

Directions

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

Changing Community Connections

How have nature centers
adapted their engagement?

**DIRECTOR'S
NOTES**

**ENGAGING
TEACHERS
AT TREMONT**

**LAND
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
AT NATURE CENTERS**

**FORUM
HIGHLIGHTS**



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

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

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Cover photo: Sunrise at the Wildlife Barn of Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center in Sandstone, Minnesota.

About ANCA

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

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

Director's Notes: Envisioning Success at ANCA

Jen Levy, Executive Director
ANCA — Logan, UT



We are more than a month into 2021, and I am determined to make this a better year than 2020. We still have a long road to a “post-COVID” normal but there is a light at the end of this incredibly long tunnel.

That light was evident at the ANCA Winter Retreat held at the end of January. Normally, the ANCA Board meets in person in the winter to review and refresh our strategic plan, and this year we gathered on Zoom for our meetings. Despite the continued need to meet virtually, the mood was positive and the meeting was very productive. We took advantage of online tools including [Padlet](#) for our flip charts and notes and [Topia](#) provided an opportunity to gather around a campfire and visit with the ANCA staff. We addressed the very real impacts the pandemic has had on ANCA and our members, and we were able to return to our strategic priorities and recommit to the Vision Statements we articulated in our ANCA 2025 Plan.

VISION STATEMENT #1

ANCA will have organizational capacity and financial stability to meet its current and future objectives.

The events of 2020 made clear the importance of being a strong organization with the capacity to

weather a storm. To that end, we will continue to identify, plan for, and secure the components for our financial stability including the ANCA Endowment, Operational Reserve, and Memorial Scholarship Fund as well as launch an Innovation Fund to secure money for projects and new opportunities. We also recognize that organizational capacity includes supporting our human resources and we will be reviewing ANCA’s personnel policies and compensation schedule.

VISION STATEMENT #2

ANCA will maintain best practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusiveness within our membership and the profession.

A year ago we accepted a proposal from Cream City Conservation & Consulting to help us assess, shape, and improve our practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. With the financial uncertainty of the pandemic we put the proposal, and expense, on hold, but the board voted in January to resume the work. Phase 1 will include an organizational assessment designed to establish a true benchmark of readiness to engage in equity work by evaluating existing organizational structure and culture as well as allowing individual team members to assess their own readiness confidentially. In addition, we will be scheduling a workshop for our members, *Recruitment, Hiring & Retention for the 21st Century Workforce*. The workshop will be customized based on feedback from a similar workshop we offered at the 2020 Summit.

VISION STATEMENT #3

ANCA will continue to recognize and promote its core values while responding & adapting to trends within the dynamic profession.

At the start of the retreat we took the time to re-examine the core values we adopted in 2019 to determine if they are still present in our work. We did this by celebrating our 2020 accomplishments and identifying the core value an accomplishment best aligns with. I am most proud of the work we did to increase opportunities for our membership to support and learn from each other through the ANCA Discussion Forums, the Virtual Summits, and the brand new ANCA CONNECTS program. We also identified the need to connect with outside partner(s) and/or organizations that are studying trends in the field.

VISION STATEMENT #4

ANCA will be the leading source for professional development tools and relevant resources for leaders and aspiring leaders in the nature and environmental center field.

Our work here is critical as we will need to continually evaluate our professional development tools especially as they relate to the needs of our members post-COVID. Before 2020 we had just begun to explore virtual options for our board and staff meetings. In the past ten months we have hosted dozens of member CONNECTS meetings, two Summits, and one Peer Consult - all on Zoom. We look forward to bringing back in-person events but cannot ignore the value of engaging with so many of our members in the virtual world.

VISION STATEMENT #5

ANCA will explore and define our voice toward relevant advocacy and civic engagement.

In 2018, ANCA was asked to add our support to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's request for the consideration of alternatives to the proposed border wall between the United States and Mexico. The pro-

posed wall would directly run through the Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park. The ANCA Board voted unanimously to support TPWD's letter. The Board also decided we needed to draft a policy that would guide our public policy and advocacy efforts. A committee was formed with the task of drafting the policy and a first draft was presented to the Board in August 2019. The policy was met with questions — not about our role as advocates, but about the issues we would prioritize, and for our capacity to implement advocacy efforts. The list of potential issues and topics is vast and we needed to decide where we wanted to have influence. The events of 2020 made it clear where we needed to focus — our plan and strategies should focus on actions that impact the ANCA community at large. At the retreat in January, the ANCA Board approved the [ANCA Public Policy and Advocacy Strategy \(pdf\)](#). The Policy will help guide our efforts to be the voice for our profession and elevate the nature and environmental learning center field. The strategy will guide us in identifying the issues we need to address to support our mission and to unify our members in cooperative action. Our plan will include calls to action when we need our members and the nature and environmental learning center profession to perform an action to call attention to an issue. Examples of ANCA's 2020 Advocacy efforts included:

- letter campaigns advocating for COVID-19 economic relief for nonprofits and for nature and environmental learning centers.
- issuing statements to showcase our support of equal access to nature and providing our members with examples of statements in support of equal access to nature.
- partnering with other organizations in their efforts to bring attention to the need for financial support for nonprofits, environmental education programs, and museums.

