

Nature Centers: Staying Relevant, Achieving Impact

Corky McReynolds, PhD, CPF
Professor Emeritus
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Founder & Principal
LeadTeam, LLC

Introduction

This article is based on the 2015 ANCA Blue Ribbon Report, a research study conducted by Andrew Revelle, MS. while at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, the ANCA Summit 2016 Blue Ribbon presentation, and a recent survey on evaluation for nature centers.

A great way to end a career as Director of Treehaven and Professor in the College of Natural Resources at UWSP was to work with Andrew Revelle, as his advisor and co-researcher, on the *ANCA Blue Ribbon Report*. (Revelle 2015)

This study was requested by ANCA in 2014 as part of their 25th anniversary and to update a Blue Ribbon Report on nature centers conducted by the Natural Science for Youth Foundation in 1989. Andrew’s complete work can be found on the ANCA website. [Click here.](#)

As I prepared to present the Blue Ribbon Report titled, “The Future of Nature Centers: A View From the Profession” at the 2016 ANCA Summit, I reflected on the beginning of my profession as a nature center director in 1975, how far we have come and what changes our profession has experienced. This article provides a concept of how nature centers have changed over the decades, interprets relevant studies, and summarizes the Blue Ribbon Report. This article reports on the data collected at our Trends session at the 2016 ANCA Summit and introduces the concept of a national effort to determine the impact of our centers. The purpose of this article is to look ahead, based on our perspectives, to determine how our nature centers remain relevant in our communities.

Our Legacy/Our Development

During the spring of 1976 I was guiding a group of 4th graders on our new boardwalk through a beautiful swamp of cinnamon ferns. As I stopped and began to talk about the ferns, a girl raised her hand and offered, “My mom and dad grow these!” I was a bit confused but replied, “Do they sell them?” “Oh no” she exclaimed, “They smoke them!” This story reminded me of the paradigm of our innocence in providing nature experiences and encounters for youth. As a concept, we were a special place located somewhere in or near a community that invited youth and others to come visit. In its simplest form we were interested in making aware and educating about nature. (Figure 1)

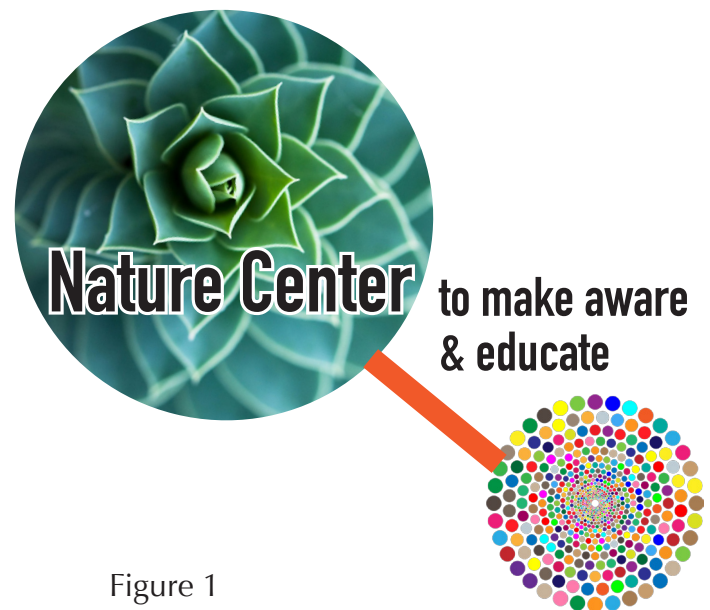


Figure 1

As our profession developed we learned more about creating links, networks, and collaborations within our communities. We learned more about what our stakeholders wanted from us. Our missions were challenged, broadened, and deepened. We were still about nature, but we became more sophisticated to our methods, deliveries, outreach, and relationships. We no longer were just about nature awareness but we became interested in how to create future stewards

for our environment. (Figure 2)

