized as the 2020 Outstanding New Leader Award recipient. I recall reading ANCA’s Blue Ribbon Report in preparation for an interview for the position that I have been fortunate to serve in over the past four years. The central theme of the report was “relevance,” and increasing Fontenelle Forest’s relevance has been central to the growth and success that our Board and staff have worked to achieve. As an organization founded over 100 years ago, the Forest is deeply established in the history and the hearts of our community. There is a core identity and purpose that is vitally important to who we are as a nature center. Holding onto a core identity and moving forward into the future first appeared as competing values. Ultimately, we came to understand that being relevant meant that we could both celebrate our achievements and challenge the status quo by embracing the values of excellence, engagement, sustainability, stewardship, and integrity. I am incredibly proud of the work that we have done at Fontenelle Forest through every department and at every level of leadership. We have pushed ourselves and one another. We’ve lifted heavy loads together. And today, we are pulling our oars in rhythm.

The ANCA community has been a key part of my nature center administration journey from the moment it began. I have benefited tremendously from the talent, wisdom, and perspective offered by everyone around me. I am grateful for ANCA’s contribution to my professional growth. And, I am deeply honored to be selected from among the knowledgeable, passionate, and accomplished professionals that comprise the ANCA membership. Thank you.



# Director's Notes

Jen Levy, Executive Director  
ANCA — Logan, UT

**WE ARE ENTERING** our sixth month of living through a pandemic and it is definitely not getting any easier. While we might be getting used to some of the new routine – frequent hand-washing, wearing a mask while out, and interacting with friends, family, and co-workers on Zoom, the decisions seem to be getting much harder. When will it be safe to return to a favorite restaurant? Go to the gym? Go on vacation? More importantly, when can kids and teachers return safely to school and to our centers again? I know many of you are struggling with the reality that schools will not be visiting nature centers and outdoor schools this coming year and that could spell disaster for our industry.

In April 2020, the Lawrence Hall of Science conducted a nationwide survey and the data is clear, we are a field at risk. The [resulting policy brief](#) describes the survey and results as well as recommendations for mitigating the threats to the field. There is no easy solution. We will need funding to maintain our centers and make the needed changes to reopen centers and programs. We will need funding to pay staff and increase access for marginalized communities. We will need to coordinate with schools to engage more students in outdoor learning. The North American Association for Environmental Education released [guidance for school reopening](#) and how outdoor learning can help. The recommendations include partnerships with community organizations

like nature centers and outdoor schools. We have our work cut out for us, but we are not alone. Our network of members, business partners, and local communities are with us through this challenge. We need to stay connected, tell our stories, and share our ideas and successes.

The ANCA CONNECTS program, launched in March, has brought together more than 1,000 participants in our online meetings, webinars, and peer socials. We will continue these meetings, and we are planning the workshops and sessions for our September Virtual Summit. We will continue to share resources for our members who are navigating the pandemic as well as the normal challenges of leading a nature education organization. We are sharing Covid-19 specific resources



es [here](#) including the Nature Center Toolkit, an extensive guide that can help you safely open and maintain your site throughout the pandemic. The toolkit was a joint project between Marshall & Sterling Insurance and ANCA.



*Sept 14-17, 2020*



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*Squam Lakes Natural Science Center*

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*National Audubon Society (formerly)*

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*Warner Park Nature Center*

Chad Truxall

*Marine Discovery Center*

Jenn Wright

*Grass River Natural Area*

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Jen Levy

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Asa Duffee

### EVENTS COORDINATOR

Sarah Reding

### OFFICE & MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

Taylia Sunderland

## Director's Notes (cont. from page 5)

We have been able to maintain the ANCA staff through the past several months, and I am grateful for the work they have done to support our members. I am also thankful to the members of the ANCA Board who are facing the challenges head on at their own organizations as well as supporting ANCA and its members. ANCA's Board of Directors is comprised of some of the top nature center leaders in the country. The Board is structured by design to include representation based on budget size, day use/residential facilities, geographic location, years of experience, and governance type.

July 1 marked the beginning of a new fiscal year for ANCA and new faces on the board. Two amazing members, Amber Parker and Kay Carlson, have finished their terms after six years of incredible service. Carlson, Executive Director of the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes in Shaker Lakes, OH, chaired the Governance Committee and was an active member of the Development Committee. Parker, Executive Director of the Ijams Nature Center in Knoxville, TN, served as the Vice President of Professional Services supporting both ANCA Peer Consults and the Summit. Board service can be one of the most challenging volunteer roles and both Carlson and Parker performed with professionalism and enthusiasm. THANK YOU Amber and Kay!

To fill the vacancies, we welcomed two new board members, Chad Truxall and Javier de León. Truxall is the Executive Director of the Marine Discovery Center in New Smyrna Beach, FL. In 2018, he was awarded the ANCA Outstanding New Leader Award. Truxall has served on Peer Consult Teams and has been actively coordinating Peer Meetings in Florida for the past few years. De León is

the Park Superintendent at Estero Llano Grande State Park and World Birding Center in Weslaco, Texas. He served on the 2018 ANCA Summit Host Committee, is a member of the ANCA DEI Committee, and has served on a Peer Consult Team. Welcome to the ANCA Board Chad and Javier!

At the ANCA Spring Board Meeting, Kitty Pochman, executive director of the Linda Loring Nature Foundation in Nantucket, MA was elected to the position of President Elect. Kristin Smith, Interpretive Programs Supervisor for the Tualatin Hills Park & Recreation District in Beaverton, OR, was elected to the brand-new position of Vice President for Strategic Direction. The full list and bios of the ANCA Board can be found [here](#).

The work ahead will be challenging, but I am confident that with the right team of staff and board ANCA will continue to serve our members who are doing the important work of connecting people with nature. Stay strong and healthy! 🌱

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# Actions Always Prove Why Words Mean Nothing

Merica Whitehall, Executive Director  
Fontenelle Forest — Bellevue, NE

**O**N MARCH 13, 2020, a global pandemic led to a national emergency, sheltering in place, social distancing, and an economic shutdown. Very quickly, a critical health crisis became a political football. People felt fearful, anxious, and isolated. We quickly began to communicate that, “we are all in this together.” Yet, statistics demonstrated that we aren’t really all in it together. As a result of systemic barriers to health and medical care BIPOC experience much higher levels of infection and death from COVID-19.

On May 26, city streets erupted following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer. The racism recognizable in policing today has historic links to slave patrols; a system of policing legalized to subjugate Black people trafficked for profit and bank issued credit by slavers. Floyd’s murder was one of innumerable, equally horrifying, unjustified, and unprosecuted deaths of Black people in America. And again a call for unity rang out from organizations and businesses across the nation.

