



March Newsletter



Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

I am writing to share some deeply concerning news. Governor Sherrill's recently proposed budget eliminates all funding for the New Jersey School of Conservation. If this stands, our gates will close, 30 dedicated staff members will lose their jobs, and thousands of students — more than half from poorer districts — will lose their primary connection to the natural world.

This isn't the first time NJSOC has been threatened. Throughout our more than 75-year history, we have repeatedly had to prove our worth in the face of tough state budget environments. Each time, we have emerged stronger because our community refused to let this light go out.

The irony of this proposal is that closing NJSOC won't save the state money. It will create a massive fiscal liability. The state would inherit the maintenance of a \$34 million asset, including a \$3 million dam upgrade and hundreds of thousands in annual holding costs. More important, it would threaten our state's efforts to prepare children for the green economy of the future and address the growing mental health crisis plaguing the next generation.

We cannot — and will not — let this happen. In the coming weeks, we will reach out with specific instructions on how you can help us take this fight to the Statehouse.

We know that if our voices unite as one, we will restore these cuts and continue our work as one of the world's premier centers of outdoor learning.

Please, stay tuned and get ready. Our students are counting on us.

With gratitude and determination,



Kerry Kirk Pflugh,
Executive Director



Marie Kuhnen



Jackie Russell



Elizabeth Kitchel

NJSOC Celebrates Women's History Month

By Kerry Kirk Pflugh, Executive Director

The New Jersey School of Conservation has been fortunate to have had strong, innovative, trailblazing women who have left an indelible mark on the development of the NJSOC. Whether it was our school, camping, food service, or health and wellness programs, these women were pioneers in their respective disciplines within the larger field of outdoor education. In honor of Women's History Month, we want to remember and celebrate several of our mavericks who helped create a world class environmental education center and in whose shoes we are still walking.

Dr. Marie Kuhnen, Camp Wapalanne Director and Professor of Field Biology 1950 – 1995

Dr. Kuhnen was the first director of Camp Wapalanne in 1950 when the NJSOC initiated the summer camp program with the intent of providing urban children an opportunity to recreate in a natural setting. Dr. Kuhnen served as director for two summers.

Following her summer camp involvement, for the next two decades, Dr. Kuhnen instructed a 10-day undergraduate Montclair State Field biology course for undergraduates during the summer. Dr. Kuhnen is also credited with establishing the L. B. Sharp Library. She eventually became the chairperson of the Montclair State College biology department and held that position for eight years. Dr. Kuhnen was a professor of botany and a faculty member of MSU

for 41 years. A brilliant scientist and beloved mentor to hundreds of students, and friend and colleague to so many, Dr. Kuhnen was also a memorable teacher.

“Although Marie Kuhnen’s ‘Roots’ were embedded in the foundations of Nature, Outdoor, and Conservation Education that were prevalent in the 1950’s and 1960’s – and, although those roots were somewhat subsumed by the rise of Environmental Education in succeeding years –she totally captured and captivated what has been a ceaseless and ongoing passion of the New Jersey School of Conservation!” said Honorary Trustee Jerry Schierloh. “Dr. Kuhnen’s most profound influence on the New Jersey School of Conservation was, unquestionably, her initiation of the Camp Wapalanne Summer Camping Program in 1950 . . . a program which would undergo numerous evolutionary ‘leaps-and-bounds’ during the next 35 years and become one of the most Influential and respected nature and environmentally-oriented Summer Camping Program of its kind, both Nationally and Internationally!”

Elizabeth Kit Kitchell, Coordinator of School Programs, 1964-1966

Miss Kit, as she was known, arrived at the NJSOC in 1964 with the fifth director, Dr. John J. Kirk. She was the Assistant Professor of Outdoor Education as well as the first Coordinator of School Programs. She had been the Director of Camping Services for the Detroit YWCA and had been responsible for working with 4,000 students with a camping philosophy emphasis. In the NJSOC’s archives there is a folder labeled: Camping Era: Kit Carson and Sam Houston Units. It has a counselor evaluation form dated from 1964. The evaluation form reflects a value system expected and practiced by the counselors at the NJSOC’s summer Camp Wapalanne program. This system was developed by Miss Kit. It included such things as cooperation-teamwork; personality and character considerations such as initiative, independence, imagination, ability to get along with others, enthusiasm, willingness, friendliness, promptness, neatness and cleanliness, dependability, responsibility, pleasantness of personality, ability to teach others, leadership ability and stability. The evaluation also included a counselor’s ability level in skills related to nature and conservation, campcraft, boating, swimming, crafts, music and archery.