Enacting these visions together

I look forward to the work ahead, and I welcome the input of our members in these efforts. Together we can support each other and share the lessons we are learning. I am grateful for the generosity and collective wisdom of the ANCA Community and the strength and courage every single ANCA Member has exhibited this past year. 🌱

Community Connections Change as Organizations Adapt

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



Hardy participants of Osprey Wilds' Picnic Pick Ups.

FOR HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE who celebrate Thanksgiving near Sandstone, Minn., this past holiday was a different experience — and not just because they had to socially distance. Typically the local churches and charitable organizations offer a meal to their communities, but this past year all of those meals were canceled due to the pandemic.

The staff at ANCA Organization Member [Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center](#) took note and decided to provide a *Thanksgiving Feast to Go*; as a normally residential center with food service and overnight facilities, the organization had already been doing *Picnic Pick Ups* where it provides a meal to go. Such meals typically cost \$25 for two serving sizes, but with the Thanksgiving meal Osprey Wilds chose to use a pay-what-you-can model and suggested \$5 as a donation for the meal. Staff planned to provide 150 meals.

After all was said and done, Osprey Wilds served upwards of twice what they had planned — 272 meals. If everyone donated \$5 for the meal, the organization would have brought in \$1,360; it brought in over \$3,000 instead. Over half of that money came from

donors who simply wanted to support the program, and didn't order a meal.

Osprey Wilds Executive Director Bryan Wood says this was a big success financially, but he was even more enthusiastic about the community engagement. Of the people who registered through the program, over half were new to the Osprey Wilds database. On top of that, local businesses supported the meal with food donations, so the service strengthened those relationships as well.

"We were really pleasantly surprised with the interest in it from the community," says Wood.

The *Thanksgiving Feast to Go* is representative of how many nature centers — and particularly residential environmental learning centers — are redefining their community connections in the context of the pandemic. Often these centers are engaging with new communities, including their neighboring communities, and clearly using new methods to connect. Beyond the ubiquitous virtual engagement, we've seen a variety of ways that organizations are connecting either via pick-up service or small in-person groups.

Eagle Bluff and Tremont Use Small Groups for Programs and Activities

Some centers are using private experiences, where a small group can safely share an activity together.

ANCA Organization Member **Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center** offers *Adventure Experiences*, most of which appeal to a more intrepid audience. These include a “Places Seldom Seen Adventure Hike” that has three-foot river crossings, a “Meet Our Wildlife Experience” to learn about animals up close, or “Geo-Snacking” where participants use a GPS to find snacks in hidden places — with “Geo-Schnappings” being the adult version.

The Eagle Bluff staff developed *Adventure Experiences* at a time when there was no other programming, and they saw that families were still eager to be active. By keeping most of the activities outdoors and in small groups, Eagle Bluff can safely offer the experiences while still engaging in-person. The organization has also found that it’s reaching new community members through *Adventure Experiences*, as its audiences in the past have not always focused on local families.

In the warmer months of 2020, **Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont** safely offered in-person Community Science programs, such as monarch tagging and bird banding. Though Tremont had hosted these programs before, they were clearly different in the pandemic. The staff wasn’t sure what to expect when initially preparing for them, but it became clear that such in-person opportunities were popular due to their outdoor and COVID-safe nature. Monarch tagging — in which monarch butterflies receive a lightweight tag to help track their migration — was especially popular.

“These proved to be incredibly impactful programs for a variety of audiences — including youth from urban communities, and adult participants who became either first-time donors or increased their donations,” says Tremont’s President & CEO Cathey McClary. “People seeking solace in the outdoors

found value in participating in these programs that contribute back to our National Park.”

Balancing the need for fundraising

Of course, many nature centers faced a precipitous drop in revenue in 2020, and residential centers were hit particularly hard. Organizations adapted their fundraising engagement accordingly.

ANCA Organization Member **Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park** typically hosts a clambake fundraiser in September, which would bring together hundreds of people and raise over

\$100,000. Instead, this past fall the event transitioned to a meal called *Picnic in Your Park*, similar in model to Osprey Wild’s Thanksgiving meal and *Picnic Pick Ups*. This was clearly billed as a fundraiser, however, with a price point of \$150 and additional sponsor opportunities.