Today, a growing community of leaders and activists are working across generational, racial, social and economic barriers to assure that Black Lives Matter. Leaders in every sector are reflecting on questions related to “if” and “how” this applies to their organizations.

At nature centers and environmental organizations we must ask ourselves these questions too. According to [Leaking Talent](#), a 2019 study conducted by Green 2.0, “the environmental movement has historically had a lack of racial diversity across all ranks of the largest NGOs and foundations.” While BIPOC represented 36% of the U.S. population in 2014 and comprised 29% of the science and engineering workforce, *BIPOC did not exceed 16% of the staff of environmental organizations for*

*decades even in organizations that stressed the value of diversity.* Today, BIPOC represent almost 41% of the US population according to [Pew Research](#) and only 20% of environmental NGO staff and executives.

## Fontenelle Forest & DEI

In this article I want to share what Fontenelle Forest has done to harness the momentum of the moment to advance racial equity within our organization. What I’ve tried to highlight thus far is that

*Merica Whitehall speaks at Fontenelle Forest.*







*This ornate signage welcomes visitors at Fontenelle Forest Nature Center.*

a system, policy, or procedure is almost always the companion of a consistently created outcome. Actions always prove why words mean nothing. And therefore, if nature centers want to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive we must examine and redesign our systems, our policies, and our procedures.

At Fontenelle Forest we have established a foundation for DEI by:

- Establishing organizational values which include a commitment to inclusivity and the removal of barriers that prevent us from realizing this value;
- Developing and adopting a 20-year master plan that centers the interests and values of our surrounding community rather than imposing Fontenelle Forest's interests and values on the community that we exist to serve; and,
- Including recruitment and retention of top diverse talent as a strategic goal.

Creating a racially just organization requires a focus on changing how your organization operates; removing barriers that exclude others; and, inviting broader and more representative leadership into decision-making. And, we are still challenged. Fontenelle Forest's staff is over 90% White. The attrition rate of non-White staff is 60%. The reasons for staff attrition have included the level of compensation, lack of op-

portunity for growth, and feelings of cultural isolation. The work of undoing continues.

Recruitment of diverse staff and board members must be intentional and you must be willing to invest all the time needed to engage diverse job candidates in the recruitment and hiring process. As new job descriptions are created, rather than simply using a statement about non-discriminatory practices we strive to communicate a culture that embraces DEI. To help us get our job opportunities in front of a diverse audience of high quality candidates we have compiled and use a list of job posting sites and diverse local contacts. Suggestions for your list includes ANCA, the [Foundation List](#), local environmental justice organizations, [Environmental Professionals of Color](#), and [Outdoor Afro](#).

Staff compensation and benefits can also be a barrier to recruiting diverse candidates. Diverse candidates may not have the option to take a job that does not provide them the ability to fully meet their financial obligations. Fontenelle Forest is making market rate compensation a priority as we develop a 3-year plan to move all of our staff positions to competitive compensation. Benefits can be expensive but we are increasing value to our staff by offering greater flexibility and support in work accommodations as well as sick leave and vacation sharing policies.



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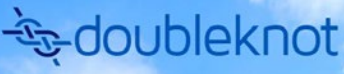


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In our effort to recruit a diverse Board we post Board service opportunities publicly. We use a board service application form and review a matrix to inform our board composition needs when we vet applicants that have applied to serve on our board. Board Covenant expectations can also serve as structural barriers to diversity, specifically meeting times and giving levels. Adopting a “Give/Get” option and holding meetings at times that accommodate volunteers that may work hourly, full-time jobs and/or have household responsibilities are just two options to remove barriers that hinder diverse representation on Boards.

### Using this moment to take action

Among the public proclaimers of #BlackLivesMatter were organizations and businesses “outed” for actively practicing exclusion and discrimination. Fontenelle Forest did not issue a public statement in solidarity with BLM. Instead, we are seizing this opportunity to take real actions to support racial equity. Organizations like [ANCA](#), [The Nature Conservancy](#), and the [Audubon Society](#) provide excellent examples of nature and environmental organizations that have clear positions on racial equity. I have presented these exemplars to Fontenelle Forest’s Board of Directors as I advocate for the creation of a DEI Task Force at the

board level that will:

- Create and adopt a racial equity statement that can be publicly communicated;
- Create and adopt policies and practices at the board and staff level that guarantee that Fontenelle Forest will be a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable organization; and,
- Prioritize racial diversity on Fontenelle Forest’s Board of Directors.

We have recently created a staff committee focused on racial equity to provide a safe space for open, honest dialogue as well as a role offering recommendations for actions and policies Fontenelle Forest needs to transition to operations that more effectively realize racial equity. Recommendations made to the executive director will be brought to HR when new or revised policies are needed.

Until the murder of George Floyd, racial equity and inclusion had not been a central discussion at Fontenelle Forest even though we have consistently advanced this value in the ways that I’ve shared with you. As we take on this important and difficult work nature centers and environmental organizations must take action to institutionalize systems of change that advance racial equity and demonstrate that indeed, we are all in this together. Actions always prove why words mean nothing. 🌱

*Merica Whitehall serves as the executive director of [Fontenelle Forest](#) in Bellevue, NE. Check out [Green 2.0](#) and the [Center for Diversity & the Environment](#) to learn more about advancing racial equity in at your nature center. Also, learn more about how allies for nature are working across disciplines to advance public and planetary health at [SHIFT](#).*

# As Nature Center Leaders, It's Our Responsibility To Be Anti-Racists

Loren Smith, PhD, Director of Network Development and Strategy  
National Audubon Society

**WORD TRAVELED SWIFTLY:** A Black birder named Christian Cooper, well-known in the New York City birding community and a board member of New York City Audubon, had been subjected to racist harassment in Central Park. Within hours, national media was running stories about the incident and the birding world had to reckon with its own challenges as dozens of birders of color came forward with their own stories of being targets of racist bigotry by strangers and fellow birders alike. And then came the video of George Floyd's murder by four Minneapolis police officers.

At [National Audubon Society](#), staff, executives, and board members had been prepared to meet this moment by a multi-year journey of training, learning, and action around equity, diversity, and inclusion, including anti-racism. And so very quickly, Audubon coalesced around a public message and made a series of statements and actions in response to Christian Cooper's experience and George Floyd's murder.