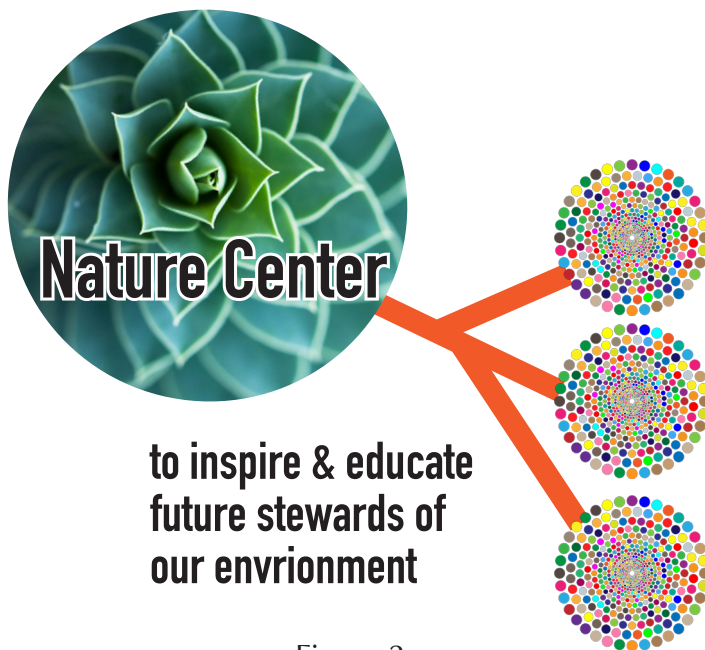


Figure 2

Our nature centers continue to transform through a combination of our need to achieve economic sustainability with a strong desire to remain true to our mission. We are becoming more centered within our community by engaging with and for our environment, rather than just teaching about the environment. Our mission, as a profession, has developed to build capacity for nature-based community engagement and stewardship. (Figure 3)



Figure 3

Interpreting Research

From teaching and providing nature-based experiences for individuals, we are now challenged to become providers and facilitators of nature-based community engagement. Figures 1-3 represent the changes our profession has experienced and this abbreviated review of research represents support to those changes. If we are committed to change and achieving positive impact to fulfill our mission, then we need to consider the implications of what the synthesis of these studies have recommended.

To increase impact we need:

- **Longer Experiences** – For example, a one to two hour one-shot program is not going to achieve impact when compared to 4-6 hour programs. A 4-6 hour program is not going to achieve the desired impact of an overnight program and so on. To achieve the impact we strive for, nature centers need to develop programs where we have longer, more in-depth experiences.

- **Multiple Experiences** – For example, a once a year experience at the nature center may not have the impact of three experiences once per season. Monthly day-long experiences are going to have more impact than visiting three times a year, and so on.

Shepard (1986), Bognar (1998),
Palmberg (2000), Farmer (2007)

To increase environmental behavior we need to:

- **Engage in Active Participation** – Our programs need to engage our clients into active and authentic participation. We have long evolved past being “sages on the stage” to becoming “guides on the side.” Our program participants must be actively involved in all stages of their experience.

- **Remove Barriers** – We must be proactive in assessing and removing external social and cultural obstacles for our participants we are trying to serve. We can no longer be passive and hope they will come. We must also be aware of helping our participants with internal factors that can serve as barriers such as emotion, locus of control, taking personal responsibility, and priorities.

- **Increase Individual’s and Collective Competency** – To practice positive environmental behaviors and take action for the environment requires helping create personal competencies. Competencies are not just

awareness and knowledge about nature but must include an individual's emotional, personal, and cultural confidence factors. Collective competency includes the ability to achieve goals by working together.

Zelezny (1999), Kollmus (2002),
Chawla (2007)

To be relevant in our communities we need to:

- Support Environmental Connections – Programs and experiences we provide need to relate, link, and support the participant's experiences and environmental concerns. We must be proactive in helping make those connections.

- Provide a Place for Leisure – Healthy lifestyles while engaging in quiet but active leisure at the center are valued by our participants and supporters. We may have once seen ourselves as just a place for learning about nature, but have now become integral to promoting and engaging in mission-based leisure.

- Strengthen Community Resilience – We are no longer apart from the community but a valued member of the community. Whatever befalls the community, our nature centers need to be part of the restoration and foundation of a community's core values and culture.

- Promote Civic Engagement – Nature centers can be hubs for developing and promoting nature-based causes through skill building for community members, collaborations, and involvement.

Highlights of the 2015 Blue Ribbon Report

Methods

A survey was developed and sent to the ANCA membership followed by a random and peer nominated selection of nature center directors that either had less than five years (Emerging leaders) or more than 15 years experience (Seasoned leaders). In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 Seasoned and six Emerging leaders.

Survey Results: Changes

Respondents predicted changes that will occur in the nature center profession include:

- 96% Raise funds from new sources, primarily by concentrating on entrepreneurship (earned income)

and Legacy (long-term fund raising practices; i.e. endowment, wills, etc.).

