



December Newsletter



Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

As we enter the final days of 2025 and my second year as Executive Director, I look back on all we have accomplished and feel tremendous joy and gratitude to all of you who have made it happen. Despite budget constraints, we managed to grow the number of program days, school groups, teacher professional development sessions, and conducted some unique and important research. We made our campus more accessible and made our programming more equitable, as we continue to restore and update our campus facilities and infrastructure.

This year we also made one of my dreams come true — we revived some Wapalanne magic and offered our first mini-camp for adults: a Wapalanne Women's Wellness weekend. It was such an enormous success that we will be offering it again in 2026 and we will be adding three more Wapalanne mini-camps including The Lost Art of Camp Craft Skills. Stay tuned.

Like so many of you, the holidays evoke poignant memories of people and times gone by. I can't help but think of my dad, Dr. John J. Kirk, and how proud and pleased he would be to see our campus so vibrant and full of life and promise. He loved the NJSOC and the people who made the magic.

And I share his sentiment.

I continue to be inspired by our community of students, teachers, interns, staff members, researchers, master educators, Camp Wapalanne alumni, health care professionals, facility crew, chefs and food service crew, contractors, trustees and advisers and all our supporters for their dedication to the NJSOC and for continuously supporting us as we grow our program capacity with creative new programming and substantive new lesson planning for all our visitors. Thank you.

I wish the happiest of holidays to you and your families. And I wish you peace, joy, health, adventure and love in the New Year!

In Friendship,

Kerry Kirk Pflugh,
Executive Director, New Jersey School of Conservation



A Year of Impact: 2025 at the New Jersey School of Conservation

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

As 2025 comes to a close, we at the NJ School of Conservation are reflecting on a year marked by connection — to students, educators, researchers, partners, and the land that sustains our work. Across every department, our shared commitment to environmental education, stewardship, and community shaped a year of meaningful progress.

Guided by the mission of the Friends of NJSOC — to foster environmental knowledge and action through education in a natural setting — we continued to grow as a place where

learning is experiential, inclusive, and deeply rooted in care for the environment.

Expanding Environmental Education

Education remains at the core of NJSOC's work. In 2025, more than 2,000 K–12 students from 71 schools across New Jersey learned on our campus, exploring science, ecology, and leadership through immersive, hands-on experiences.

This year also strengthened our support for educators. The Climate Change Learning Collaborative served 130 teachers. Two more grant-funded initiatives, Botanical Literacy (with NJDEP) and Beaver STEAM, reached an additional 42 educators, expanding classroom impact well beyond our campus.

Our Education team grew with the addition of Aliza Kawecki, a new full-time educator, and our partnerships expanded to include organizations such as the NY/NJ Trail Conference, Sussex County ARC, American Exchange Project, The Watershed Institute, Beachy Birders Adventures, and Clean Communities.

We were proud to host our first annual Juneteenth celebration with Outdoors on Purpose, welcoming 45 community members for a day centered on reflection, connection, and time outdoors.

A newly formalized internship program welcomed two full-time summer interns who completed significant projects, including launching the Ecological Research as Education Network (EREN) class and developing a campus-wide Sustainability Plan. We also supported college service-learning and environmental groups from institutions across New Jersey and hosted three weeks of summer camps, including Stokes Music Camp and Camp Sojourner.

The year closed with the launch of our first Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend, a new program that quickly generated strong interest and nearly reached capacity in its inaugural year.

Feeding Body and Community

Nourishment is an essential part of the NJSOC experience. In 2025, our Food Service team prepared and served more than 10,000 meals, supporting students, educators, staff, and guests throughout the year.

Highlights included the addition of a new salad bar, a fully operational second kitchen at Long House, and continued progress toward a Farm-to-Table program. We are also in the process of developing an internship partnership with Sussex County Community College's Culinary Arts program to provide hands-on learning opportunities while strengthening our kitchen operations.

The team also focused on sustainability: reducing food and plastic waste, increasing scratch cooking of soups and sauces, upgrading tools and equipment, and completing major infrastructure repairs, including the freezer and hot truck. Close coordination with the Education team ensured that students with special dietary needs were fully supported.

Health, Safety, and Preparedness

The Health Department played a vital role in ensuring that NJSOC remained a safe and supportive environment for all who visited campus. In 2025, the team supported programming for 71 schools, renewed standing orders with Newton Memorial Hospital, and helped develop and review the Campus Critical Response Plan.

Additional accomplishments included hiring two part-time, on-call nurses, arranging Basic First Aid and CPR training for all staff, and conducting regular campus inspections to maintain health and safety standards.

Research and Collaboration

Research at NJSOC reached new milestones in 2025. A formal agreement with Rutgers University established NJSOC as the North Jersey Research Center, strengthening our role as a hub for environmental research and education.

We also launched a Research Consortium with more than eight universities, colleges, and county colleges. Collaborative projects explored forest productivity, vegetation indices, and temporal growth rates, alongside studies on amphibian health, urbanization, and disease dynamics with Montclair State University.

Ongoing campus-based research included work on vernal pool phenology, lake management, permaculture, and expanded citizen science initiatives through iNaturalist, connecting research directly to education and community engagement.

Investing in Campus and Infrastructure

Behind every successful program is a campus that is safe, functional, and welcoming. In 2025, the Facilities team completed major capital improvement projects, including rebuilding the warehouse, advancing renovations to the Kittatinny Hall Faculty Annex, and reconstructing the Main Office bathroom and business office.

Additional work included constructing a new north entrance to the North Hill toilet house, improving drainage systems, and refurbishing key spaces across campus, from cabins and lodges to the Welcome Center kitchenette.