The first came on May 26, the day after the [Central Park incident](#); another followed shortly thereafter about [anti-Black racism](#) and the challenges that people of color face in the conservation and birding communities — with a public commitment to pursuing an anti-racist course of action in everything Audubon does. Audu-

bon also shared a [statement in support of recent Supreme Court wins for Dreamers and LGBTQIA+](#) people during this time. Internally, Audubon has also committed to providing extensive staff trainings and resources, building on years of previous work, to ensure that Audubon meets its stated [equity and inclusion](#) goals.

Audubon's executive and development teams kept up a steady cadence of communications to inform our board and major donors. The message was clear: Audubon

is committed to being anti-racist, hopefully with the committed support of each board member and major donor, because it's what is required of us as humans and conservationists.

Being a 115-year-old organization whose donor base is overwhelmingly white and affluent, but whose 34 nature centers serve more than one million people in communities that are predominantly not white and not affluent, means that Audubon has a huge opportunity when addressing America's racist past and present. There is already excel-

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lent equity, diversity, and inclusion work happening at our nature centers, and we are investing in new anti-racist and de-escalation training for all of our staff so that they can help manage the necessary conversations around these issues in a way that isn't harmful to people of color.

Many of our efforts are built into the day-to-day activities of our center staff and educators across the country. In 2018, we as an organization decided to use the term "community science" instead of "citizen science" to create a more inclusive context for these important projects that help us track bird population health long-term—a change that was championed by one of our nature center directors. Most recently, because of COVID-19, we've had to transition all of our education and camps to distance learning. Audubon nature centers, like Debs Park in Los Angeles, have taken to doing live demonstrations and bird watching events on social media. But because many of the communities we serve lack adequate access to broadband Internet, we've also had to develop Camp-In-A-Box and at-home learning modules, and we began handing them out at meal distribution points in local schools. We also created an entire at-home English- and Spanish-language learning module called **Audubon For Kids/Audubon para niños** that adults could use to keep kids occupied.

Actions like these are not limited to organizations with national

scope, teams of communications professionals, and hundreds of employees. Any professional nature center organization can adopt equity, diversity, and inclusion, and anti-racism policies. Free or low-cost resources exist to educate and inform boards, staff, volunteers, and community members so that they can all better participate in the struggle to end racism, including **Anti-Racism Resources** compiled by Sarah Sophie Flicker, Alyssa Klein (May 2020) and **Anti-Racism, Racial Justice, and Abolition Resources**, curated and compiled by Sujata Tejawani, Sujata Strategies (May-July 2020). Every center has the responsibility to examine policies and practices that perpetuate racism — even those that manifest within their own organization — and to act to address them.

Support for Audubon's anti-racist, pro-inclusion and equity stance has been nearly universal — not just at the staff or board level, but from people who had felt alienated from the broader conservation movement (which is also very white). Our statements and actions — partnering with the organizers of Black Birders Week, working alongside communities of color across the country — have invited far more people in than anyone who chose to leave. We are confident that other nature centers around the country can deploy these same actions and tactics and, together, we can make the outdoors welcoming to everyone. 🌱

*Loren Smith, PhD, is the Director of Network Development and Strategy for the National Audubon Society. He works with Audubon's network of 34 nature centers, 450 chapters, and 120 campus chapters to further programming and activities that promote birds and the places they need. With a diverse background in paleontology and fundraising, Loren feels fortunate to be able to connect his multiple career paths in the service of environmental education and conservation.*



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# Lessons Learned from Crisis: Perspectives from ANCA Emeritus Members

Asa Duffee, Marketing & Communications Coordinator  
ANCA — Asheville, NC

**S**INCE MARCH, we've all heard the word “unprecedented” repeated ad nauseum to describe the pandemic and our current circumstances. Yet while it's true that the field of nature centers has never faced a situation quite like this, it's also true that nearly every organization has endured some form of significant crisis in the past, and that organizational leaders had to navigate those crises.

Knowing that ANCA Emeritus Members have been those leaders during times of challenge, we spoke with three Emeritus Members to share the lessons that they gathered through such experiences.

## Holly Dill

Holly Dill, retired Executive Director of the [Environmental Learning Center](#) (ELC) in Vero Beach, FL, had much to take in when daylight broke upon the ELC on the morning of July 1, 2008. The night before, an intense storm passed through and lightning struck the ELC's largest building, resulting in a fire that destroyed the building and an adjacent public restroom facility.

“It was so severe and so abrupt,” Dill recalls.

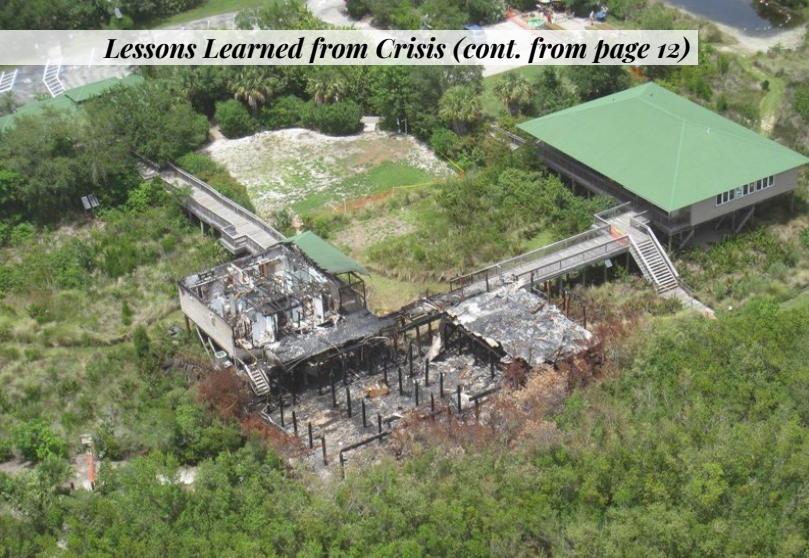
While the organization had contingency plans for natural disasters such as hurricanes, such plans didn't necessarily apply to the situation — in hurricanes, warnings come in advance and you can prepare accordingly. The abruptness of the fire, however, meant that all the contents of the buildings were destroyed.

In the nature and environmental learning center field, we often observe that staff are particularly adaptive, due to the unpredictability of both nature and working with the public. The staff of the ELC proved that observation true in this situation, as they were in the midst of summer camps, and thus parents were dropping off their children that morning right as the staff was processing what had happened. They scrambled to safely host the camps and were able to pull it off with creative and quick thinking.

Meanwhile, Dill had to similarly take fast action, starting by communicating with the board, staff, and the larger community. Because of the quick awareness, the community rallied to support the organization.