These criteria were used throughout the Camp Wapalanne years and emphasized during the counselor training which was held a week in advance of campers arriving. It was an intense training that helped form tight cooperative bonds between the counselors and created enduring friendships. These counselor characteristics could be seen at Camp Wapalanne throughout its nearly 40 years of existence, enduring many years after Miss Kit moved on from the NJSOC.

Jackie Russell Patterson, School Program Coordinator, 1964-1966

Jackie first arrived at the NJSOC in 1962, as a pre-service teacher in Paterson State College. The experience was so impactful, that Jackie went on to receive her instructorship in riflery from the NRA and became the first riflery instructor at Camp Wapalanne in 1964. She quickly went from being a head camp counselor to Program Director and also served as Weekend Coordinator for school groups throughout 1964-1966.

She went on to pursue a master’s degree in environmental education and study at the University of Michigan under Dr. William Stapp who was innovating ideas in this emerging educational field. Upon completing her degree, she returned to the NJSOC as the Public-School Coordinator and implemented some of the new concepts in EE that were being developed at the University of Michigan.

She put together a program in the new field on EE with concepts and approaches she had learned studying under Dr. Stapp. This included creating an interdisciplinary approach by integrating EE into the four curriculum areas of science, humanities, social studies and recreation. She created a community assessment survey whereby data about the community was collected in advance of a school visit. The data was then used and shared with staff so they could customize the lessons taught so that the information was relatable to their life experience. These surveys were updated every five years to reflect the current status of the community. Jackie was also responsible for initiating the orientation and summation which we continue to conduct with each school group who visits us.

As part of her efforts to create and develop an EE program at the NJSOC, she authored a Teachers Manual that included lessons and ideas on the delivery of education programs taught here. In the Guide she shared her philosophy on the importance of EE:

“Today, environmental studies include the total fabric of human knowledge and provides children with a better understanding of the total environment and assists them to become more enlightened citizens who are better prepared to meet future environmental problems and solve them for the betterment of mankind.”

Laura Edsall, Head Cook, 1963-1983

Laura set the standard for top grade “camp cuisine” in the early days of the NJSOC. Laura made many of our dishes from scratch. Camp Wapalanne campers will recall the famous Sunday morning “Vagabond Breakfast” of sticky buns and cinnamon buns. Despite being allowed to “sleep in” on Sundays, these tasty delights had us all racing to get our fill.

Like today, food menus were carefully constructed taking into account food allergies and other special needs. The meal plan was created by the Head Cook but had to be approved by the Director before it was finalized. When Laura started as Head Cook gluten free, vegetarian or vegan diets were relatively rare in camping kitchens. But it was during her tenure that such special diets became more common place. She helped begin the transition of the NJSOC’s food service program and put us on the path to what continues to be a more inclusive way of thinking about institutional food.

Regina Kelly, Assistant Professor, Humanities and Social Studies, 1967-2010

Reggie first came to the NJSOC as an undergraduate from Trenton State College in 1964. During the 1967-68 school year she participated in the first year of the Experienced Teacher Fellowship federal grant program at the NJSOC. She worked summers as a camp counselor for Camp Wapalanne and during the school year was a classroom English teacher. She was hired for a full-time teaching position at the NJSOC in 1970.

