



February Newsletter



Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

With this month's newsletter, we celebrate Black History Month and honor several leaders who have made a crucial difference in NJSOC's history and our current work. We spotlight Liz Jackson, longtime environmental leader, as well as three members of our Board of Trustees: Tenisha Malcolm-Wint, founder of Outdoors on Purpose, and Sean Spiller, past president of NJEA and longtime classroom science teacher, and Marsha Benovengo, conservationist, mentor, and angler.

As part of our mission to make environmental education fully accessible to all, we are working hard to embed equity in everything we do to ensure that students and teachers in every part of our state — regardless of their backgrounds or ZIP codes — have the opportunity to experience our programming and visit our pristine campus.

Make sure to read about our upcoming programming and join us for our March activities, listed below — and learn about the bobcats that have visited our campus this winter!

In Friendship,

Kerry Kirk Pflugh

Kerry Kirk Pflugh,
Executive Director



Celebrating NJSOC Board Member and Outdoors on Purpose Founder Tenisha Malcolm-Wint

In honor of Black History Month, the New Jersey School of Conservation (NJSOC) proudly spotlights Tenisha Malcolm-Wint — an advocate, organizer and bridge-builder working to expand access to the outdoors across New Jersey.

Tenisha is the Founder and Executive Director of Outdoors on Purpose, a nonprofit she launched in 2020 (and formalized in 2024) to engage all, with an emphasis on Black and brown communities in outdoor recreation, environmental education, food justice and public policy advocacy. She currently serves as Vice President of External Affairs for Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey, leading advocacy efforts that impact over 55,000 girls statewide. Through her consulting firm, TNM Consulting LLC, she advises municipalities, particularly urban communities, on public policy solutions.

Tenisha joined NJSOC shortly after it transitioned to independent leadership, drawn by its legacy as an outdoor learning lab in Stokes State Forest. What began as exploratory conversations with Executive Director Kerry Kirk Pflugh quickly grew into deeper involvement on the NJSOC board. Today, she serves on governance, legislative, and program committees — helping to strengthen board infrastructure, shape culturally relevant programming, and connect legislators to the school's impact.

Through Outdoors on Purpose, Tenisha helped launch two first-ever events in NJSOC's 75-year history: the 2024 Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service and the 2025 Juneteenth Celebration. The Juneteenth event brought more than 20 youth and community members from Newark to campus — many for the first time — by providing charter transportation and removing barriers to access. Participants spent the day canoeing, hiking, testing water samples and raising a Juneteenth flag in reflection and celebration.

For Tenisha, the work is deeply personal. Growing up in an urban community, she found healing and restoration in nature — while also recognizing that outdoor spaces can hold layered and complex histories for Black and brown families.

“This space is for you,” she often reminds participants. “Just as much as anyone else.”

It is this understanding that fuels her dedication to reimagining access and building stronger, more meaningful relationships between community and the outdoors.

Her leadership embodies Black History Month not only as remembrance, but as reclamation, representation, and renewed access for all — ensuring that more young people can see themselves reflected in conservation and the outdoors.



Celebrating Environmental Leader and Montclair State University Alumna Liz Jackson

In celebration of Black History Month, the New Jersey School of Conservation (NJSOC) is proud to honor Liz Jackson — an environmental leader whose journey into the field was truly unique.

Liz grew up in the concrete jungle of Harlem. Every summer, from age six into her twenties, her parents sent her to sleep-away camp where her love and appreciation of the natural world took root.

“They wanted us to see and experience something different,” she recalls.

Those six-week stretches outdoors broadened her worldview and planted seeds that would later shape her life.

Though her first career was in theater, she always maintained a connection with the outdoors by hiking and camping. Liz spent more than 15 years performing in community and off-Broadway productions, including for the Sterling Renaissance Festival. She is a marionettist by trade and has appeared in numerous films.

But in her thirties, seeking a new direction, she took a Career Assessment Exam. The top result? Environmental education.

Unsure what that meant, she reached out to friends who told her about NJSOC. Later she met its director, Dr. Kirk, and enrolled as a graduate fellow to live on campus for two and a half years in the “sticks” of Stokes State Forest.

The early days alone on campus were daunting, but one solo hike around Lake Wapalanne changed everything, and helped Liz reach a new realization: “Only a few places on this planet make me feel whole, and SOC is one of them.”

NJSOC became a space where she could combine her love of both theater and science — using performance and a passion for learning and communication to engage students, interpret lessons and bring the outdoors vividly to life.

Liz would go on to join the New Jersey DEP Fish and Wildlife, where she has spent more than two decades serving the public statewide through conservation education programs such as Be Bear Aware and Project WILD; and develop curricula that trains educators to use the environment as a context for teaching math, science and literacy. Currently, she coordinates two initiatives: Hooked on Fishing and Sisters Afield.