*Cover photo: Buildings afire on the night of June 30, 2008, at the Environmental Learning Center in Vero Beach, FL.  
Photo provided by Holly Dill.*





*Left: Aerial view of the fire's aftermath at the ELC. Right: Aerial view of the ELC's newly-constructed buildings in 2010. Photos provided by Holly Dill.*

"Literally, that first day, we had scientists calling us, saying, 'We're dropping off used nets and sampling equipment out of our closets' because they knew our summer camps were going on," Dill says, as all of the ELC's equipment was lost to the fire. "It was just amazing how people wanted to help."

Dill took the process step by step, leading a fundraising campaign to construct new buildings. In May 2010, the ELC hosted a re-opening celebration that showcased its new Discovery Station building.

Dill says that though the sudden tragedy was difficult, there were still lessons that she learned along the way.

"All help is important, no matter how big or small," she says. The ELC's community rallied together in support of the organization, and that rallying was not just beneficial from a financial perspective, but also in bringing the community together. Children hosted lemonade stands and readathons, which Dill saw as an important part of engaging the ELC's audiences.

There were other silver linings to the situation, too. "We also realized that we could view it as seeing the glass as half-full," Dill says. "It gave us an opportunity to redesign the

buildings and it allowed us to recreate what worked, but to improve what did not work." The result was that the new buildings achieved Green Globe certification and worked better for hosting exhibits than the previous buildings.

Dill recognizes that the ELC's situation did not necessarily parallel the pandemic, as there are universal effects from the coronavirus. "With the pandemic, everybody's affected," she says. "In our situation with the fire, the community rallied around us because it was just this one aspect of the community that was affected."

*Holly Dill*



## **Ken Voorhis**

Ken Voorhis, retired Executive Director of the [Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont](#) (GSMIT) and retired Chief Education and Operations Officer at Yellowstone Forever, when asked about any crises he has faced as a leader, listed off a number of unfortunate circumstances.

"Several government shutdowns, a flood that washed out our entrance road, a blizzard that had a group stranded for several days and no power for 10, norovirus that went through a group of 100 college students that were with us for a week, lost students, etc," he responded. From those combined experiences, Voorhis says he learned valuable lessons in responding to any crisis as the leader of an organization.

Voorhis says it's first important to pause before reacting. During crises, "we needed to step back and take time to think and be careful about our first gut reaction" because that reaction isn't usually the appropriate course of action, he says. Instead, gathering information and then forming a plan should be the first step.

Following the plan, then, clear



communication is vital. “You have to give answers as soon as you can, and be as completely transparent with those as possible,” says Voorhis. Even in situations like the pandemic where there are many unknowns, it’s still important to communicate what you don’t know, but are working to find out.

Even though the pandemic is difficult to predict, Voorhis says that planning and training in advance is invaluable for all types of crises. By running through various scenarios together, the staff develop a culture of being better prepared for any situation. In this way, too, you can develop a clear communication and decision-making process, where you have one point person who can direct others in any given scenario.

### **Suzanne Tuttle**

Suzanne Tuttle, retired Manager of the [\*\*Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge\*\*](#) (FWNC&R) in Fort Worth, TX, faced a different situation than the drastic events at the Environmental Learning Center or Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. The city itself owned and operated the nature center, but due to the Great Recession they began to explore the possibility of outsourcing the staffing to the friends group that aided the center’s work.

This possibility endured eighteen months of examination, during which time the future of the staff was uncertain. There was no guarantee that the friends group would maintain the same level of pay and benefits as the city, and some of the staff would have had to reapply to their jobs.

As such, the staff felt some degree of stress about the possible changes. “It was kind of hard to keep mo-



*Ken Voorhis at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont.*

rale up. I tried to be as completely open and forward about what was going on as I could, but I didn’t really have total control over the outcome,” Tuttle says.

Ultimately, the city decided not to transfer the responsibilities to the friends group. The FWNC&R remains a division of the city today, and is still supported by the Friends of the FWNC&R.

Tuttle says that throughout that process, her primary goal was to communicate with the staff as best she could. “I just tried to be as transparent as possible about what I knew, what had been discussed,” she says. Asked about advice for leaders today, she advises, “Be as honest and open about the situation as you can, and set a good example.”

### **Learning from crisis**

The pandemic is uncharted territory for everyone, but these lessons from Dill, Tuttle, and Voorhis share common ground for organizational leaders. Clear communication, protocols and preparation, and a willingness to embrace change are all standards that current leaders can use to navigate our current collective crisis.

Dill specifically mentions that no matter what the results of a crisis are, there’s opportunity to grow and learn through one’s experiences. “It’s important to learn through what you’re going through,” she says.

Hopefully, then, one day years from now, you’ll share your own lessons learned from the 2020 pandemic. 🌱

*Suzanne Tuttle (center) points while leading a group.*





# A Tried-and-True Medium: Grass River Natural Area Engages Audiences by Publishing Books

James Dake, Education Director  
Grass River Natural Area — Bellaire, MI

**N**ATURE CENTERS are always on the lookout for new ways to provide services, creative methods to share interpretive media, and resourceful ways to bring in revenue while still meeting their mission. One way to do that is through publications.