The Conservancy used a virtual component where it sent a video to attendees, but the staff knew that they wanted to



Eagle Bluff’s Adventure Experiences offer up-close encounters with wildlife, including three birds of prey. This small-group experience is held safely in a large indoor space.

include an element of in-person human interaction as well. In this case, attendees arrived to pick up a picnic basket with a full meal and mocktail, and Conservancy leadership staff would greet them at a distance. Participants never got out of their car, but could still have some human interaction — and even go to a designated parking lot where staff would engage with them and catch them up on Conservancy happenings. Afterwards, participants could go picnic at a number of recommended sites in the national park.

Event consultant Stacey Rusher coordinated *Picnic in Your Park* and says it was a strength that there was an in-person element, at a time when community members are craving human interaction.

“People really wanted that face to face,” she says. “We were happy that we could give it to them, even if it was for just a couple minutes in the parking lot.”

Picnic in Your Park didn’t raise nearly as much as the clambake fundraiser it replaced — but this was expected, as the picnic event didn’t include certain fundraising elements that were part of the clambake.

When directly comparing ticket sales and sponsorship revenue, in fact, *Picnic* had an increase of 20% over the clambake. As such the Conservancy staff feel it was encouraging for the future.

“It was very well-received, both successful financially and from a feedback standpoint,” says Rusher. “We feel so strongly about it that we are using it as the model with which to launch our June [fund-raiser].”

Equity remains difficult to balance

One concern about community engagement right now is that many private experiences cost more, and therefore remain inaccessible to those who cannot afford them. At a time when the pandemic has a disproportionate impact on communities of color and low-income people, this is especially worrisome.

“That’s been a huge challenge, to be able to balance equity versus actually bringing in some revenue,” says Eagle Bluff Executive Director Colleen Foehrenbacher.

In an effort to address that challenge, Eagle Bluff worked with a donor to offer certain school programs for free or at reduced cost for schools. This doesn’t apply to the aforementioned Adventure Experiences, but is one effort to integrate equity into the organization’s educational programs.

Woods says that Osprey Wilds was encouraged by the sliding scale of the Thanksgiving Feast To Go event. The staff had discussed such a model for other programs and events in the past, but the Feast To Go was the first to actually use it.

“That broke the dam for us on the pay-what-you-can model,” he says. The organization will likely implement a sliding scale for other

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events and programs, as an effort to make them more accessible.

Looking to the future

As the coronavirus vaccine continues to roll out, nature centers' methods of community engagement will undoubtedly change in the coming months. We know, though, that the vaccine is not an immediate reversal of the pandemic's effects, and that the future of non-virtual connection still faces great uncertainty. Rusher mentioned that the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park aspires to do more in-person engagement later in the year, but they're likely still far from planning any events with large groups.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic, however, is that nature center staff are utilizing their ingenuity and resourcefulness to develop safe services such as those in this article. Foehrenbacher says that though the staff at Eagle Bluff have had to radically change their work, they've risen to the challenge and will continue to do so as the pandemic carries on.

"It's been a good exercise in creativity to have to push ourselves to try and still be able to achieve our mission and reach people," she says. "Even though it's been challenging, it's been really good for us." 🌱

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Photo: Winter sunrise at **Osprey Wilds**
Environmental Learning Center.

Tremont Equips Teachers to Take the Classroom Outside

Erin Canter, Manager of Science Literacy and Research
Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont — Townsend, TN

Educators are learners too, and empowering teachers to feel comfortable taking kids out in their schoolyards is a goal for us at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, right alongside student-centered learning — even when the teachers don’t have all the answers to curious questions of “what’s this?” or “how did this happen?”

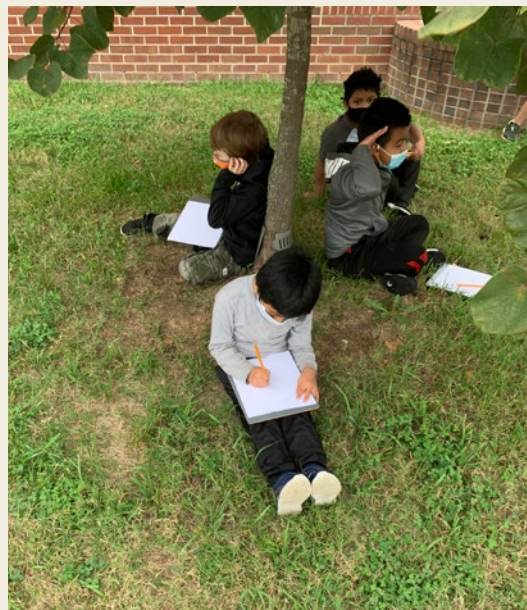
We know that students with access to the outdoors are healthier, more focused, and just have *more fun* while learning. While the evidence for enhanced student well-being is well documented, a missing piece is often support for motivated teachers to get outside, be curious right along with their kids, and see their schoolyards as areas for curiosity driven exploration. Here in East Tennessee we knew of so many motivated teachers working alone to teach outside the classroom, often reinventing the wheel or fighting against misconceptions from colleagues or school administration. We knew them, but they didn’t know each other! Thus the idea to create a network was hatched: the *Community for Schoolyard Teaching & Learning*.