- 77% The Executive Director's role will include stronger skill sets and experience in business, fund raising, and building external connections.

- 77% A nature center's role in the community will become a more active voice for the environment.

- 76% A nature center will develop more formal relationships with schools to create and provide increased authentic experiences. (i.e. STEM, meaningful research, citizen science).

- 57% A nature center will target audiences that will include more experiences for adults and families, less emphasis on schools.

Survey Results: Correlations

- Increase need for funding = increase staff
- Increase educational staff = increase fund raising and public relations staff
- Increase public relations staff = fund raising staff
- The recent recession will continue to impact strategic planning, staffing, and fund raising.

An interpretation of the staff correlations might mean there will be more cross over functions required of educational staff to be more involved in fund raising and public relations in addition to educational responsibilities. The recession is still fresh in the respondents' minds and has caused nature center directors to approach strategic directions and fund raising priorities differently than before the recession.

Interview Results: Comparisons

Emerging Leaders are more likely to:

- Be more technology focused;
- Incorporate climate change into programming;
- Collaborate with other non-profits;
- Expand programming beyond schools;
- Connect authentic experiences with programming;
- Volunteer efforts into rehabbing our environment.

Interview Results: Themes

The Future of Nature Centers:

A View From the Profession identifies a set of sub-themes that have been expanded in this article into a core set of four themes. These four themes could guide our professional development and strategies for the changing roles we encounter.

A key, single phrase that can sum up the results of the research is *Being Relevant*. How do nature centers remain (or become) truly relevant in the communities or the regions we serve?

To be relevant, Nature Centers will be:

- Leaders in Conservation and Restoration – Our nature center sites and our off-site projects will reflect best practices and involvement in conservation and habitat restoration. We will not be silent partners but leaders in demonstrating, promoting, educating, and implementing best practices actively throughout our chosen service areas.
- Leaders in Education and Advocacy – Our nature centers will develop and embrace best practices in educational methods that provide authentic experiences that connects with our participant's real life situations. Our nature centers will expand our role from education to include experiences that elevates our role as leaders in advocacy for environmental and related causes and concerns that fit our mission.

• Leaders in Collaborations and Partnerships – Nature centers will actively seek, form, and lead collaborations that will help implement strategic priorities. Nature centers will form true partnerships with other organizations and other nature centers to fulfill broader causes that can only be accomplished through multiple stakeholders working together.

• Leaders in Reflecting Our Community – Nature centers will be leaders in establishing relationships with all members of the community service area and actively obtain involvement from those members as staff, board, and volunteers. The nature center will reflect the diversity of our community in programs and leadership.

Observation

Has our conceptual model changed? Are we developing into an entity that is becoming an integral member of the community and as relevant as our fire departments, libraries, hospitals, and coffee houses? As institutions we may have achieved or should strive to achieve a model that is more complex than when our centers first started. (Figure 4)