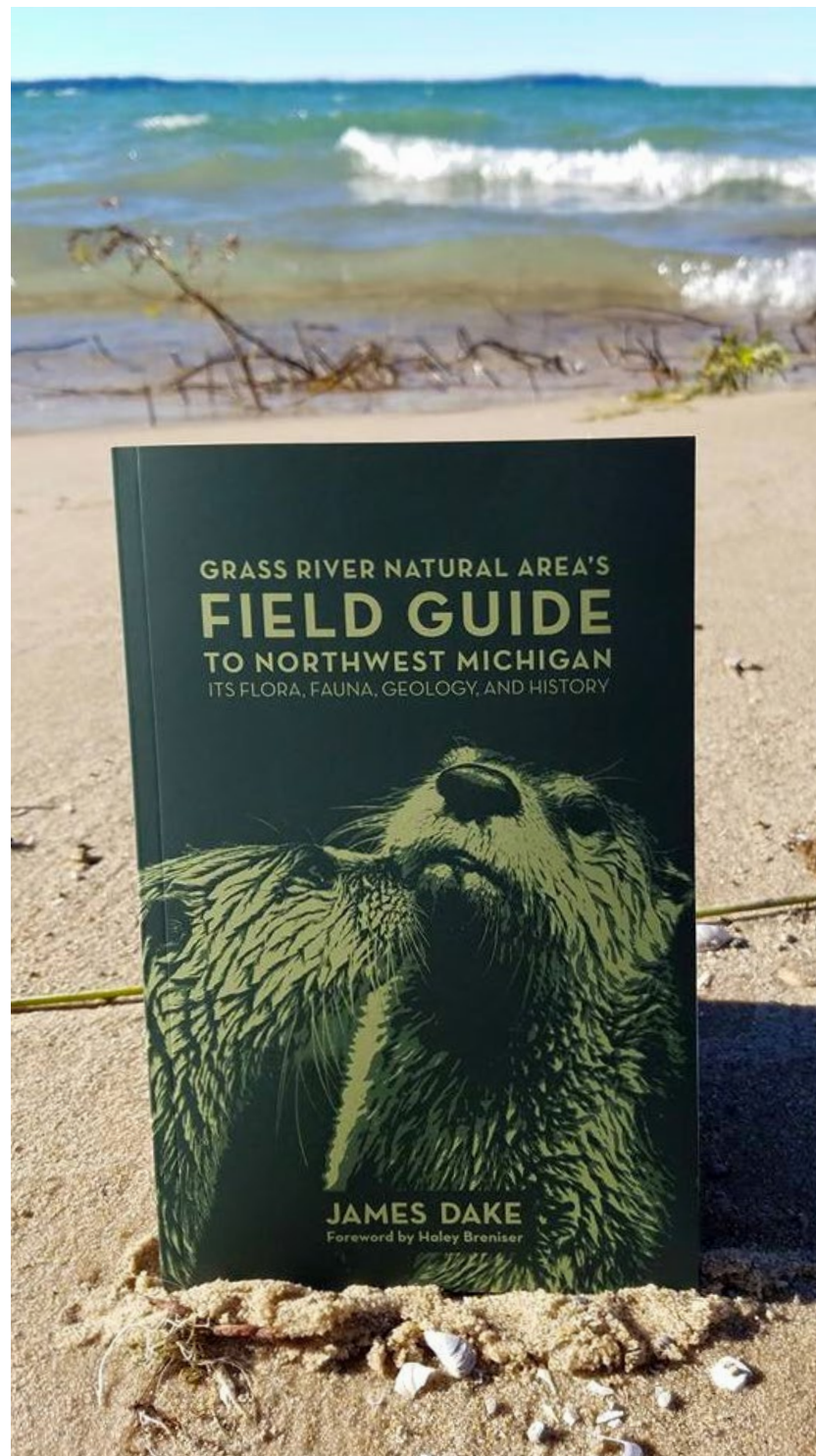
“Books?” you may say. “How are books in any way new or creative? Why not apps?”

While the act of creating and printing books is nothing new, technology has advanced in a way that allows for small nonprofits, like nature centers, to step more easily into the realm of publishing. You can now design your publications in-house, print the books in small quantities with a very quick turnaround time, and get high-quality publications into the hands of your visitors without going through a large publishing company. Being your own publisher opens up a wide range of avenues to create some impactful and eye-catching interpretive media.

And, people still have a deep love for books. Print is certainly not dead in today’s digital world.

**Grass River Natural Area** in Bellaire, Michigan became a publisher in 2016, with the publication of our first book, “Field Guide to Northwest Michigan.” This 152-page book includes a little bit of everything. With chapters on local history and geology, along with full-color photography sections of over 400 species of local flora and fauna, a visitor to the natural area can get the big picture of our organization’s history and mission, while also being able to identify the bug they just saw once they stepped out the door or the toad their child just picked up. The guide is easy to use for beginners, but full of information for nature enthusiasts.

This meets our mission by educating visitors about the plants and animals right in our backyard, while also generating revenue. We sell the





book in our gift shop in the nature center, as well as many of the local bookstores. For many weeks in a row, the guide has been a number one bestseller in one of our local bookstores.

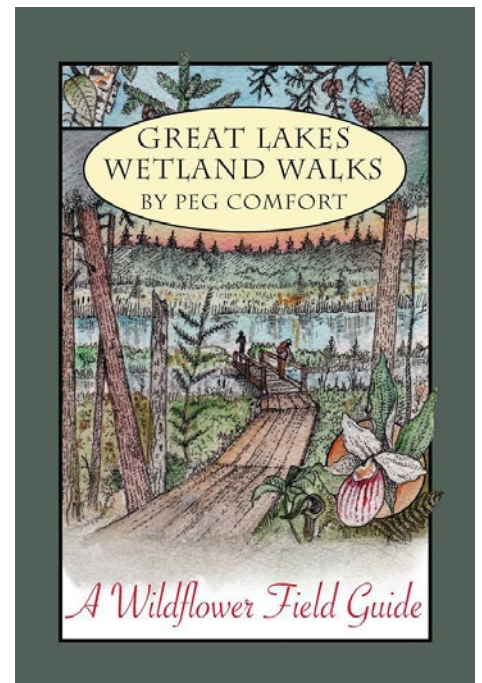
Even better yet, the book was supported by our local community foundation and energy company through grants, which helped to cover the printing costs. These grants also included books being donated to classrooms in local schools to be used as a local science textbook. Since its publication, there are now over 2,800 copies in circulation, with over 650 in the hands of students and teachers. In the coming months, we will be printing over 2,000 additional copies of an updated and revised 2nd edition.

Shortly after publishing the book, we were approached by a long-term volunteer, board member, and donor to our organization. She had been working on a wetland wildflower book for years but had yet to navigate the world of pub-

lishing. "Would it be possible for Grass River to publish my book?" she asked.

What better way to meet our mission and engage our supporters, than to publish a book on wetland wildflowers written by a local naturalist that had been with our organization since its early years? So, in 2019, we published "Great Lakes Wetland Walks" by Peg Comfort. This spiral-bound wetland wildflower guide combined the writing of the author, with cover artwork by a locally known artist, botanical sketches from another artist, a foreword by a well-known local author, and photography from Grass River. We laid out the book, provided the photos, secured grant funding for printing, and worked with the printer to get it in print. We now sell it and distribute it throughout the region.

Our next project is working with another nature center in Michigan to create a field guide for their nature center and region. In this instance, we are providing a service



that we have expertise in to another nature center, and in the end we will get an accessible nature guide into the hands of more people throughout the state.

People love books. And, the technology is there for nature centers to create the books that people love. So get publishing! 🌱

*James Dake is author of "Field Guide to Northwest Michigan" and education director at Grass River Natural Area in Bellaire, Michigan. Check out Grass River's publications [here](https://grassriver.org) or contact James at [james@grassriver.org](mailto:james@grassriver.org) if you have questions about creating your own books.*





# Reflections on Reopening The Wilderness Center

Jeanne Gural, Executive Director  
The Wilderness Center — Wilmot, OH

**I** CONSIDER myself lucky. But it takes more than luck to make a living doing what one loves which, for me, is being an Executive Director of an active nature center. Yes, luck is a part of it, but so is hard work, preparation, training, flexibility, as well as developing and being able to effectively communicate a vision.

