The Greatest Teacher of All

This summer, like every summer at camp, is making the long days simply melt away into a blur of memories. One of the single most important events at my camp is training the new crew of educators to teach agricultural education to inner city youth. For most of these young adults, this is their first really rigorous job. They are about to embark on one of the most intense experiences of their lives by connecting children to the outdoors through farm animals and an organic garden. Despite a regimented schedule of workshops intended to increase their arsenal of knowledge, they never truly grasp the magnitude of what they are preparing for, nor do they fathom the impact that this experience will have on these children in broadening their connection to the wider world... That is until one day, when the first thirty-six of three thousand children stand at the front of the barn and await the expertise of their novice educators. Suddenly, the children themselves become teachers as their curiosity guides an exploration that helps each new staff member find his and her own voice and teaching style.

Stepping back, the circle becomes more clear. The educator is a teacher to the children and the children are teacher to the educator but the greatest teacher of all is Nature. Through observation and immersion in nature, the pages in the book of life are revealed, and realities, causes and effects, relationships better understood.

Older educators are an important part of the circle. As we mature in our profession, it is ever more important to mentor the new educators in our charge. We need patience to remember that each young adult is brand new to the profession and they are learning from scratch, even more so than when we were their age. I see that more and more people-- though interested in nature, the environment or the outdoors-- are disconnected from the natural world; they have been sheltered from it.

Why do we have a professional organization? I believe one of our greatest benefits is for one generation to mentor the next generation of professionals. Perhaps as we get older or even retire being active in the organization seems less relevant, but we need the knowledge and expertise of those that have laid the foundation. I invite you all to be a mentor to a young adult and invite them to the Annual Conference, October 2nd-5th at the Silver Bay YMCA on Lake George.

Or to share our collective history with the Legacy Committee that will document and preserve the “First 50 Years” of NYSOEA. Our job is to open doors so all can see what is outside. What greater reward than to open doors for other professionals so that people can begin to see the fundamental power awaiting in the outdoors and to meet the greatest teacher humanity has ever known.
Every spring I enjoy walking along the shores of Staten Island. With five public beaches: South, Midland, Cedar Grove, Great Kills, and Wolfe’s Pond, the borough is blessed with ample per capita sand and surf. Before swimming and sunbathing season, I prefer a more subtle sneak preview on two feet, with only a kite, a pair of binoculars, and a camera.

For the past two seasons, everyone has been more keenly aware of the fact that the coastline is constantly changing. Hurricane Sandy made many of the changes herself in October 2012, but much else has been done in the months since. Bulldozers and back hoes are constantly building berms and everything else needed to provide clean and safe beach access. Resiliency measures have altered the contours and the culture of our coasts. Open waterfront vistas have been replaced with dunes covered with newly planted beach grass. Fences have blocked once-open access. Kite-flying winds have been muffled by dunes. All-terrain vehicles find it hard to resist the challenge of climbing the sand hills, but additional law enforcement, fencing, and public awareness campaigns have helped to reduce this threat.

Shoreline restoration efforts will ultimately provide natural defenses against future storms, and it is exciting to see a concerted effort to rebuild a network of oyster reefs and grassy dunes. The Billion Oyster Project, a partnership of schools, businesses, government, non-profits, and individuals, has begun a project to restore one billion oysters to the New York Harbor over the next 20 years while educating about the ecology and economy of the local marine environment. Based on Governors Island, the Billion Oyster Project has been offering trainings to monitor oyster cages as part of a citizen science project along the southeastern shore of Staten Island and elsewhere along the New York Harbor. After trap bag installation, then berm and dune construction, much of the beach grass planting was done by volunteers through the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation and the Student Conservation Association. To celebrate local efforts, and
to inform the public how our rich maritime past is shaping a resilient future, local civic and business associations, architectural firms, and cultural organizations teamed up to present an “I <3 My Shoreline” event at the Staten Island Museum this past March, including Marine Mammal Education with Gotham Whale, an Interactive Model Oyster Reef, and more.

Enter this beach season more connected to the surrounding communities and more aware of the progress made in more than 18 months since Sandy. While two of the beaches, Cedar Grove and Wolfe’s Pond, still remain closed to swimming as of Memorial Day 2014, I can still stroll the wind-blown sand, look towards the dunes and out at the waves, and know that with each passing day, we are moving closer to “Welikia,” (my good home).