Reggie was a brilliant, colorful and creative educator. She was responsible for integrating humanities and history into many of the classes offered at the NJSOC. She also further developed the American Craft Heritage program now called Early Settler Life at the NJSOC, building off of what had been started by Jackie Russell Paterson; introduced a lapidary class which emphasized the beauty of renewable resources, and created a historical reconstruction class which explored the CCC history of the campus. Reggie was also the editor of SOC News, a publication inspired by Jackie Russell Paterson which was published three times a year. She also created new lessons in the humanities curriculum and social studies including perceptual awareness and creative writing. She said of the humanities:

“The humanities are a rich fund of information, ideas, perceptions, theories and experiences, many of which are vicarious, which we acquire and participate in via our sensory and intellectual apparatus. We connect with nature by means of our senses. Literature and the arts are the key vehicles by which a culture articulates its beliefs and values. Most important to environmental education are these attitudes, values and beliefs which provide a greater awareness/resources for understanding the nature of humankind and the relationships of humans to the rest of nature.”

Mary Durbin, Head Nurse, 1968-1991

Although, the NJSOC has had several nurses in our early history, none were as memorable or colorful as our resident nurse, Mary Durbin who graced our campus for 23 years. There is not a Camp Wapalanne camper who does not have their own Mary Durbin story.

Mary established a reputation for quality health care for student and teacher visitors, and for being an ardent advocate for a host of wild animals that lived in the forested vicinity of the school. Her office was papered with her views on animal cruelty and advocacy for the rights of animals and the protection of wildlife and endangered species.

When Mary was being interviewed by Annette Sambolin for the *New Jersey School of Conservation from 1949 to 1999* about her time at the NJSOC, she said,

“so many memories...The last night of summer camp and the campfire at Piney Point...young faces singing camp songs then waiting eagerly for their awards. Everyone lifting up each other’s candle and quietly walking back over the bridge, only the procession of candles glittering in the dark and a hush over all, the only time the children were quiet.

One Spring we had an unexpected snowfall and the Jersey City (Joint Activities) group was in residence...A student from Jersey City said it was the first time she had seen “clean snow.” It’s sad that so many children have no contact with nature...schools like SOC are more essential than ever.”

Mary brought conviction, efficiency, a commitment to public health and a deep and profound concern for the students and campers she cared for in her tenure at the NJSOC.

Information for this article was taken from New Jersey School of Conservation from 1949 to 1999 by Annette Sambolin.



Mary Durbin



Reggie Kelly



Laura Edsall



NJSOC Launches Vernal Pool Phenology Project

As Director of Education, Tanya Sulikowski is always looking for ways to connect research with education to help teachers and students. To her, the nationwide Vernal Pool Phenology Project was an ideal opportunity to do exactly that.

Since the NJSOC campus has wooded areas with natural pool formation this time of year, the school is participating in a project to study the impact of climate change on the natural pools where amphibians tend to reproduce.

The research questions are clear: “Phenology deals with the timing of natural events,” Sulikowski says. “One of the consequences of climate change is the creation of mismatches in timing.” This project will seek to understand whether natural pools are drying up sooner due to multiple factors, including whether trees are absorbing more water due to increased temperature variability.

The first student group to participate in the project will be a group of students from Montclair under the supervision of Professor Lisa Hazard. School groups from middle

school, high school, and undergraduate institutions will also participate in the weeks ahead.

Collection variables include tree budding, frog croaking and egg massing. Students will be equipped with binoculars and polarized sunglasses and will help report the data to the larger research network, which is funded by the National Science Foundation. Recent NJSOC intern and Drew University graduate Ashley Rogers focused on the Vernal Pool Phenology Project for her summer internship capstone project. Rogers believes that students at all levels will benefit from participating in this research.

“This exposure may also encourage some students to be more cognizant of humans’ adverse impacts on vernal pools, including water contamination and habitat destruction,” said Rogers. The project will also “provide children with a better understanding of the life cycles of both amphibians and trees, especially for students from more urban communities with limited or no access to these life forms.”



THE ART OF BEING HUMAN
Observing our Nature Within

**AT THE NJ SCHOOL OF CONSERVATION
IN STOKES STATE FOREST**

“Made me appreciate how important it is to practice being present and practice mindfulness on a daily basis.”
--Past participant

**a full day of self-discovery
through mindfulness in nature**

Mindfulness techniques
Nature observation walks
Cell phone nature photography
Deep relaxation instruction
Personal journaling

Saturday, April 18

This popular program is now in its 5th year at NJSOC!