Getting Started

Admittedly, in “normal” years it’s tough to spare staff and resources to create and maintain such a network when our days are packed with hundreds of residential learners on campus. When COVID hit we were given the opportunity to step back, assess the needs of our teachers, and get to work.

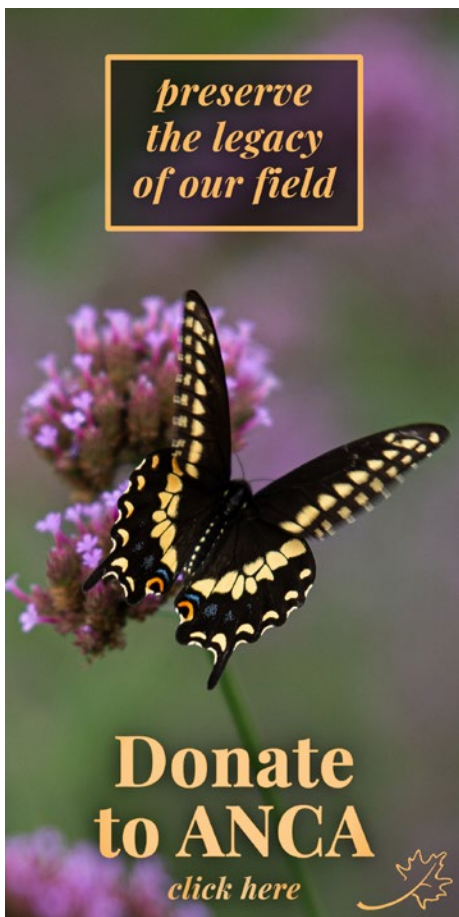
We foresaw an inherent value in the community itself, the interconnectedness of not just local teachers but partners and experts that share a common goal of getting kids outside. With the growing support for time spent outdoors to improve physical and mental health, we made a logical partnership with a public health educator from the Knox County Health Department. This relationship shows a united force which speaks to outdoor experiential education as *essential* for meeting health and academic goals — not just one more thing *in addition to* other goals.

In summer of 2020 we conducted an online Interest and Needs survey to make sure we took direction from our teacher community from the start in the design and goals of our network. We wanted to know *if* and *how* teachers would use



“ It feels rewarding to see firsthand the excitement and wonder my students are experiencing, exploring the natural spaces around the school yard. I get to be part of that!
— Elementary School Teacher





Tremont Equips Teachers (cont.)

such a network. The “if” was a resounding “YES!”. For the “how,” the top responses were to:

- **Connect** with other teachers to learn how to meet standards in the schoolyard.
- **Brainstorm** to create new lesson ideas.
- **Learn** from others about what works: no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to outdoor learning!

Based on the needs expressed by our community and partners, we decided on three basic pillars for our network:

- **Networking:** the sharing of best practices, success stories, and lessons learned with like-minded folks.
- **Belonging:** Much has been shared recently about the need to incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) for our young students into all aspects of experiential outdoor education (see: grow-outside.org). Teachers are just as in need of support and a sense of community! We pay special attention to the SEL needs of our teachers, as well as model techniques of mindfulness activities and metacognition debriefs that they can then facilitate with their students.
- **Professional Development:** Tremont provides professional development in terms of grade level content, facilitation skills, and bringing in experts to provide training in specific skills and fields.

Adapting to COVID

In-person experiential education is unbeatable, but the virtual platform has its benefits. No drive time to in-person gatherings means more accessible meetings for busy teachers juggling work and family. Hosting our discussions via Zoom also allows us to expand our reach and invite folks from out of state to share their experiences, which adds to the feeling that this movement is large and growing, and teachers are not alone in their outdoor efforts.

While we always wanted to include SEL for our teachers, the impacts of a global pandemic, heightened political tension, and continued violence against our Black community members made us pivot to make mental health and interpersonal connection a top priority. We also decided to spend the academic year (2020-2021) with monthly agendas pre-determined by Tremont staff so teachers could join without any additional prep time.



Left: The Community for Schoolyard Teaching & Learning meets on Zoom.

