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## November Newsletter



### Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

This fall we celebrate our community of volunteers and leaders that make New Jersey School of Conservation a thriving educational resource for students, teachers and researchers.

We would not be in the position we are in today if it were not for the dedicated service of a multitalented team of legal experts, science teachers, and program leaders who volunteer to lead our programs or work part-time to ensure our visitors have a positive experience time and time again.

At the same time, we have been recognized by our friends in Sussex County for our contributions to the life of our local community.

As Thanksgiving approaches, we are extremely grateful for the deepening web of partnerships that makes NJSOC so successful and that are critical for our ability to make an

impact in Sussex County and for the thousands of students from across the state who visit. Read all about our volunteer appreciation programming, leadership award recipients, and more below!

We wish you and your family a Happy Thanksgiving from our entire NJSOC family to yours.

In Friendship,

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

Henry Kirk Pflugh



## New Jersey School of Conservation honors Dennis Toft with its highest award in recognition of his long service to the school

The New Jersey School of Conservation earlier this month honored prominent environmental attorney Dennis Toft with its highest award in recognition of his long service to the School of Conservation. Dennis is a member of the firm at Chiesa, Shahinian and Giantomaso ("CSG Law"), where he is co-chair of the Environmental Department.

NJSOC presented Dennis with its "Merit Award" at the school's annual Staff, Board and Volunteer Appreciation Day.

Dennis, who first attended the school as a student, has acted as NJSOC's pro bono counsel since the Friends of NJSOC took over management of the campus three years ago. In that role, he spearheaded the school's negotiations of a long-term lease agreement with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection — a critical step that allowed the school to welcome overnight visitors.

Dennis, who continues to serve as counsel to the NJSOC Board of Trustees, has also played a key role, along with his CSG Law colleagues, in developing human resources and other business and organizational policies.

"I'm so proud to honor my good friend Dennis Toft with our Merit Award, highlighting his key role in building the modern School of Conservation," Executive Director Kerry Kirk Pflugh said. "The School of Conservation would not be here if it wasn't for Dennis' strong support in

helping us reopen. And in the years since, Dennis has ably used his legal acumen to lay the foundation for long-term sustainability. We are grateful for his continued leadership and his deep commitment to our mission."

Dennis first came to the school for a two-night trip in fifth grade and then came back in high school to serve as a junior chaperone.

He still remembers taking classes in plant ecology and visiting Tillman's Ravine, a nearby hiking area with natural waterfalls.

These memories stuck with him into adulthood and helped galvanize his involvement in the Friends of the NJSOC, the organization that saved the school from closure during the pandemic and that now manages the campus on behalf of the state.

Dennis received this award during NJSOC's annual Volunteer Appreciation Day to recognize the leading conservation professionals who make a difference every day for the environment, as well as for our students and staff.

NJSOC looks forward to continued progress with its programs, school visitors, teacher training programs, and more in the year ahead.

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*Amelia Basile receives Volunteer of the Year Award from NJSOC Education Team Allyson Lance, Tanya Sulikowski and Aliza Kawecki*

## **NJSOC Recognizes Additional Champions at our Volunteer Appreciation Day**

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

On Saturday, November 1st, NJSOC proudly hosted our annual Staff, Board, and Volunteer Appreciation Day, a special opportunity to recognize the incredible individuals who pour their passion, time, and talent into our mission year-round.

Held in the cozy warmth of Big Timbers, the afternoon began with a delicious lunch thoughtfully prepared by Chefs Mike and Shaun. Our community of staff members, board

trustees, and volunteers shared conversation, laughs, and gratitude over a hearty meal, followed by a sweet finish of cake, coffee, and tea. It was a true celebration of friendship, service, and shared purpose.

## Honoring Outstanding Leadership & Service

Also recognized for their extraordinary contributions to the NJSOC were:

- Shayne Russell – NJSOC Public Program Leadership Award For visionary leadership as Chair of the Public Programs Committee from 2020–2025. Shayne's guidance helped expand NJSOC's public offerings and deepen our engagement with families, educators, and nature lovers across New Jersey.
- Amelia Basile – NJSOC Volunteer Award For a year of dedicated internship service followed by continued volunteer involvement that strengthened our programs and operations. Amelia's enthusiasm and commitment embody the spirit of NJSOC volunteerism.