While I fully believe in empowering staff, one of the most rewarding and exhausting challenges I have found in my dream job is the sheer amount of decisions that need to be made in any given day. Every day we are faced with having to make small, seemingly insignificant choices, and far reaching decisions that will impact others. But now many of us are having to make decisions that can prove dangerous, possibly even life threatening, as well as potentially detrimental to our centers. While we all have different levels of input from staff or oversight by our boards, the decisions that must be made regarding our centers amid the presence of COVID-19 can weigh heavily.

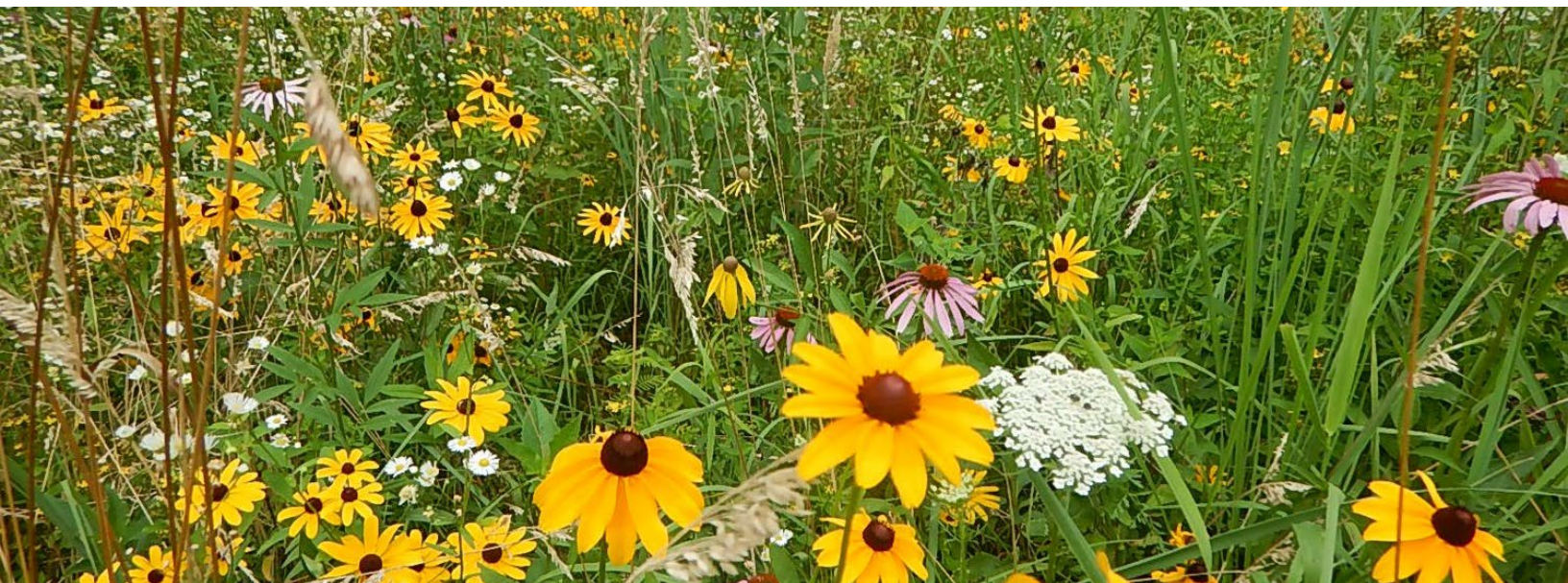
The decision to open vs. staying closed, or closing again will impact your center, staff, members, and you. Please don't discount the impact these decisions can have on your wellbeing; we have an obligation to take care of ourselves as much as we do others.

The board of [The Wilderness Center](#) fully empowered me to make the best decisions I could in regard to closing the center, how best to keep the staff employed and productive, and if/when we should open back up. With those decisions comes responsibility, and that too can feel heavy. The weight was eased by having open communications with the staff, and a robust network of colleagues on which to call.

TWC is now open 7 days a week. We decided to take advantage of this new era to evolve. We decreased operating hours to give ourselves extra time to disinfect surface areas and to check in with each other. We increased signage to include more donation options and membership info. We added QR codes to enhance the visitor experience. We developed new ideas for online, outside, and offsite programming for when that can happen again. We, like many of you, also significantly increased our social media presence. We cleaned, painted, and repaired displays, trails, and other features. We expanded our vision for what we can become.

None of this makes up for the challenges we still face, but by taking action and increasing our communication with each other and our members, we feel better prepared and connected for what may come next.

*Prairie at The Wilderness Center.*



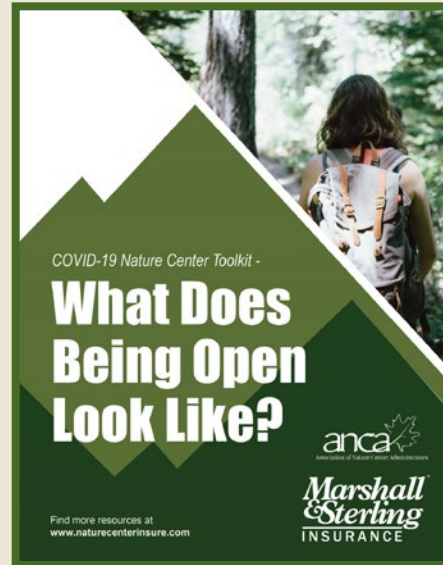


ANCA proved to be a valued source of comfort, training, ideas, cocktails, and laughs during these changing times. It was through a catch-up call with a colleague, Irene Jones from Marshall & Sterling Insurance, that we first discussed the idea of a booklet, a toolkit to help with the decision-making process of whether to open our center back up to the public. From that first casual phone chat ANCA acted quickly — a committee was quickly assembled, a template was produced, and ideas were shared. Having something tangible to help guide and inform was something I didn't know I wanted, but I am thankful it now exists and for being a part of the process. I hope it helps. [Editor's note: see the COVID-19 Nature Center Toolkit to the right.]

The peace we find in nature can help calm our angst. It can bring solace from the tumult. Being able to share that with others is powerful. Our work and our centers make a difference.