These programs target youth and families — particularly women — in fostering a comfort level with the outdoors while learning to fish.

Today, Liz remains committed to expanding pathways into environmental careers—especially for students who, like her younger self, may not know that this field exists.

“Be the change you want to see,” Liz says.

Through her work and the difference she makes, more young people of color can find themselves reflected in conservation and outdoor education in New Jersey and beyond.





Honoring Educator and Advocate Sean Spiller

In recognition of Black History Month, the New Jersey School of Conservation (NJSOC) recognizes the leadership and advocacy of Sean Spiller — a longtime science educator, former mayor of Montclair, and past president of the New Jersey Education Association — whose support has helped strengthen and sustain the school's mission.

A high school science classroom teacher, Sean Spiller has taught anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, and physics. When asked what he loves most about teaching, his answer is simple: the students.

“Those moments when you see a student truly understand something — that’s the joy,” he shares.

Spiller first became engaged with NJSOC through advocacy efforts at NJEA, working to ensure the school received the funding necessary to continue serving students across the state. As he learned more — about NJSOC's history, its impact, and its setting in the heart of Stokes State Forest — he gained a deep appreciation for its role in New Jersey's educational landscape.

Visiting campus with his own children, Spiller was struck by its unique character. “It’s like a college campus in the woods,” he reflected — an expansive, immersive environment where science is not confined to a textbook but experienced all around you.

For a science educator, that kind of hands-on, outside-the-classroom learning is invaluable. Students are not rushing from one period to the next; they are seeing, touching, and exploring the very ecosystems they study. He believes this immersive approach is especially powerful for students who may struggle in traditional classroom settings. At NJSOC, learning becomes personal and tangible. Curiosity grows naturally when students can connect lessons to the world around them.

Spiller has also emphasized the importance of reducing socioeconomic barriers so more Title I schools and students from urban communities can access these experiences. He notes that environmental challenges often disproportionately impact communities of color, making access to environmental education not just beneficial, but essential.

“We’ve got to reduce those barriers,” he explains, “so more kids have the opportunity to be the ones coming up with solutions.”

In his advocacy with legislators, Spiller has underscored that the State of New Jersey holds both a historic and practical obligation to support NJSOC. The school is a vital part of the state's educational legacy—one that prepares students to confront today's environmental challenges. Reflecting on his own experience as a student of color in a segregated school

system, Spiller stresses the importance of authenticity and representation in education. During Black History Month and beyond, he reminds us that every student should see themselves reflected in the work of conservation and science.

“This is for you,” he says. “You, too, belong in this space.”

Through his leadership, advocacy, and unwavering belief in students, Sean Spiller continues to champion the transformative power of education—ensuring that the School of Conservation remains a place where every child can connect, learn, and lead.





Celebrating NJSOC Board Member and Conservation Trailblazer Marsha Benovengo

In honor of Black History Month, the New Jersey School of Conservation (NJSOC) proudly spotlights board member Marsha Benovengo—a dedicated conservationist, mentor, and angler who is breaking barriers and ensuring the next generation has a seat at the table.

Marsha serves as the Chair of the New Jersey State Council of Trout Unlimited, making history as the first woman of color to hold the position. Her rise to leadership was built on a

foundation of "doing the work" — spending years as a volunteer and educator, leading conservation projects and serving as the president of a local fly fishing club. For Marsha, what began as a childhood bond with her father while fishing and attending camp evolved 20 years ago into a passion for fly fishing, a pursuit she found deeply restorative and calming.

Drawn to the NJSOC by its potential to change lives, Marsha sees the school as a critical front in the fight to preserve childhood access to the natural world. She views the NJSOC not just as a location, but as a vital laboratory where young people can escape the pressures of urban sprawl and discover their own potential through the outdoors.

"It's our obligation to ensure that our young people have the kinds of opportunities that allow them to live out their potential," Marsha says. "To get to know the outdoors, to get to know conservation — especially when sprawl affects their lives."

On the NJSOC board, Marsha is a vocal advocate for authentic equity and inclusion. She believes that for the conservation movement to grow, organizations must be willing to recognize existing challenges, embrace the discomfort of difficult conversations, and proactively reach out to communities that have historically been excluded from outdoor spaces. She has been particularly moved by NJSOC's recent efforts to build bridges with new communities, seeing it as the necessary "work" required to sustain the movement.

For Marsha, Black History Month is a season of profound joy and pride, but it is also a call to action. She often reflects on the fact that she stands on the shoulders of giants—the advocates and leaders who came before her—and she is determined to provide that same steady foundation for those following in her footsteps.

"I want to do the work," she explains, "so that we can leave the next generation the kind of environment that they deserve."