Challenges

We have a core group of forward-thinking, motivated educators that have seen transformation in their students with their own eyes. However, we continue to face a few hurdles in recruitment that we think are based on the fallacies that

1. This is just another meeting, another Zoom, another thing to add to the plate rather than the tools needed to accomplish all the tasks teachers face.
2. Outdoor education is for science. Those in our core group or who have been to Tremont can see their schoolyard as theaters or social studies or Language Arts classrooms, but we have had trouble recruiting folks who are not yet familiar with the value of being outside for ALL subject areas.

Feedback from teachers

For some teachers, the monthly meetings are the needed push to take their kids outside to try some of the discussion techniques and explorations with their students, such as **sound mapping** or **I notice, I wonder, It reminds me of**. No outdoor exploration is too small, and one elementary school teacher took her kids out to find an interesting object and noted she “didn’t even have to ask [students] to be quiet. They were completely engaged.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly in a time of isolation and uncertainty, the most positive feedback is not in the content but in the community itself. The sentiment that was echoed by many can be summed up by the feedback given by one of our local elementary school teachers regarding our monthly calls:

“Tremont has created a safe space for educators to connect with one another, cultivate creativity, and exchange ideas while at the same time allowing a place to find stress relief during this difficult year.

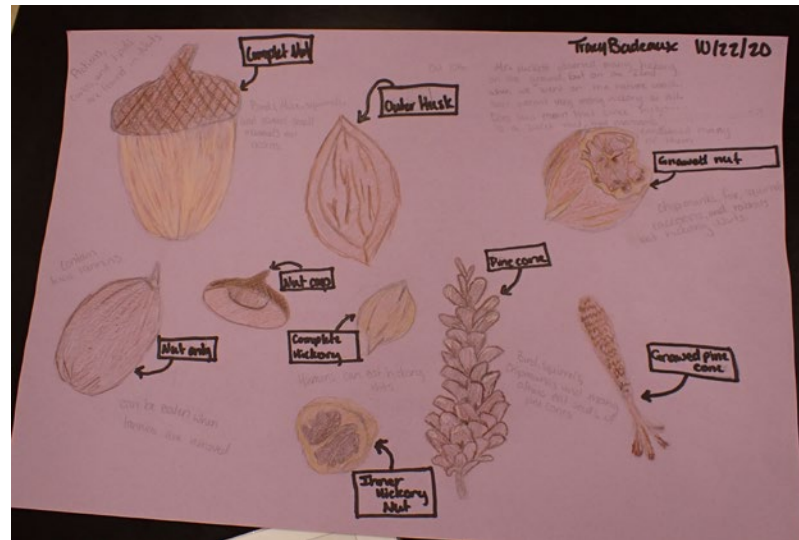
The positive interactions that I have had with nature and those people that love nature have helped me to calm my thoughts, relieve stress, and stay connected. My mental and emotional states have improved, and I look forward to spending time with people that are excited about the world around them.”

Importantly, teachers noted the SEL benefits from going outside for their students as well. They notice their “sleepy and often depressed students open up and become a kid again every time [they] take that outdoor break.” The students themselves are often aware of this: one high school teacher noted that he took his students out many times during COVID, and the feedback from them noted the “mental health relief value of it.”

Vision for the future

As the dust settles from this time of wild uncertainty, we hope to shift from Tremont designing the monthly agendas to an Open Space-like flow where our participants are empowered to suggest topics and

Page of a nature journal, a useful activity for students.



GENERAL OUTLINE OF A SCHOOLYARD TEACHING & LEARNING MEETING

From a teacher survey, we found that monthly, 90 minute calls from 4:30-6:00pm ET would accommodate the majority of schedules. In each of our meetings we facilitate:

- “Mindfulness Moments” — a chance to reset from the day, slow down, check-in
- Opportunities to connect on a personal level through smaller breakout sessions
- Reflection for metacognition — a chance to think and share about what it feels like to learn and share
- Versatile teaching techniques for teachers to experience first as learners that they can then share with students. These experiences always provide a chance to get away from the computer screen to explore, either outside or through a window.
- A space to bring up questions, concerns, and seek advice from others

facilitate discussions based on relevant needs. In the long term, we hope these gatherings take place locally and in-person so that teachers can show off their schoolyards and lead others in lessons and discussions *in situ*.

COVID prevented thousands of students and hundreds of teachers from visiting Tremont over the past year, which highlighted the need for more accessible outdoor excursions. But COVID is not the reason for this movement. While time at an RELC can radically change students' relationships with both peers and teachers and provides incredible opportunities to connect with nature, COVID is not the only barrier to entry for kids having immersive experiences outdoors. As before the pandemic, financial, cultural, and


historical barriers will play a role in who has access to our programs for the foreseeable future.