Stay safe, fellow travelers, and stay connected. 🌱

*Jeanne M. Gural has been working in the realm of field biology, wildlife ecology, and nature center management for more than 25 years. She has worked in a wide assortment of habitats and countries including Panama, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Jamaica, Mexico, Nevis, Surinam, and several areas within the United States. Jeanne is the Executive Director of The Wilderness Center, in Wilmot, Ohio. TWC is a 665 acre nature center, a 4,000+ acre land trust, a sustainable forestry service, and a conservation cemetery.*



*See the COVID-19  
Nature Center Toolkit here*





# The Importance of Investing in the Future

Asa Duffee, Marketing & Communications Coordinator  
ANCA — Asheville, NC

**W**ITH THE MAJOR CHANGES brought on by the pandemic, our field faces radical economic challenges that have resulted in difficult decisions to furlough or lay off staff, with little certainty that organizations will be able to financially recover in the years to come. While right now there's little certainty of anything in the future, some nature center leaders see this as a critical time to strategize finances on both an organizational and individual level.

"Thinking strategically right now when things are down is so important," says Brooks Paternotte, Executive Director of [Irvine Nature Center](#) in Owings Mills, Md. "This is a time when you can make changes in how you approach the operation of your nature center as well as your financial planning."

Individual financial planning — especially saving for retirement — was one of the Open Space topics at ANCA's 2019 Evolve Summit at the Cincinnati Nature Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Here, we revisit the subject of how some nature center staff approach financial planning for the future, particularly in light of the pandemic.

*Note: ANCA recognizes that with the pandemic, many people within our field are struggling to make ends meet in the present and simply cannot invest in their financial*

*future — and we want to be sensitive to this fact. Nevertheless, we believe it is important when possible to strategically think of one's financial health and future, even in the face of economic challenges and uncertainty.*

## Ensuring financial viability within our field

Becoming particularly wealthy is usually not the main goal of people who work in our field. Anyone who works at a nature center has some conviction in the mission of that organization, and likely feels fulfilled in working toward that mission.

"Most of the people that come to work at nature centers aren't concerned about the money and making a lot of money," Paternotte says. "They want to be able to live and they want to be able to retire."

Paternotte, who is 48, considers that to be a serious issue. While nobody expects to get rich by working at a nature center, there still has to be some degree of financial viability — and it takes both the individual and the organization to make it financially viable. Just because we work in a modest profession "doesn't mean we can't plan for retirement and invest," Paternotte says.

In other words, if an organization is providing a livable salary, then the individuals working at that



Brooks Paternotte

organization need to be strategic about their financial planning for the future.

## Organizations in our field can improve employees' financial planning

Saving for one's future isn't solely the responsibility of the individual, however. Organizations play a large role in how individuals are able to save, whether they offer a match on a retirement account or other benefits that lessen the financial burdens on employees.

Paternotte notes that if employees don't feel financially secure, organizations "can't retain excellent staff and we're always going to be losing them after a couple of years — and that hurts us, there's a cost associated with that. So why not invest in them on the front end rather than spending money

replacing and training?”

As part of its investment in staff, once each year, Irvine Nature Center brings in a presenter from their retirement company to discuss investment options with Irvine employees. The goal is to give more control to staff members while also increasing their financial literacy, especially for younger staff.

The nature center has further tried to increase financial literacy by having a more transparent budget and spreading financial responsibility across the organization. Both senior and junior staff have budgets they must plan; doing this gives them both more ownership of the organization and also a better understanding of how money works in a nonprofit setting.

Because of this, Paternotte says, “we have a much more informed budget and a much higher degree of financial literacy in terms of budgeting than we ever have.”

### **The challenge of saving when you’re just meeting your needs**

Of course, saving money for the future is not easy or possible for everyone.

Having two masters degrees and being an executive director, one might think that Alexa Fantacone at **Teaneck Creek Conservancy** in Teaneck, NJ, would feel financially secure — but that’s not the case. Fantacone, age 28, expresses concern about the challenging economy, especially where she lives.

“Living in New Jersey, with one of the highest costs of living in the country, has played a factor into what is ... sustainable financially,” she says.

Noting such ongoing costs and the current economic uncertainty, Fantacone hasn’t been able to invest in her IRA as much as she

would like. “I would love to be able to plan better for the future,” she says. “But right now it’s kind of what makes ends meet.”

Fantacone adds that she and her husband aspire to buy a house and have kids, which are more immediate financial considerations. “And with all that, how do I think of retirement at this point?”

The context of one’s organization can impact one’s ability to invest, too; a relatively young organization does not have the same financial backing of an organization that has been growing an endowment for decades.

### **Adapting to changes in the economy**

Fantacone also mentions the changing economy as a factor she considers when looking to the future. Whereas previous generations have been able to rely on stability



*Alexa Fantacone*

in their careers, millennials don’t feel that stability, now having seen the pandemic, the Great Recession, and the rise of a gig economy. “It is a little bit more concerning that I don’t necessarily have a full plan



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for five years down the road because I don't know what the turn will be," she says.

Offering a perspective from retirement, Charity Krueger, retired Executive Director at [Aullwood Audubon Center & Farm](#), says that diversity in financial sources will reduce reliability on just one source. "Diversify as much as you can," she says, and investigate all possible options for saving money, even outside of your institution.

Krueger recognizes that how she saved money throughout 33 years in the same position may not directly apply to young people just starting in the profession, with the larger economic changes taking place; even planning on social security is less reliable for younger generations. She still advises, though, that although the mechanisms for saving money are changing, people working in the



*Charity Krueger*

field need to confront those changes directly.

"I have friends my age who are living paycheck to paycheck," she says, and thus she urges all younger people to do what they can to avoid that situation in retirement.

## **Investing now will pay off in the future**

In our field there's an oft-repeated proverb that has various incarnations but goes something like this: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

The same principle applies to how we as nature center professionals invest financially. Since we don't work in a lucrative profession, we must think strategically about how we invest for the future, and time is the most effective tool in that investment. The earlier we invest, the more we can reap later.

Of course, especially in the context of the pandemic, not all plans go as intended. "Who knows what the future will hold despite our best efforts to plan for it?" says Krueger, but she adds that it's still important to invest in retirement and long-term care insurance as early as possible because they will most likely pay off later.

Paternotte is thankful that early in his career he had a mentor who urged him to start saving money, and he hopes that all young professionals have mentors motivating them in that direction. But leaving that encouragement up to chance isn't necessary, and that's why it's important that nature centers consider this matter on an organizational level.

"A lot of it starts with us as leaders advocating for it with our boards," Paternotte says. "We need to be taking better care of people. We can't offer large salaries — it's just not what we can do, but what can we do to make it a livable experience?"

Fantacone agrees that encouraging financial planning for employees will make nature centers more effective in their missions. "The health of the organization is the health of the employees," she says. 🌱

The image is a composite. The top left features the GWWO Architects logo, with 'G|W' over 'W|O' and 'ARCHITECTS' below. The top right text reads 'THE NATURE PLACE' with 'Reading, PA' underneath. The main image shows a modern building with a stone base and a wooden upper section with large glass windows, situated on a grassy hill. A wooden bridge with a person walking on it is in the foreground. The bottom of the image has a dark blue background with white text.