Her leadership at NJSOC embodies the spirit of Black History Month by transforming strength into progress, ensuring that the future of New Jersey's environment is as diverse and resilient as the communities it serves.



Honoring Black Environmental Leaders: Past, Present, and Future

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

Black History Month is a time to celebrate and recognize the individuals who have helped shape our nation's story, including leaders who have protected land, water, and community health. Black environmental leaders have long advocated for access to clean air, safe water, and healthy places to live, helping shape our understanding of conservation and justice for generations to come. From early pioneers who practiced sustainable land use, to modern advocates fighting environmental inequality, to young leaders redefining what environmentalism looks like, their impact continues to grow. This Black History Month, we honor a few of their legacies and the future they are building.

Past: Laying the Foundation

Before environmentalism became a formal movement, Black leaders were using their knowledge of land and nature to improve lives and build resilience:

Dr. Noel Brown was a global environmental leader and former Director of the United Nations Environment Program's North American Regional Office, whose work connected international environmental policy with education and public engagement. Through a professional partnership with former NJSOC Director, Dr. John J. Kirk, Dr. Brown became closely linked to NJSOC and was invited to speak at the organization's 30th Anniversary celebration in 1979, where he presented *The Global Dimensions of Environmental Education*. Dr. Brown later expanded his work through the Environmental Sabbath Program, encouraging communities worldwide to view environmental stewardship as both a scientific and moral responsibility.

Present: Leading the Movement

Today's Black environmental leaders continue this work by addressing modern challenges, like climate change, pollution, and environmental inequality:

Dr. Robert Bullard is known as the Father of Environmental Justice for his pioneering research showing how hazardous facilities and pollution disproportionately impact Black and low-income communities across the United States. Bullard's publication of *Dumping in Dixie* helped launch the environmental justice movement by documenting how toxic waste sites, landfills, and incinerators were systematically sited near colored communities. Despite his work beginning in the Southern parts of the U.S., the frameworks Bullard developed had deep impacts on advocacy work and policymaking, including in the state of NJ, specifically in the areas of **Newark, Elizabeth and Camden**.

Future: The Next Generation

A new generation of leaders is expanding what environmentalism looks like, ensuring it includes diverse voices and lived experiences:

Chloe Desir is New Jersey-born environmental justice organizer, working at the grassroots level to improve environmental health and equality in NJ. She joined the Ironbound Community Corporation after receiving a Political Science degree from Rowan University, where she organizes residents, builds awareness, and advocates for policy changes to address pollution, waste, and unequal environmental burdens in overburdened communities. Desir has been active in opposing a proposed fossil-fuel power plant in Newark's Ironbound neighborhood, advocating for cleaner air and stronger regulations, and also serves on the **New Jersey Environmental Justice Advisory Council**.

The three individuals highlighted here represent just a few of the many Black environmentalists who have shaped and strengthened the environmental movement over time. Their stories remind us that caring for the environment has always been connected to caring for people and our community. We are proud to honor their legacy and recognize the countless other leaders – past, present and future – whose work continues to inspire a more just and sustainable future for all.



Jordan Road School Kicks off Our 2026 School Season

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

This month, we were excited to welcome our very first school group of 2026 to campus: Jordan Road School from the Somers Point School District! Their sixth-grade class joined us for a three-day, two-night overnight experience, continuing a tradition that spans more than four decades.

Jordan Road School has been bringing their sixth graders to the New Jersey School of Conservation since 1984, making their Stokes trip a true rite of passage. Every student who has passed through the school has had their Stokes experience. Even during the pandemic, when overnight trips weren't possible, students still came for day trips as eighth graders so they wouldn't miss out entirely. That dedication speaks volumes about how deeply this experience is woven into the school's culture.

Much of that continuity is thanks to their longtime trip coordinator, Devon Kallen, who has been organizing these visits for over 20 years. From planning fundraisers to collecting winter gear so every student arrives prepared, Devon works tirelessly to ensure the trip is successful for both students and staff. Jordan Road also brings several familiar faces back to campus each year, including their nurse Margo, who will be retiring this year.

We're especially grateful that the cold weather has kept the lake frozen enough to allow us to offer Ice Fishing again this season. In addition to Ice Fishing, students will be participating in a wide variety of hands-on classes, including Conservation Photography, Metalsmithing, Orienteering, Questing, Early Settler Life, a half-day hike, and a full-day hike.

These experiences give students a chance to challenge themselves, explore the natural world, and build confidence outside of the classroom. For some students, it was their first time ice fishing, and for others, it was their very first time fishing in general!

We are thrilled to begin our 2026 season with such a longstanding partner and look forward to another meaningful week of learning, adventure, and tradition with Jordan Road School.