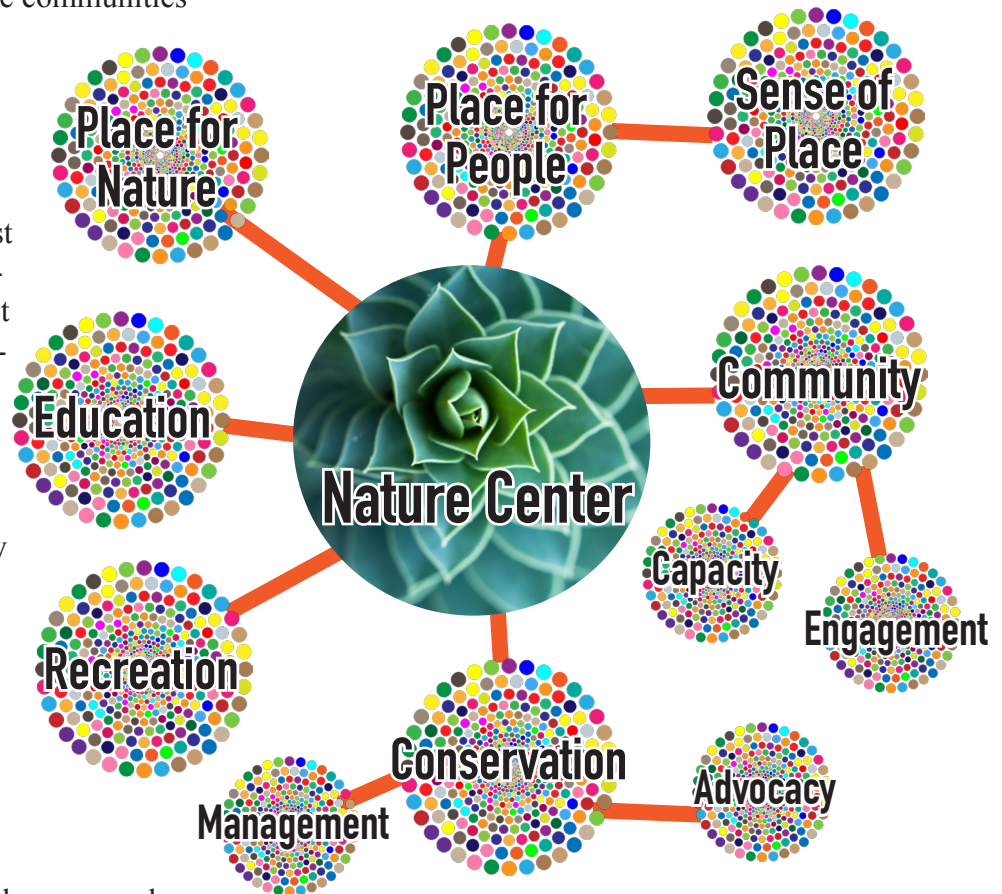


Figure 4

ANCA Summit 2016: Being Relevant

A tradition at the ANCA Summit is to facilitate a plenary session whereby we divide into small groups and tackle a topic. The discussions are documented and are used by the ANCA board in strategic planning to establish service priorities. This year the small group discussions were focused on six questions based on the 2015 Blue Ribbon Report presentation. Each group was asked to brainstorm, discuss, and finally choose their top three (or four) responses to their question. Each question and corresponding top responses are reported below.

I. How do we be relevant in our community?

1. Tell them our story, why we are relevant! Advocate for us.

2. Reflect the community in our staff and volunteers.

3. ASK – Find out what they want and need from our centers and programs or services.

4. Identify and develop true partnerships in the community that collaborate with and support community organizations.

II. How do we become leaders in conservation and advocacy?

1. Inventory our center's natural resources and collaborate with other organization to inventory the conservation needs of our community.

2. Initiate action and establish strong communications.

3. Develop a seamless approach to education and advocacy.

III. How do we build our nature centers for resiliency?

1. Diversify funding and programmatic offerings.

2. Invest in our human capital focusing on staff compensation, professional development, and wellness.

3. Understand our stakeholders.

4. Develop and enhance sustainable facilities.

IV. What programs will achieve impact?

1. Research and develop authentic experiences that are connected to the real world such as monitoring, citizen science, university cooperation, and restoration.

2. Extended impact programming with schools focusing on self-driven activities.

3. Establish programs that are multi and cross-cultural.

V. What services do we provide that the community will view as relevant?

1. Find out what the community thinks is relevant.

2. Create our center's environment that enhances a restorative recharge for our visitors.

3. Be known as the community asset that enhances quality of life.

4. Provide educational programming and work on curriculum support that our community views as relevant.

VI. How do we build leadership in our nature centers that reflect our communities?

1. Target recruitment of staff that reflects the community we serve.

2. Commit to it! Allocate resources, set goals and a timeframe.

3. Create opportunities for high school students to learn about careers in the environmental field, create and host a job fair.

Determining Our Impact

Last fall at the Alliance for Non-Profit Management I learned of a model for organizational evaluation, developed by Dialogues in Action, that could help determine the impact our nature centers are having in their community. In the past few months ANCA has been exploring the model, conducted a membership survey, and is looking at funding sources to pilot the project. This seems to be a natural next step based on the Blue Ribbon Project and other recent studies.

The following is an excerpt and highlights from the survey results. (McReynolds 2016)
(The complete survey results can be requested from corky@leadteamconsulting.com or ANCA).

Project Impact

Are nature centers achieving mission-based impact? There is a growing body of research in environmental education, but it is often program or resource specific. To date, there has been no concerted effort to support the use of evaluation to understand organizational cycles of learning, growth, or impact. A trend in the nonprofit sector is to build the internal capacity of organizations to both use evaluation as a tool for learning and to measure impact.

ANCA has established an ad-hoc team to explore the feasibility of adopting a credible national model of evaluation that nature and environmental learning centers could participate with results that would help each center understand its impact within their community and our collective impact as a profession.