Schoolyards are not only the largest, least expensive hands-on laboratories that most schools have, they are also vibrant with biodiversity, with minimal "built" classroom structures needed to support curiosity-based exploration in a way that is significantly more accessible to most students. With our local community teachers and partners, we are working together to shift outdoor experiential education from a one time trip to the Great Smoky Mountains, to an integral and daily practice that connects us to nature, each other, and to a greater sense of place in our community. 🌱



Tremont received funding from Arconic and the National Park Foundation to support staff and resources for the network launch.



ERIN CANTER is the Manager of Science Literacy and Research at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. Know of any motivated classroom teachers who need more support to get outside? Have them join Tremont's [Community for Schoolyard Learning](#) or explore [free educator resources](#).





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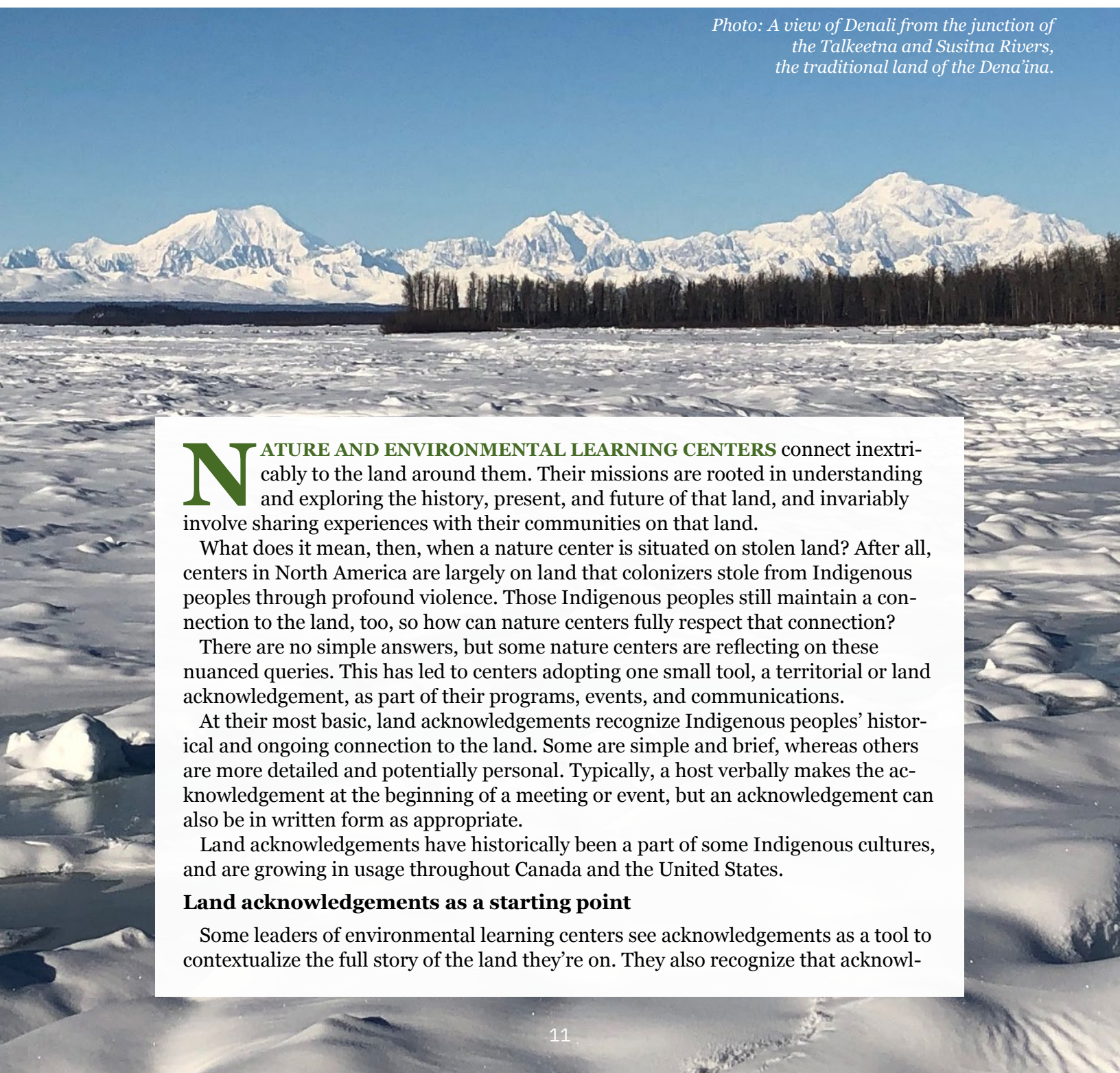
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Land Acknowledgements: Why and How Are Nature Centers Using Them?