Post-script
On June 2, 2014, it was announced that $60 million was being allocated to construct a living shoreline off the south shore of Staten Island, providing oyster beds and other habitat breakwaters and reefs in an attempt to replace the wide underwater shelf and oyster reefs that once protected the area. The project also includes a plan to engage local schools with oyster monitoring and pathways to building resiliency awareness in the community. This project, proposed by SCAPE/Landscape Architecture, is one of the winners in the Department of Housing and Urban Development “Rebuild by Design” competition.

1“Welikia” means “my good home” in Lenape, the Native American language of New York City at the time of first European contact. The Welikia project (2010-2013) compared the original and current ecology of the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, and the waters in between, with the hopes of re-invigorating the area’s natural heritage. Visit http://welikia.org/ for more information about the project.

Sitting in the midst of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, the Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC) is one of the largest residential environmental education centers in the US. It is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit and the education partner of the National Park Service in the "Water Gap". For over 40 years, PEEC has offered hands-on environmental science, and sustainability education for 24,000 annual visitors from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, utilizing the natural and cultural resources of the Park’s 77,000 acres as its outdoor classroom. Originally, PEEC provided a residential outdoor education experience for inner city students from Philadelphia, New York City, and the urban centers of New Jersey, but over the years, its role and offerings have grown.

PEEC’s campus is the ultimate example of adaptive and innovative reuse. The Center has its origins as an old Poconos honeymoon resort that was seized under eminent domain as part of the ill-fated Delaware River Tocks Island Dam Project. In 1972, PEEC’s cabins and public buildings were repurposed as a residential environmental education center. Subsequent replacement and refurbishment of buildings has created a campus that combines the environmental best practices of the new with the creative reimagining of the old.

PEEC’s award-winning passive-solar dining hall was designed by renowned architect Peter Bohlin and features a wall of used tires pulled from the Delaware River flanked by walls of glass, radiant floor heating, and natural convection cooling.

In the main building, a disused indoor swimming pool was transformed into the EcoZone Exploration and Discovery Room.

The EcoZone features a walk-through beaver lodge and crawl-through bat cave in the old pool’s deep end plus a life-size, climb-in, bald eagle nest and real black bear skeleton magnetized for students to assemble.

Affiliate Spotlight:
The Pocono Environmental Education Center
Engaging Young Scientists, Sustainability in Action

Written by Jeff Rosalasky, Executive Director, PEEC
Dingmans Ferry, PA 18328
The EcoZone provides opportunities to explore places normally inaccessible to humans and is a hands-on introduction to the resources to be explored in the National Park just outside. The EcoZone creates a sense of wonder, enhances the outdoor experience, and provides a venue for deeper investigation.

Taking the position that a campus should provide more than classrooms and beds, PEEC continues to incorporate innovative new architecture and adaptive re-use into the teaching process. The design and function of the campus provides students with not only an appreciation for nature, but a fundamental understanding of the way every day decisions impact the environment and the sustainability of humans on the planet. From the vegetable garden in old canoes, to the aquaponic/hydroponics system growing fish and vegetables, to rain gardens integrated into stormwater management, PEEC’s campus provides concrete examples of what people can do to make a positive impact.

It demonstrates what is possible and what might be possible. PEEC and its buildings continue to be a laboratory for the good that can be accomplished by human design aimed at sustainability. Form not only follows function but engages, challenges, and inspires.

PEEC is open year-round and offers environmental education, sustainability, and recreational programs for visitors of all ages. PEEC also has a summer research program for gifted science and math students (The Sci-Q Project), Delaware River-based programs for urban young women (Women on the Water), and an organic gardening centered residential program for children and young adults with disabilities (Growing Green). PEEC organizes and implements specialized field research-based programs for high school, college, and graduate students and has innovated by adding Art to the traditional STEM curriculum, turning STEM into STEAM and focusing on the math and science inherent in art and the natural world.

The keys to PEEC’s many successful programs and research collaborations are its location within the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and its amazing and varied partnerships. PEEC’s wide variety of educational and research programs dovetail with the mission of the National Parks, and PEEC has the staff and physical infrastructure to support this work. PEEC also has the ability to leverage the resources of the National Park Service, the Forest Service, state wildlife and conservation organizations, and local colleges and universities.

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On Saturday, April 19, the New York State Outdoor Education Association, Scenic Hudson, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Hudson River Estuary Program and Research Reserve met at Scenic Hudson’s Black Creek Preserve for an animal migration adventure.