Beyond these projects, the Facilities team managed the day-to-day care of campus year-round, supported by dedicated full-time and part-time crew members who ensured buildings, trails, and grounds were ready for every season.

Organizational Strength and Support

The Administration Department provided essential support across all areas of NJSOC's operations. In 2025, this included donor and foundation outreach, fundraising, corporate sponsorship development, and implementation of new systems such as a donor software platform and capital projects tracker.

Administrative efforts also strengthened organizational resilience through upgraded insurance coverage, updated policies and manuals, legislative outreach, website and social media communications, Annual Report production, and partnerships, most notably a collaboration with Ramapo College students to develop a comprehensive NJSOC Business Plan.

Moving Forward Together

The accomplishments of 2025 reflect the collective efforts of our staff, volunteers, board members, partners, donors, and supporters. Together, we are nurturing curiosity, building knowledge, and inspiring stewardship, today and for generations to come.

Thank you for being part of the New Jersey School of Conservation community. We look forward to the year ahead.



267

Program Days
from 150 in 2024



104

Days of School Groups from
55 in 2024 and 28 in 2023



2405

Total Number of Students (K-12)
from 1328 in 2024

| People Attending Programs | # of Groups |
|---|-----------------------|
|  3922 in 2025 | 172 in 2025 |
| 2249 in 2024 | 75 in 2024 |

| People Attending Programs | # of Groups |
|---|-----------------------|
|  3922 in 2025 | 172 in 2025 |

| Teacher Workshops |
|---|
| 11 Teacher Workshops from 6 in 2023 |
| 230 Teachers Attending Workshops from 112 in 2023 |

| Statewide Reach |
|--|
| 15 Counties represented from 12 in 2024 |

The mission of the New Jersey School of Conservation is to foster environmental knowledge and action through educational programs delivered in a natural setting.

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WAPALANNE WOMEN'S WELLNESS WEEKEND



Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend

By Sarah Sieminski, Master Educator

Thank you to all guests, staff, chefs and guest instructors who made Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend earlier this month such an extraordinary success.

Taking the time to slow down and resurrect the spirit of Camp Wapalanne with so many people meant so much to us and all who participated.

The Women's Weekend marked an exciting new adventure for us. While NJSOC will always be focused, first and foremost, on youth education, we're always looking to expand our programs to bring new visitors to our campus and ensure that more people from across New Jersey can benefit from the school.

We look forward to future programming inspired by Camp Wapalanne in the months to come, so check back in for opportunities to participate in future themed weekend programming and enjoy just some of the pictures from this one below!





Wildlife At Risk: Eastern Copperhead

By: Ashley Rogers, Former NJSOC Intern

Our next at-risk species is the Eastern Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*), also commonly referred to as the Northern Copperhead. This reptile resides in a variety of environments, ranging from forests and wetlands to suburbs. Northern Copperheads range from the Florida panhandle to northern Massachusetts, and west to Nebraska.

Female copperheads are typically the larger sex, but males have lengthier tails. The species has a copper-colored head that is unmarked, with a reddish-brown, coppery body. The body of this species is covered with chestnut brown colored crossbands. Younger copperheads can have a grayer appearance compared to adult copperheads, with a sulfur yellow-tipped tail. These snakes primarily consume mice, along with other small animals, and survive for an average of 18 years.

While the Eastern Copperhead is a venomous species, it only employs its fangs to acquire prey or as a defense mechanism when threatened, posing a relatively low risk to humans. Unfortunately, due to misconceptions, countless copperhead snakes' lives are taken by humans. Other risks include the pet trade and habitat degradation. As a result, these snakes are listed as threatened in New Jersey. To assist the Eastern Copperhead, advocate for stronger land and water protections, condemn the illegal pet trade, and educate others about the species. For more information, check out the Smithsonian Zoo and the IUCN Red List.





Sign Up for Stokes Music Camp

Stokes is a traditional sleep-away camp for boys and girls ages 10-17 with a musical background. The camp was established by the Preparatory Center For the Arts within the John J. Cali School of Music at Montclair State University in 1992. Its mission is to provide a creative outlet for interested students ages 10-17 with a musical background. The camp prides itself on offering a challenging yet nurturing environment for students of all backgrounds and abilities which encourages creative growth and self-expression.

Stokes is returning to the picturesque campus of The New Jersey School of Conservation, located in Stokes State Forest. Students and faculty alike routinely fall in love with the atmosphere and look forward to seeing the natural wonders that surround us. From the swallows swooping down to touch Lake Wapalanne in the morning to the families of deer who wander on the outskirts of campus, these sightings give students a greater understanding and appreciation of nature.

In addition to a schedule of recreational activities such as boating, hiking, wildlife ecology and herpetology classes, ropes courses, rock wall climbing, team building exercises, and archery, students have the opportunity to participate in a myriad of exciting musical ensembles. Students can choose from ab always impressive musical, band, orchestra, select choir, rock band, and various jazz and chamber ensembles. The camp also offers music theory classes and private lessons in order to build upon students' knowledge and leave them with lasting skills.

Whether you play classical cello, jazz saxophone, electric guitar, or if you've always wanted to be a star on stage, you'll find a home at Stokes. Come join this summer and discover the magic of making music in the forest!

[Sign Up Here](#)

Our Mission

The mission of the New Jersey School of Conservation is to foster environmental knowledge and action through education programs delivered in



a natural setting. We are a community of diverse, responsible stewards of the earth who promote sustainability practices, climate change mitigation and environmental justice.

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