FOR MORE INFORMATION: info@friendsofnjsoc.org <https://friendsofnjsoc.org/events> 

The Art of Being Human on April 18

In a world where being over-booked, over-scheduled, and busy, busy, BUSY! is often worn like a badge of honor, we're pleased to offer a refreshing antidote at the School of Conservation.

Join us on April 18th for The Art of Being Human: Observing Our Nature Within*, a full-day workshop led by longtime SOC friend Peter Del Vecchio—life coach, environmentalist, nature photographer, author, and former yogic monk. Now in its fifth year at SOC, this popular and transformative program invites you to step off the “mental gerbil wheel” and reconnect with your quiet, authentic self.

Through simple yet powerful mindfulness techniques, guided relaxation, nature observation walks, and reflective journaling, Peter will help you slow down and tune in—both inwardly and outwardly. The peaceful forest backdrop of the School of Conservation offers the ideal setting to open your senses, calm your mind, and rediscover clarity and focus.

You'll also explore the intersection of mindfulness and cell-phone photography, learning how to see the world with fresh eyes—free from judgment and expectation. With this renewed awareness, navigating life's challenges and pursuing your goals becomes more grounded, intentional, and fulfilling.

Have a teenager? This workshop is a meaningful opportunity to connect and grow together. Open to ages 12 and up (participants under 18 must attend with an adult), it's a shared experience that can spark lifelong benefits.

Give yourself permission to pause. Take one day to invest in your well-being—and carry the rewards with you long after the workshop ends.

*This workshop was previously offered as *Observing Nature: Inward and Outward*.*



Wildlife at Risk: Barred Owl

By: Ashley Rogers, Former NJSOC Education Intern & Michela Sales, Executive Assistant

For March, our at-risk species of focus is the Barred Owl (*Strix varia*), a brown-and-white-striped raptor that resides in both forested locales and swampland. This species has the appearance of a large fluffy-looking owl, with a brown barring on its upper breast and brown streaking on its lower breast and belly. Its head is rounded and lacks ear tufts, while its eyes are dark brown. The Barred Owl occurs throughout the eastern United States, north to southern Canada, and south to the Gulf Coast and Florida, and is a year-round resident, meaning it does not migrate.

In New Jersey, the Barred Owl is widely present throughout the wetland forests of southern NJ and in the riparian woodlands of northern NJ. It is extremely common for populations of this species to reside in the Highlands region of north Jersey, the Pequannock watershed, Sterling Forest, Wanaque Wildlife Management Area, the Passaic River basin, Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Bear Swamp Natural Area, Belleplain State Forest, Great Cedar Swamp, along tributaries of the Maurice River, the Atlantic white cedar swamps and mixed hardwood swamps in the Pine Barrens region, and locally in High Point State Park. The Barred Owl, which is traditionally known as the “swamp owl”, is a common inhabitant of remote, contiguous, old-growth wetland forests as they require mature wetland woods containing large trees with cavities suitable for nesting. With that said, this species often strays away from human activity by avoiding residential, agricultural, industrial, and developed areas

This species has a resounding song, which is often represented as “who cooks for you, who cooks for you allll” (audio courtesy of RangerRick.org), accompanied by loud “hoo-ah” calls and yowling. It is very common to hear their song and calls from February to mid-April, which is the time of their courtship – be sure to listen carefully if you are in an area where this species is found, especially during this time of year! Barred Owls’ vocal activity tends to peak during March, and they are also a species that mates for life with their partner.

This species feeds on small mammals but can also have an appetite for reptiles, amphibians, insects, or small birds. They swallow their food whole and often regurgitate these prey items as pellets of undigested bones, fur and feathers. Areas that are often littered with these pellets tend to be a strong sign that Barred Owls are present.