First, participants put on waders and checked a fyke net for juvenile eels, freshly arrived from the Sargasso Sea. They also looked for river herring on their way upstream to spawn. Afterwards, participants continued on to visit several vernal pools and (gently) look for breeding amphibians. Judging by this salamander and these photos of participants in action, the journey was a success.
I first met Jack in 2009. He didn’t see me coming during that first encounter. In fact, he was facing away from us so I didn’t notice him either as he blended in well with the surroundings. I’m not sure who was more surprised when we each realized the other’s presence, but Jack’s response was to twist quickly and lunge off the bank. Once my heart was back in it is rightful place, I realized I’d just witnessed the incredible speed and agility of a bull alligator. Safely escaping below the surface of black tannin-tinged water, he was gone, yet we remained floating in our canoes, a bit on edge and wondering; where was he? Having encountered the top predator in the swamp’s food chain, it was both enthralling and a bit frightening.

One-Eyed Jack, his full name, better reflects the way he maneuvered through life. Blind in one eye, approaching him from that side as we certainly did, explains why he never saw us paddling towards him. Still in his prime, his speed and swiftness were amazing, like something out of a National Geographic special. At that point, his disability didn’t seem to plague him. While blindness may have made it more challenging to forage for food, he was healthy, well fed, and living a good life in the swamp he called home, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

Introduced to many via Walt Kelly’s satirical comic strip Pogo, the Okefenokee is a pristine wilderness swamp. With ninety percent of the refuge in southeastern Georgia, the remaining acreage lies just south of the border in Florida. In this place, nature rules supreme. Man is just a visitor; a transient who comes and goes without altering the environment or balance of nature. At least that’s the operating theory. And therein lies the rub.

As with any sensitive ecological area, every time a human enters, an opportunity presents itself to alter the landscape or animal behavior. With over 400,000 visitors annually (US Fish & Wildlife statistic), every visitation ups the ante for something negative to occur. Be it the proliferation of garbage or the ill-conceived feeding of wildlife, ultimately the environment becomes less natural in its state. As I discovered this past spring, the latter was the pitfall that ensnared One-Eyed Jack.

It had been a couple of years since Jack and I last crossed paths. Paddling outbound towards Coffee Bay, I felt confident I’d see him on this trip. As we ventured out, countless groups heading towards us invariably posed the same question; “Do you know about the blind alligator out there?” Assuring them that I did, I was taken aback when we finally
encountered him. Visibly smaller in size, his body appeared to be wasting away. While his head remained massive, it no longer fit the torso attached to it. Jack also displayed a level of curiosity with our group that made me very uncomfortable. Upon seeing us he slid off the bank, swimming directly under my canoe. When I turned to lift gear out and place it on to the dock, I found Jack’s head immediately under my hands at the water’s surface. More disconcerting yet, once our food bags were on the dock, Jack raised his snout from the water, placing it amongst our bags as he rummaged around them; not an encouraging sign.

Upon seeing this potentially threatening behavior, my students became openly nervous. With higher than usual water levels, it was obvious this gator would have no problems accessing our tents and cooking area. The situation came to a head as a student and I were moving a canoe on the shore. Walking with the boat I caught a blur of motion out of the corner of my eye. It was Jack, and he wasn’t pleased. If you’ve never had a fully grown predator charge you, please understand that the situation can change rapidly. Luckily for us, Jack stopped six feet short of where we stood. Instantly, he opened his jaws to their fullest extent and with a loud hisssssssssssss, vocalized his displeasure. A few tense moments passed before he slipped back into the water, retreating to the center of the canal. My group was stunned, speechless, and scared; not necessarily in that order. The instant our initial shock wore off, it was obvious we couldn’t spend the night at this site. Jack had crossed the line. His aggressiveness was neither predictable nor desired, so when our collective “flight versus fight” reflex kicked in, we flew all the way back to the Suwannee Canal entry point.

Arriving back at the dock, I walked directly to the office to report our experience. Speaking with friends who work in the refuge, I learned that Jack had appeared ill over the past year or so. It was during this time that his body began wasting away; he also began begging for food. Unfortunately, too many people had obliged him, and canoe groups were now one of his largest sources of food. As Jack acquired a taste for marshmallows, hot dogs, bread, and other junk food that didn’t fulfill his nutritional requirements, he also lost all fear of people.