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# Advice for New Directors

**T**HE [ANCA Google Group](#) is one of the main hubs for the ANCA community and we're always impressed with the level of engagement on the list-serv. Recently one conversation stood out to us, in response to a question about advice for a new director:

**Jason Martin, Executive Director**

**Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center**

*I was recently hired into my first nature center ED position (I start on July 1st). To all of the seasoned ED's out there, what is the best piece of advice that you wish you would have had to better prepare you for your first day, first month, and/or first 6 months as an ED?*

Throughout the responses, we saw four main categories of advice: listen, build a network, take care of yourself, and continue to learn. Here, we catalogue some of what ANCA members wrote.

## 1. LISTEN

**Jason Meyer, President/CEO**

**Blandford Nature Center**

**Secretary — ANCA Board of Directors**

For the first several months, you may feel the desire to jump right in and take control. Yes, you'll need to do that on some things for sure, but there is a lot to learn from staff, donors, participants, visitors, and your community by just listening ... without being defensive about anything. In fact, be proactive and ask questions!

**Marisa Oliva-Rodriguez, Manager**

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands  
& World Birding Center**

Take time to get to know your site, your staff and (if you are new to it) your community. Sometimes, we want to hit the ground running, with all sorts of projects and ideas, but it is important to learn the history of the organization and appreciate its role in the community. It's also important to learn the skill set of each of the staff, so that you can work to build a more well rounded, cohesive team. Once you have gotten the lay of the land, you will have a better understanding of how you can bring your ideas and skill set into the fold, and be more successful in implementing your plan.

**Robert Mercer, Retired Director**

**Silver Lake Nature Center**

Practice "Yes, and..." If one is listening carefully, they are NOT listening for problems, but listening for solutions. When someone (staff, board, community) offers a suggestion, the common response is, "Can't do that" or "Yes, but here are the problems with your suggestion." The Yes and... response is, "great idea, how can we implement it and how can we make it even better by bringing together additional resources." Of course the idea must fit the mission and strategic vision.

**Mark McKnight, President/CEO**

**Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center**

Another thing I'd say as someone still very new to this (2.5 years): You'll never see the place from the outside again as you do now. Don't forget those initial impressions—what's odd? Missing? Not welcoming? What's just right and should be protected at all costs?

**Eileen Tramontana, Executive Director**

**Trout Lake Nature Center**

Remember to be flexible and institute change gradually. Talk about anything you are thinking about changing with lots of folks. This helps build buy-in and a desire to see new.

## 2. BUILD A NETWORK

**Marisa E. Oliva-Rodriguez, Manager**

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands  
& World Birding Center**

Another piece of advice is to make time to know your visitors and community partners. Make sure to take time outdoors enjoying what your visitors enjoy and building those relationships. Soon enough you may find yourself stuck behind a desk more often than you like, so making an effort now while you are new will help form and sustain those relationships in the years to come.

**Bryan Wood, Executive Director**

**Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center**

Develop close ties with a few peers that you can call at anytime to talk through things. No one on your nature center team knows exactly what you do and the stressors you deal with, but other EDs do and it is important to have those friendships and support when things are rough.



**Corky McReynolds, Principal  
LeadTeam, LLC**

Leadership is never about the individual, it is always about the people around and with you. You can't do it alone, if you try, you will remain alone.

**Tim Sandsmark, Education Supervisor  
Jefferson County Open Space**

Soaking in as much as you can from other professionals is a great way to learn. When I started in the profession many moons ago, it was ANCA that helped me considerably (and still does).

**Jason Meyer, President/CEO  
Blandford Nature Center  
Secretary — ANCA Board of Directors**

Get involved in ANCA - the resources of this organization are amazing, but the true treasure to be found are in the relationships that you can develop within this group. Find your mentor(s), your friends, and your cohort as a new leader. You've already taken a great first step by reaching out here.

### 3. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

**Rich Patterson, Co-owner  
Winding Pathways**

**Retired Director, Indian Creek Nature Center**  
Take care of yourself and pace yourself. Many people who work in the environment and social services are tremendously devoted to their cause. This is a huge benefit and can be a curse. So, keep perspective. Take time for yourself and your family. They are the priority. At work carefully pick your priorities and try to avoid spreading yourself so thin you fray at the edges. Many good people have suffered burnout, alcoholism, divorce, depression ... so don't let these awful things happen. Take time for fun. Enjoy your accomplishments. Cultivate friendships and hobbies that give you pleasure.

**Vicky Runnoe, Conservation Education  
Supervisor**

**Morrison Knudsen Nature Center**

Do not forget why you got into this field in the first place. Step away from your desk and tag along with a group of kids on a program. Grab your binocs, stroll around the trails and see what you can find. Stand on your pond platform, bridge, overlook, or whatever you have and just chat with some visitors. Go for a hike with your staff just to see what's blooming, what migrants have arrived, what mushrooms are up, whatever you want to discover together.

**Bryan Wood, Executive Director  
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center**

Setting up personal boundaries within your day (and taking vacations) to not think about work is what can allow you to stay in this for the long haul and ultimately be more effective.

**Jen Levy, Executive Director  
ANCA**

Don't make personal sacrifices for the job. Do not give up your pay or PTO in hard times. You earn both, it's a job, and you need to make sure everything you do can be sustained when it is time for someone else to have the job. And make sure your staff do the same. We need to provide jobs with fair pay, reasonable hours, and less burnout.

### 4. CONTINUE TO LEARN

**Bryan Wood, Executive Director  
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center**

Strive to continuously feel challenged or slightly uncomfortable with how much you are doing and where your org. is. If you ever reach a point where you feel you have arrived and everything is fine with your org, it is probably due to a lack of creativity and ingenuity. You need to continue to push yourself and the organization forward, and avoid complacency.

**Eileen Tramontana, Executive Director  
Trout Lake Nature Center**

Also, things take much longer than you will expect. Don't get frustrated just know it is a process.

**Corky McReynolds, Principal  
LeadTeam, LLC**

We can never know enough, our learning never stops. If it does, then we have given up and it's time to move on.

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These were only some of the responses to Jason Martin's question, so there's more to see in the [discussion](#) itself. Also see *Director's Guide to Best Practices* by Norma Jeanne Byrd on our [Publications](#) page.

If you're not already in the [ANCA Google Group](#), we invite you to join — and you don't need to be an ANCA member; the Group is open to all. 🌱



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