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

*Photo: A view of Denali from the junction of
the Talkeetna and Susitna Rivers,
the traditional land of the Dena'ina.*



NATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CENTERS connect inextricably to the land around them. Their missions are rooted in understanding and exploring the history, present, and future of that land, and invariably involve sharing experiences with their communities on that land.

What does it mean, then, when a nature center is situated on stolen land? After all, centers in North America are largely on land that colonizers stole from Indigenous peoples through profound violence. Those Indigenous peoples still maintain a connection to the land, too, so how can nature centers fully respect that connection?

There are no simple answers, but some nature centers are reflecting on these nuanced queries. This has led to centers adopting one small tool, a territorial or land acknowledgement, as part of their programs, events, and communications.

At their most basic, land acknowledgements recognize Indigenous peoples' historical and ongoing connection to the land. Some are simple and brief, whereas others are more detailed and potentially personal. Typically, a host verbally makes the acknowledgement at the beginning of a meeting or event, but an acknowledgement can also be in written form as appropriate.

Land acknowledgements have historically been a part of some Indigenous cultures, and are growing in usage throughout Canada and the United States.

Land acknowledgements as a starting point

Some leaders of environmental learning centers see acknowledgements as a tool to contextualize the full story of the land they're on. They also recognize that acknowl-

edgements are a starting point for action, rather than a complete action by itself.

“Our territorial acknowledgment strives to recognize that throughout time people experience the land in a variety of ways. We are not the owners of the land, but we own our connection to and responsibility for the land,” says ANCA Member Catey McClary, President & CEO of **Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont**. “We see the land acknowledgment not just as a statement to read, but an opportunity to facilitate a shared experience.”

The staff at Tremont developed an acknowledgement in the summer of 2019 and is continually developing its use in different meetings and programs. This reveals an important aspect of all land acknowledgements: there’s not just one acknowledgement that staff can memorize and recite word-for-word. The specific acknowledgement depends on the situation: a staff meeting and a week-long residential program will incorporate land acknowledgements very differently, and every person can make an individualized statement. Further, different locations require different acknowledgements, even if those locations are a few miles apart.

ANCA Organization Member **North Cascades Institute** now uses an acknowledgement to begin every program and institutional meeting, after initially developing its acknowledgements in 2015.

“It’s a very useful tool for grounding people in place and time,” says North Cascades Institute’s Executive Director Saul Weisberg. Rather than a rote statement, he sees it as an important part of the organization’s relationships with Indigenous communities and Tribal entities, as well as its own connection with the land.

ANCA Organization Member **Denali Education Center** is currently building acknowledgements to use in its programs and meetings. Executive Director Jodi Rodwell says that by recognizing Indigenous connec-

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NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The human story of the North Cascades begins with the original stewards of these land and watersheds, the Indigenous Nations and their modern descendants. North Cascades Institute acknowledges that our programs take place in the ancestral homelands of Tribes, Bands, and First Nations, including most notably the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe, Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe, Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, Samish Indian Nation, Nooksack Tribe, Lummi Nation, Stó:lō Nation, Nlaka’pamux Nation, Colville Confederated Tribes, Syilx/Okanagan Nation.

As educators, we have a responsibility to examine our own relationship to the Land we live and teach on and to the local Indigenous communities whose traditions and identities originated in these special places. We acknowledge that the settlement period histories in this place often reflect the detrimental effects of disease, displacement, violence, migration, and loss of tenured land of Indigenous People.

We offer this acknowledgement as a first step in honoring their relationship with land we share, and a call towards further learning and action, not in place of the authentic relationships with local Indigenous communities, but rather to assist in giving them voice.

tion to the land, “we can better represent the place where we are.”

What do land acknowledgements achieve?

A common argument against land acknowledgement is that it’s a token gesture when delivered by non-Indigenous people or institutions. In other words, it’s an action that may not actually decolonize spaces or promote Indigenous rights, and might just serve to make non-Indigenous people feel like they’re taking action.

This is why Weisberg says acknowledgements are part of a bigger picture of connecting with Indigenous communities and addressing colonialism — especially in the context of nature and environmental learning centers as place-based organizations.

“It’s just the barest beginning,” he says. “The real point of this is to begin a genuine relationship.”

All the ANCA Members interviewed for this story made this point clear: a respectful land acknowledgement is based on more than one person’s words, and behind the statement should be authentic action and connection. The statement is just the tip of the iceberg, not the iceberg itself.

McClary says it was vital for Tremont to engage in

dialogue to develop its acknowledgements, and did so with members of the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians \(EBCI\)](#) and the [National Park Foundation](#) among others. “Receiving feedback from EBCI and other leaders of National Parks was a critical starting point of a conversation that strives to ensure we don’t create this for participants, but with participants,” she says.