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It was this absence of fear that eventually sealed his death warrant. Just two days after our return, orders were issued for his termination from the swamp. A bullet to Jack’s brain ensured he’ll never threaten anyone again.

For those of a particular age, the first Earth Day is just a memory; to others, it’s history. Regardless of which camp you’re in, the title of this column, a quote from Pogo, was chosen as the catch phrase for an anti-pollution poster during that initial event. Yet in this case, I think it also speaks to what people collectively, and ultimately, did to Jack. With the passage of time, he had met the enemy, and it was indeed us. Had people only observed him all these years, he might still be reigning over his favorite black water haunts in the swamp, a wild gator, free from the influence of humans. While his death would still have been assured—after all, all life is temporary—nature’s cycle would have been the determining factor, not the hand of man. And that, to me, is the way it should be.

Until next time, may all your rambles lead you to new and exciting places.
It’s been an incredible journey.....

1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s 2010s

... from Earth Day to the Environmental Literacy Plan
... from CFCs to climate change
... from letters to list-serves to links
... from Albany to the Adirondacks, from Buffalo to Brookhaven

Tell us about it!

Help us to create something that will show where NYSEOA has been and inspire the next generation into the next 50 years. There are several ways you can help:

Become part of one of the subcommittees:

- Digitizing: responsible for gathering, organizing and digitizing all material
- StoryCorps: set up opportunities for former and current members to record their thoughts through paper surveys, online forms, and portable audio/video recording sessions about NYSEOA and Outdoor Education. This will become part of a historical PowerPoint that will be shown at the 2018 conference and posted to the website.
- Publications: gather and organize all past publications including: Communicators, Conference Booklets, newsletters, pictures
- History: research and write the history of NYSEOA and Outdoor Education, to be unveiled at the 2018 conference
- 2018 Conference: join the committee and help plan this big event

Share any old material and photos you have
Support these efforts financially by becoming a sponsor
For more information, or to join the Legacy Committee, contact legacy@nysoea.org and visit http://nysoea.org for exciting updates
The 63rd Annual Cortland Recreation Conference Recap

Written by Sarah Powers, SUNY Cortland RPLS Student
Alumni Affairs/Research Symposium Conference Coordinator

We had an abundance of networking and professional development opportunities at this year’s conference. The theme embraced the playful spirit of the recreation field but also the many career paths it covers, including recreation management, outdoor recreation, therapeutic recreation, commercial recreation, tourism, special events planning, and much more. Some of the events at the conference included an internships fair for students, entertainment during lunch, a raffle, a research symposium, a round table, and an all-conference session on the history of the SUNY Cortland Recreation Department. We had a social for all our attendees at Brix Pubaria in Cortland.

Our Metcalf Endowed Keynote Speaker was Dr. Lawrence Allen, currently the Dean of the College of Health, Education and Human Development at Clemson University. Dr. Allen’s primary research interests focus on the development of community tourism and recreation services and their impacts on the social, cultural, and economic well-being of communities. This effort has provided valuable information in understanding tourism and recreation impacts, especially in rural areas and small communities. Most recently, Dr. Allen has been involved with the development of guidelines and management principles for nature-based tourism enterprises and the development of a benefits-based leisure service delivery system. Prior to joining Clemson, Dr. Allen headed the Department of Leisure Studies at the University of Illinois, and previous to that, chaired the Recreation and Leisure Studies Department at Temple University. He was the President of the Academy of Leisure Sciences for 1994-95. He also served as Co-Editor of the Journal of Park and Recreation Administration and was a member of the Board of Directors of the Society of Park and Recreation Educators.

The 63rd conference had a great time planning the conference and heard a lot of positive feedback from attendees. We are excited to see what is in store for the 64th Annual Cortland Recreation Conference, which will be held November 6 & 7, 2014. This year’s theme is “Dive Into Recreation.” Further information is available on our website: www.cortland.edu/recconf. Also, please like us on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/events/1452585654970913/ to learn of new updates and to find out what is going on. We hope to see you at the 64th Annual Cortland Recreation Conference!

Invitation for Articles and News

The PATHWAYS team is always eager to hear from members and publish the articles that they have authored or news or event announcements that they would like to share with fellow members. We invite you to send your submission for our next issue. Simply send us the text with any supporting material -- pictures, newspaper clippings, and more. We can receive it in any of the ways listed below.

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