



May Newsletter

Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

I have an important announcement.

Please follow this link to our website to watch the video about fully funding NJSOC:
<https://njsoc.org/>

Thankfully, two newly introduced Budget Resolutions #302 & #990 would fully fund NJSOC! We encourage you to call and write to your legislators and ask them to support these budget resolutions!

We are doing everything we can to advocate for NJSOC and to make sure that our elected officials in Trenton understand the importance of our school to the lives of so many people.

We are counting on your help to make sure we are successful!

Governor Sherrill and your legislators in Trenton need to hear your voice!

We're asking you to communicate with your elected officials so they know how many people support our work to educate students, empower teachers and lead cutting-edge research programming.

[Please click the "Contact Your Lawmakers" button below to help!](#)

Thank you for all you do to support our school. I trust that we will together make sure that the future is bright for NJSOC!

Sincerely,



Kerry Kirk Pflugh,
Executive Director

Contact Your Lawmakers



NJ School of Conservation Receives Historical Marker

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

The NJ School of Conservation was pleased to unveil a historic marker, presented by the Sussex County Historical Marker Program. It was a joyous day filled with excitement, camaraderie, and of course, history for all of those who attended.

Originally part of land purchased from the Skellinger family in the 1920's to be added to Stokes State Forest which was created by Governor Edward Stokes in 1907, the site was later developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps as part of the Roosevelt Administration's job creation program during the Great Depression. Their work included the construction of Lake Wapalanne and many of the campus buildings still in use today.

In 1949, the property officially became the New Jersey State School of Conservation through the advocacy of educators, conservationists, and Senator Alfred Littell. Over the past 77 years, NJSOC has served more than 500,000 students and educators through immersive environmental education programs, while helping shape the field of outdoor and conservation education both nationally and internationally.

The unveiling ceremony began with a flag raising, conducted by the NJSOC Facilities Crew, followed by the singing of the National Anthem by local community member, Charlotte Fyrer, and the pledging of the Conservation Pledge. NJSOC Executive Director, Kerry Kirk Pflugh, kicked off the ceremony by reflecting on the journey to receive the historical marker, and then unveiled the marker with Friends of NJSOC Vice President, Shayne Russell, and NJ State Parks Administrator, Rebecca Fitzgerald.

We were fortunate enough to have three wonderful speakers at our ceremony, which further highlighted the significance of the NJ School of Conservation receiving a historical marker: Bill Truan, the Sussex County Historian, spoke about the importance of identifying and acknowledging places of historical significance in Sussex County, and that the NJSOC was a

great addition to the historical sites throughout the county.

Darian Rivera, a Training Program Specialist from Grey Towers National Historic Site, offered some words from the perspective of Gifford Pinchot and his profession of forestry, as well as President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his initiative of starting the Civilian Conservation Corps and how its legacy continues on to today.

Jeffrey Urbin, an Education Specialist and Director of the Pare Lorentz Film Center at the Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, concluded the speeches by discussing the Civilian Conservation Corps under President Roosevelt and its lasting importance to Americans since the Great Depression.

We were also grateful to have representatives from Sandyston Township, the Sussex County Commissioners, the State Parks Service, the U.S. Forest Service, Grey Towers National Historic Site, and members of the NJSOC community present at the unveiling.



Our 2025 Annual Report

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

Thanks to our community of supporters, 2025 was a year of incredible growth, connection, and impact at the NJ School of Conservation.

We're excited to share our 2025 Annual Report, highlighting the meaningful progress we made together. We were able to expand access to environmental education, strengthen community partnerships, and inspire the next generation of environmental stewards thanks to the ongoing support and belief in our mission from our supporters.

Here's a glimpse of what we were able to accomplish in 2025:

- Nearly **3,900 participants** engaged in our programs
- Served **30 Title I schools**, increasing access to outdoor education in New Jersey
- Served **62 Schools** from **15 New Jersey Counties**
- **Public program offerings tripled, welcoming more people into the nature of Stokes State Forest**
- **280 volunteers contributed over 650 hours of support**
- Expanded research and climate education initiatives across New Jersey

From hands-on learning experiences in Stokes State Forest to fascinating research and new community programs, every milestone is a reflection of the commitment to our mission.

As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to protecting this special place and ensuring that environmental education remains accessible to all.

Thank you for being part of our community and for believing in the power of environmental education.



Celebrating Michael Roche's 50 Years of Serving Students and Staff at NJSOC

50 years ago to the month in spring, 1976, Michael Roche took a road trip that would make a major difference in his life.

Driving a friend to NJSOC's campus for a job interview, Michael had a chance meeting with Dr. John J. Kirk. The two connected immediately and Dr. Kirk offered Michael a job as Summer Assistant Program Director at Camp Wapalanne. Michael's 50-year connection with the school began, and his passion for teaching students in the outdoors—already discovered in internships at environmental field centers—found a special home.

Michael's impact over five decades is extraordinary. A classroom teacher for 44 years, a board member of the National Consortium for Specialized Secondary Schools of Mathematics, Science and Technology (NCSSMST) and American Junior Academy of Science (AAAS/AJAS), he has made a critical difference in curriculum expansion for kids.