Wildlife at Risk: Bobcat

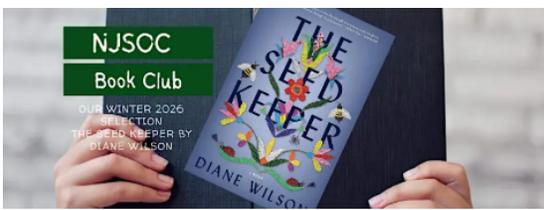
By: Ashley Rogers, Former NJSOC Education Intern

This January, we are spotlighting the Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), an elusive feline native to NJ. Bobcats are considered a medium-sized cat, standing at about two feet tall – they are larger than a domesticated housecat but much smaller than a cougar or lion. The species' fur can range from a yellowish brown color to a reddish brown color, with distinctive markings varying from 'tabby' strips to heavy spotting. Their ears are slightly tufted and they have a short bobbed tail.

This wild cat resides in a variety of habitats, ranging from swamplands and forests to deserts and coastal regions. The species is the most widely distributed native wild cat in North America and is present in all 48 contiguous United States with the exception of Delaware. As a carnivore, Bobcats are known for their ability to help stabilize small mammal populations, such as rabbits, mice, and squirrels, within their local communities. Their habitat consists of 'dens' in crevices in rocks, under fallen logs, thick tangles of vegetation, and under fallen trees. Bobcats in the wild can live up to 12-13 years of age.

Although the Bobcat is the most far-ranging wild, native feline in North America, it faces countless threats, including habitat degradation, disease, and the fur trade. In New Jersey, there is a serious risk of vehicular collisions with the species, resulting in injury or death, while in previous years, deforestation has been a major concern for the species. In January 2025, the NJDEP updated the status from endangered to threatened due to increased research and wildlife management techniques, which has allowed the population to increase in northern portions of the state. To address these hazards, habitat corridors should be established, especially in hotspot areas. Additionally, land and water protections should be strengthened. You can help with efforts relating to protecting and preserving Bobcat populations by reporting sightings of Bobcats to NJDEP Fish & Wildlife using the NJ Wildlife Tracker tool.





Monthly Events

March 7 @ 9:30 am - 12:30 pm

Spring Nature Zen Tangle Drawing Workshop and Walk

NJ School of Conservation | 1 Wapalanne Road, Sandyston, United States

Join us as we learn about this meditative drawing method. Zen Tangles are an easy-to-learn, relaxing, and fun art form in which you use structured patterns to create beautiful images. The designs are non-representational and unplanned. There is no up or down to Zen Tangle art. You don't need to know what a tangle is going to look like to draw it. The result is always a delightful surprise!

<https://njsoc.org/event/spring-nature-zen-tangle-drawing-workshop-and-walk/>

March 14 @ 10:30 am - 12:00 pm

NJSOC Book Club: The Seed Keeper

NJ School of Conservation | 1 Wapalanne Road, Sandyston, United States

Our FREE book club is back with a new title for Winter 2026! Join us as we read together *The Seed Keeper*, a novel by Diane Wilson. Participants will read at their own pace, with the opportunity to discuss virtually via the Heylo app. You'll receive weekly discussion points to ponder that will guide our group conversation. We'll meet to discuss the book face-to-face on Saturday, March 14th, at the School of Conservation from 10:30 to noon. This meeting will also include an outdoor activity related to our reading.

<https://njsoc.org/event/njsoc-book-club-the-seed-keeper/>

March 20 @ 4:00 pm - March 21 @ 4:00 pm

Planting the Seeds of Environmental Learning: A Workshop for K-5 Educators

NJ School of Conservation | 1 Wapalanne Road, Sandyston, United States

Join us for a field based, hands-on Project Learning Tree workshop, helping K-5 educators bring environmental learning outdoors. Join us for a Project Learning Tree (PLT) workshop at the New Jersey School of Conservation, designed specifically for educators working with students in grades K-5. Set within a beautiful forested campus, this hands-on professional learning experience brings environmental education to life while modeling best practices for outdoor and inquiry-based instruction.

<https://njsoc.org/event/planting-the-seeds-of-environmental-learning-a-workshop-for-k-5-educators/>

March 22 @ 1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Painting Among the Pines: A Winter Fox on Skellenger Road

NJ School of Conservation | 1 Wapalanne Road, Sandyston, United States

This painting captures a quiet, wintry moment that feels both serene and a bit magical. Imagine standing along the quiet stretch of Skellenger Road just as the morning light begins to filter through the frost. In this workshop, we'll recreate this striking scene: a vibrant orange fox perched atop the roadway to the NJ School of Conservation, serving as a bold focal point against a minimalist winter forest.

<https://njsoc.org/event/painting-among-the-pines-a-winter-fox-on-skellenger-road/>



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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