## Reflecting on a Meaningful Year

NJSOC's Executive Director, Kerry, delivered an inspiring presentation highlighting NJSOC's accomplishments over the past year across all areas of our work:

- Administrative: Strengthened organizational systems and partnerships to support continued growth and sustainability.
- Education & Programs: Expanded impactful learning opportunities for youth, families, and educators, furthering our mission of environmental education and stewardship.
- Facilities & Maintenance: Continued essential improvements and campus care to preserve our natural and historic spaces for generations to come.
- Food Service: Supported a warm, welcoming campus experience through nourishing meals and hospitality that bring our community together.

These achievements are the direct result of the dedication and teamwork of everyone connected to NJSOC.



*Vice President Shayne Russell receives NJSOC Leadership Award from Executive Director  
Kerry Kirk Pflugh*

## A Token of Thanks

To express our gratitude, every attendee received a cozy NJSOC-branded roll-up blanket—a small token to reflect the warmth and appreciation we feel toward all who give so generously to our organization.

We are deeply grateful to our staff, board members, and volunteers whose dedication continues to power the mission of the NJ School of Conservation. Together, we are protecting this historic campus, educating future environmental stewards, and building a stronger, more nature-connected future for New Jersey.

Thank you for being part of our story — and for helping us write the next chapter.

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## County Economic Development Partnership Awards NJSOC with Environmental Leadership Award

The New Jersey School of Conservation is honored to have received the Environmental Leadership Award from the Sussex County Economic Development Partnership at its annual luncheon earlier this month.

The award is "given in recognition of an entity or individual who makes a conscious effort to develop or expand a business that complements and is consistent with the character of the environment of Sussex County."

We are very grateful and excited to have been recognized by the organization, a public-private partnership that seeks to attract and retain businesses in Sussex County.

Since taking over management of NJSOC, we have worked hard to strengthen the school's ties to our local community. We have welcomed school groups from nearby districts, regularly opened our campus to the public for the first time and used local contractors for our facilities improvement and preservation work.

This award is a testament to the work we have done to integrate NJSOC into the life of Sussex County, and we look forward to continued collaboration in the future.

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## Wildlife At Risk: Fowlers Toad

By: Amelia Basile, Former NJSOC Education Intern & Volunteer

The Fowler's Toad (*Anaxyrus fowleri*) is native to New Jersey, as well as Michigan and parts of the US coast of the Gulf of Mexico. These amphibians thrive in a wide range of habitats from woodlands to beaches. However, they cannot withstand extreme temperatures, so they burrow underground for protection during the hot and cold months. The Fowler's Toad can be identified by its dark spot on its underside, spots with 3+ warts throughout the top of its body, and a lighter colored line down its back.

Fowler's Toads can be found hunting for small invertebrates at night. They breed in temporary or permanent pools of water and eggs are laid by the thousands. Many animals eat the eggs and the grown Fowler's Toads even like birds and snakes. To defend themselves, they rely on their camouflage or excrete a poisonous substance to deter predators.

Humans pose a large threat to Fowler's Toads as well. Habitat destruction is taking their habitats away and replacing it with ground that they cannot camouflage themselves in. Fertilizers and pesticides also cause a decline in species that live in areas with chemical use. Before January of 2025, the Fowler's Toad was listed as a species of special concern in NJ. It is now listed as stable; however, they are still in threat of human pollution and habitat destruction.

It is still important to protect and preserve this species as its diet consists mainly of species that humans consider pests, like crickets and other small insects. This aids in regulating

ecosystem services for humans which are extremely important for our existence on a functioning planet. Amphibians like the Fowler's Toad are the main food sources for larger animals which play larger roles in the ecosystem overall.

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*Photo Courtesy of Todd Pierson*



*Photo Courtesy of Smithsonian's National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute*

## Our Mission



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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.

[Visit Our Website](#)

Friends of NJ SOC | One Wapalanne Road | Branchville, NJ 07826 US

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