The North Cascades Institute also reached out to Tribal members to share its acknowledgement effort, and received feedback from some. Weisberg specifically advises “that nature centers offer to compensate Indigenous people for being part of this work. There is a long history of asking people to take their valuable time to work on our issues.”

Rodwell says that in addition to building on Denali Education Center’s connections with Indigenous communities, she thinks that acknowledgements will have a direct impact on non-Indigenous program attendees. She notes that by incorporating these statements into every program, the Center can push back against a racist stereotype of Native people existing only in the past, and make clear that Native people have an ongoing connection to the land.



DILLON NATURE CENTER
Courtesy of Dillon Nature Center

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“We need to do this”

Having helped develop acknowledgements at North Cascades over five years ago, Weisberg says that nature centers shouldn't delay in creating their own and incorporating them into programs and events. The Institute took time to create its acknowledgements and institutionalize them, but he thinks that it doesn't have to be a drawn-out process.

“Right now, I think we should have done it quicker. Dealing with issues like racism and colonization, we're never going to get it 'right,’” Weisberg says. “It's a lifelong journey, and we're going to fail, but we fall forward and we get up and keep moving. You can't fail until you get something out there, and you try it.”

Weisberg adds that he thinks nature centers have a particular responsibility to do land acknowledgements, given their connection to the land.

“We need to do this,” he says. “This is not an optional thing when we're teaching outside with people.” 🌱

RESOURCES

These external resources share more information about Indigenous land acknowledgements and how to develop them.

[A GUIDE TO INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)

Native Governance Center's guide, including tips for creating a land acknowledgement.

[BEYOND TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

An âpihtawikosisân blog post reflecting on territorial acknowledgements and actions beyond them.

[NATIVE LAND](#)

A website run by Native Land Digital, including a map of territories, languages, and treaties.

[WHOSE LAND](#)

A website that maps Indigenous Nations, territories, and Indigenous communities.

[HONOR NATIVE LAND: A GUIDE AND CALL TO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)

The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture's page about land acknowledgement.

[NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE'S LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT GUIDE](#)

The North Cascades Institute has a guide for how to use its own land acknowledgements. We've made this available to ANCA Members in the Policies & Procedures folder of the [Sample Documents & Resources](#) on the ANCA website's Member Portal.

EXAMPLES OF WRITTEN LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AT NATURE CENTERS

[Blandford Nature Center](#)

[Fallen Timbers Environmental Center](#)

[Islandwood](#) (bottom of page)

[North Cascades Institute](#)

[North Branch Nature Center](#) (bottom of page)

[Severson Dells Nature Center](#) (bottom of page)

Photo: Students at the North Cascades Institute.

“This is not an
optional thing when
we're teaching
outside with people.”

Discussion Forum Highlights

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

Ohio nature center in the news

As people who are deeply invested in nature centers, we often hold a fundamental belief that natural spaces are beneficial to our communities — but not everyone shares such beliefs. This was evident in a *Golfweek* article about possible plans to convert a current golf course into a nature preserve near Canton, Ohio; if those plans go ahead, ANCA Member *The Wilderness Center* would operate the property. The article covered the politics surrounding those plans, and why some community members oppose the nature preserve.

After this article was shared on the ANCA Discussion Forum, a conversation ensued regarding nature centers' value to their communities, and the right ways to advocate for that value. For instance, do we highlight the economic benefits from natural spaces, the personal engagement aspects such as educational opportunities, or the environmental advantages such as water quality? Obviously one can approach the conversation in many ways, and the right answer will be nuanced and dependent on one's own community.

This discussion gets to the heart of why nature centers exist, so we recommend you see the Discussion Forum for a wide variety of insights and comments on the topic.

Fullersburg Woods Forest Preserve.

Photo by Deborah A. Gayon.



Membership Questions

This conversation began with specific questions about membership programs, especially about how membership relates to revenue, as well as how membership compares to donations. The discussion featured various insights in response, plus specific logistics such as tax deductions. We found it particularly interesting that certain responses came from centers that are moving *away* from membership programs, whereas others shared how they've benefitted from recently creating such programs.

Scholarship applications

Many nature centers offer needs-based scholarships for programs, and there are myriad ways to implement those scholarships. Some use an honor system, assuming that anyone who asks for a scholarship requires it, but other centers use more extensive verification. This conversation runs the gamut of those methods, and highlights various factors that may influence what's right for different organizations.



Left: A winter program at Wild Bear Nature Center.
Photo by Sarah Travers.



Right: An Eastern Bluebird enduring a Michigan winter at Chippewa Nature Center.

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