“Project Impact” is a process of training and implementing an internal evaluation developed by Dialogues In Action and will include questions that could be used to determine the impact of our nature centers on a national scale coupled with individually developed questions that are customized to each of the participating centers. The result would be two-fold. One, each participating center would engage in an evaluation process that would result in a self generated report that could be used by the center to determine impact within their local community or service area, recommendations for improvement, and potential use in gaining support. Second, the results would be confidentially shared with ANCA that would establish a data bank that could be used to demonstrate the impact of nature centers nationwide. This collective information could be used to establish a national voice for the profession.

The purpose of the ANCA member survey was to determine if there was enough interest from the nature center community to continue exploring the feasibility of adopting a national evaluation model for

measuring impact. The desired outcome of the survey was to obtain at least nine centers that expressed a positive response to participating in a pilot program.

Survey Highlights

In June 2016 all 346 ANCA member nature centers were surveyed with 90 responses or 26% response rate.

24 centers indicated they would like to participate in a pilot project.

Type of Center

Day	77%
Residential	6
Combination	10
Other	7

Governance

501c3	58%
Institutional	26
Partnership	11
Other	5

Year Established

Range-1942-2018
Mode-1964
Median 1979

Importance of determining impact

88% Very Important/Important

Willingness to share results with ANCA – 86% Yes

The economic significance of the nature center profession may be more than we imagined. The mean annual budget of respondents was just over \$1million. Since this was a survey to the entire membership we can generalize a total ANCA membership annual budget of \$365,000,000.

There were six centers with budgets over \$1million and 16 centers with less than \$1million indicating yes to participating in the pilot. (Two centers did not provide their budget). There were 15 centers with budgets over \$1million and 18 centers with budgets less than \$1million indicating maybe on the survey. (Six centers did not provide a budget).

The good news is that it is not just the centers with the largest budgets interested in participating in the pilot.

Respondents indicated three primary reasons to participate in Project Impact:

1. Determine a method so we can assess our impact.
2. Learn what we can do, changes we can make, that would impact our visitors and what programming would most impact our community.
3. Prove our benefits and growing needs among our constituents.

Respondents indicated three primary reasons for not participating in Project Impact:

1. Limited staff time
2. Limited funding
3. Timing

Next Steps

We have always considered our nature centers relevant, but the question and challenge is how do we know if the community views our nature centers as relevant. We have learned a lot about our profession and we still have lots to learn but we do have opportunities to dig deeper into why, what, and how we do what we do to achieve the impact of our missions and to be relevant in our communities. As a profession we have been dedicated to identifying and embracing best practices for the leadership and administration for our nature centers. We are now at the edge of opportunity to establish our local and national impact and relevancy through programmatic changes, evaluation, and professional growth, as individuals and institutions.

References

- Bognar, Franz (1998) The Influence of Short Term Outdoor Ecology Education on Long Term Variables of Environmental Perspective. *JEE*. Vol. 29.4.
- Chawla, Louis & Debra Flanders Cushing (2007) Education for Strategic Environmental Behavior. *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 13.4.
- Detmann-Easler, Detra & Jim Pease (1999) Evaluating the Effectiveness of Residential Environmental education Programs in Fostering Positive Attitudes Toward Wildlife. *JEE*. Vol. 31.1.
- Farmer, James & Doug Knapp & Greg Benton (2007) An Elementary School Field Trip: Long Term Effects on Ecological & Environmental Knowledge & Attitude Development. *JEE*. Vol. 38.3
- Kollmus, Anja & Julian Agymen (2002) Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behavior? *Environmental Education Research*. Vol.8.3.
- Kostka, Donna (1976) Nature Center Program Impact. *JEE*. Vol. 8.1.
- McGrath, Daniel & Daniel McMillen (2007) Urban Nature Centers and House Prices in Chicago. Berkeley Institute of the Environment. UC-Berkeley.
- McReynolds, Corky (2016) ANCA Project Impact Survey Results, ANCA
- Palmberg, Irmelia & Jari Kuru (2000) Outdoor Activities as a Basis for Environmental Responsibility. *JEE* Vol. 31.4
- Revelle, Andrew (2015) The Future of Nature Centers: A View From the Profession. University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.
- Shepard, Clinton & Larry Speeman (1986) Affecting Environmental Attitudes Through Outdoor Education. *JEE*. Vol. 17.2.
- Stern, Marc (2015) The Value of Nature Centers and Community. Virginia Technical University