In the state of New Jersey, Barred Owls are listed as a threatened species due to vehicular collisions, habitat degradation, and rodenticide. Because Barred Owls require large and extensive mature forested areas for their nesting cavities, they are affected by habitat fragmentation as well as becoming more vulnerable to human disturbance and predation by Great Horned Owls. Supporting land protections, establishing bird boxes, and reducing rodenticide application can help protect this species.



Photo Courtesy of All About Birds (Cornell Lab)



Photo Courtesy of Mass Audubon



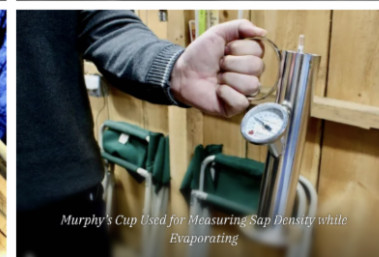
Vince Portelli's Shed



Machine Used for Evaporation



Niter Settling at the Bottom of the Bottle



Murphy's Cup Used for Measuring Sap Density while Evaporating



Portelli's Set Up



Portelli's Set Up

Behind the Scenes of Local Maple Sugaring

By: Amelia Basile, NJSOC Junior Educator

Just one hour from The School of Conservation, Vince Portelli makes maple syrup from local sugar maple trees in his backyard. He started his business, Frontier Maple Products, after friends and family enjoyed his sapping hobby that he learned through YouTube videos. Now, he sources thousands of gallons of his sap from friends in New York State and collects some from his yard in Bloomingdale, NJ. To collect the sap, he travels with a large stainless steel tank from New Jersey to New York and back!

What trees can be used for maple syrup?

Sugar maples are a native tree to New Jersey and have the highest sugar content of any tree making them ideal for making maple syrup. Portelli says, "This region of the state has so many more maple trees than people think!". He explains there are seven native species and the Norway maple which is invasive. The Norway maple also has a very low sugar content so they are not ideal for sugaring.

How is sap extracted?

During late winter and early spring, trees begin a cycle caused by warm days and freezing nights. Trees push sap out during warm temperatures and bring sap up the trunk during freezing nights. This creates a flowing system of sap that can be collected by tapping into the tree. The hole created will give the tree a place to expel sap during the day where temperatures are warm. Once the tree is tapped, Portelli mentions, "It takes a lot of patience". You need many filters to catch any critters or debris that finds its way into the sap. Some large companies can have sap containers as large as swimming pools and bears are sometimes found swimming in them! When the sap is collected from the drip bucket it is very thin and has very little sugar in it. It is filtered many times by a fine strainer and is then added to an evaporator.

How is maple syrup made?

An evaporator removes water from the sap and caramelizes the sugar. Portelli mentions an important fact that the density needs to be perfect. "We use a murphy cup to test the syrup's density and by law, it needs to be at 66.9% brix to sell commercially". To get the perfect density, Portelli adds water or boils the sap for longer. At the bottom of the machines, you can spot a grainy deposit called niter. These are minerals deposited when the sap is heated and is often referred to as "sugar sand" in the sugar maker community. When the syrup is at the perfect density, it must be at 185 degrees F to sterilize the glass bottles it is sold in.



Job Opening - Education Intern (Part Time)

The New Jersey School of Conservation (NJSOC) is offering paid intern opportunities to those candidates interested in a position involving environmental education, support of onsite field research, completion of a pre-determined capstone project and assistance in daily operations and administrative functions of our education programs.

The Internship will provide an opportunity for a successful candidate to employ interpretive, outreach and administrative skills to:

- (1) complete pre-determined "capstone" project mutually agreed upon by intern and NJSOC staff
- (2) implement educational and interpretive programs highlighting the natural and cultural features found at the NJSOC
- (3) support onsite field research projects
- (4) assist with the daily operations and coordination of facilities at NJSOC

(5) perform a variety of administrative and technical duties in support of the organization

PRIMARY DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Program Promotion, Development, Facilitation and Assessment

- Lead students through multi-day, hands-on, experiential learning in outdoor settings.
- Create original and innovative interpretive materials, activities and curricula that align with state and national standards.
- Cultivate an inclusive learning environment by delivering culturally relevant content, presenting multiple and balanced perspectives and connecting instruction to participants' lives and community.
- Manage students' physical safety in outdoor settings using sound judgment and applying appropriate risk management decisions.
- Assess and document student learning and program outcomes.
- Assist with the development and management of content for the NJSOC website, social media and e-blasts.
- Assist with communications during onsite and community outreach events.
- Assist with ongoing research projects, as available.
- Support an ongoing biological inventory of the site.
- Establish and maintain respectful, supportive and compassionate relationships with staff, volunteers and participants.
- Model responsible environmental behavior.
- Fulfill other duties as assigned.

QUALIFICATIONS

- Entry level knowledge of natural history and inquiry-based, multi-disciplinary science.
- Possession of the social and emotional skills necessary to build rapport and positive relationships with people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, cultures, orientations, identities and communities.
- Ability to perform physically challenging work outdoors in all weather conditions on uneven terrain. Ability to lift and carry 40 pounds.
- High level of digital competency in various media including; Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Facebook, Instagram, Canva, etc.
- A willingness to be coached and openness to feedback.
- Commitment to equity and inclusion within our community.
- Excellent organizational and planning skills.

[Read More](#)



Monthly Events

April 4 @ 9:30 am - 12:30 pm

Spring Sketching and Watercolor

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

Grab your sketchbook & find your muse among the trees as we turn simple vignettes into colorful masterpieces with just three primary paints. Walk on the beautiful School of Conservation campus and sketch vignettes of nature and scenery. Once our pencil-and-ink sketches are complete, we will use a triad of watercolors to create a range of colors to add to

our sketchbooks and complete our themed artistic observations. No artistic skill is necessary! All materials will be provided, and you will leave with supplies to continue to practice your art at home. Light snacks will be provided. This workshop is for artists aged 18 and up; 12 and up are welcome with an adult. Everyone is an artist!

<https://njsoc.org/event/spring-sketching-and-watercolor/>

April 18 @ 9:30 am - 5:30 pm

The Art of Being Human: Observing Our Nature Within

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

This program offers a deep, personal experience in learning to still the mind, open the heart, open the eyes, and use our higher senses to observe within ourselves and around us at all times. This popular program is now in its fifth year, designed and led by Peter Del Vecchio, sharing his decades of training and life experiences as both a keen observer of the natural world and yogic mindfulness guide. Instructor-led activities include simple and powerful mindfulness and deep relaxation techniques, nature walks (some silent), journaling, discussions, and cell phone nature photography – a favorite! The serene forest environment of the School of Conservation is the perfect place to accomplish this! Once we come in touch with our true self within, it is so much easier to navigate the world to attain our goals. Throughout our lives from early childhood, we are guided toward intellectual learning: facts, dates, calculations, etc. The Art of Being Human: Observing Our Nature Within offers a practical, deeper type of learning to help free us from that “mental gerbil wheel”. We learn to focus inwardly in order to better focus outwardly. The benefit is a much cleaner, happier, giving, and more fulfilling life. This program is designed for ages 12* to adult (*children under 18 must be accompanied by an adult). No prior experience is required – just a love of nature and learning.

<https://njsoc.org/event/spring-sketching-and-watercolor/>

May 2 @ 9:30 am - 12:30 pm

Spring Wildlife and Geology Hike

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

Join us as we hike through the campus of the School of Conservation and into Stokes State Forest. We will journey to the Spring Cabin past vernal pools and up to the Geology Loop, searching for wildflowers and rocks while identifying our botanical and geological findings. This will be a 4-mile hike for adults and children over 13 accompanied by an adult. A smartphone will be helpful for identification. Trails may be rocky or snow-covered. Be sure to dress appropriately. Hiking poles are recommended. Additional information will be provided upon registration. Please remember to check the email you use to register. Your registration fee is a donation to the School of Conservation and will help to support our 2026 programs. Pay what you wish, knowing that you are making a difference.

<https://njsoc.org/event/spring-wildlife-and-geology-hike/>



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.

Click logo to make a donation. Or click [here!](#)

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