As a teacher for 27 years at High Technology High School—recognized multiple times as the number one STEM school in the country and in New Jersey—, Michael spearheaded a research requirement that empowered Freshmen to propose and design research projects with hypothesis testing so they could conduct research, analyze data, and write their conclusions in their Sophomore year.

During his tenure, Michael felt that students should have greater access to field research experiences that would serve them as scientists. He subsequently worked with Master Educators Lois Lyons and Director of Education Tanya Sulikowski to successfully advocate for a school board-approved curriculum expansion for a program designed for STEM-focused students to conduct field research at NJSOC.

Michael further put his expertise with science curricula to work with Master Educator Robin Anderson to align NJSOC program offerings with New Jersey's "first-in-the-nation" climate education standards.

Michael especially values establishing good relationships and rapport with his students. He strives to learn every student's name as soon as he meets them, recognizing that each learner is more likely to feel seen and heard by a teacher who takes care to treat them with respect.

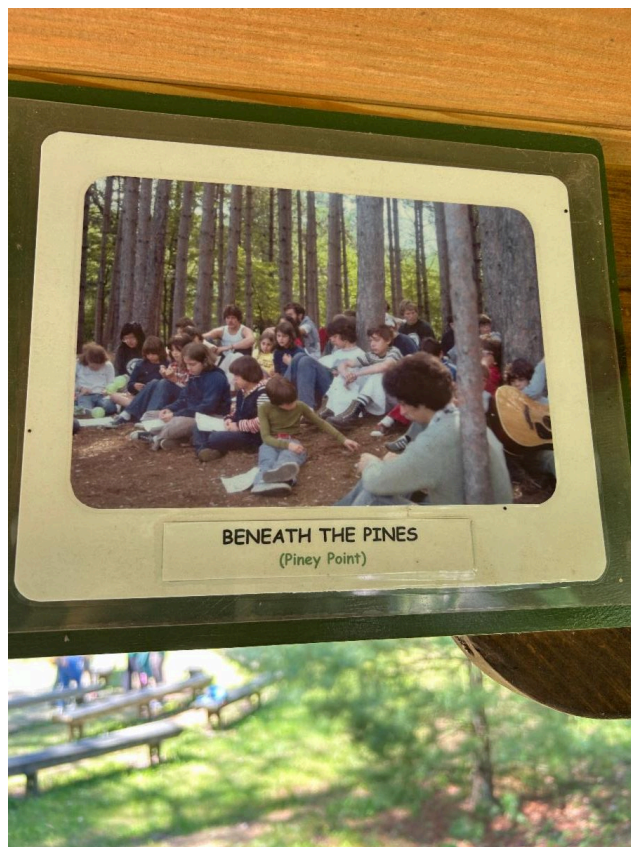
"Humor worked really well for me in a number of situations," Michael says. "Humor and empathy. Making sure that a student knows he or she is being heard before trying to address any problem that is happening. If you could make them smile, at the beginning of a lesson or conversation, it gives you a much better chance of a good outcome."

At a school like ours, with a rich tradition and a long history, the contribution of teachers who are committed to what we do over the long-term is a vital resource. When Michael first began at NJSOC, he looked to educators like Jerry Schierloh and Dr. John J. Kirk for inspiration and to develop the skills to become an exceptional educator. Michael always advises teachers to implement anything that they see is working well for others, recommending Austin Kleon's book "Steal Like an Artist," to colleagues and friends—a book that encourages people to implement best practices that create success. In professional development sessions, Michael strives to give young teachers tools and approaches that will make their lives easier in the classroom.

Michael's final year in the classroom was during the 2019-2020 year. He has been active with NJSOC since, leading fish and water ecology lessons, orienteering activities, and more. Last year, in helping organize NJSOC archives, he came across a quote from someone who worked at the school in the fifties: "When visiting Wapalanne, I can still see my footprints. Many others have tramped over them, but they are still there as the foundation of what is today."

Michael took a photo of the quote and saved it in his phone. "I think of it often when I'm out on trails with students and when I'm out by myself prepping a site," he says. "I find myself looking down and thinking of those individuals who helped shape my teaching, my attitudes, and how I view the world. My hope is that my footprints, and those of my current and future colleagues, help continue to reinforce that foundation he referenced."

We know that Michael has left a lasting footprint not only on the New Jersey School of Conservation, but on countless teachers, students, and scientists whose access to learning opportunities is bigger and greater thanks to the difference he has made and continues to make in our field.



NJSOC Proud to Partner with Sussex County Community College

NJSOC is excited by its new partnership with Sussex County Community College—the only college in the county, with over 3,000 students in a variety of training programs. We spoke with Dr. Cory Homer, president of SCCC, who is also a member of our Board of Advisors.

Since becoming president 18 months ago, Dr. Homer has made it a priority to work with NJSOC to find opportunities for SCCC students, especially students of environmental science.

“Being so rural, it is important for us to form educational partnerships to give our students a well-rounded experience,” Dr. Homer said. “Our students and faculty are always happy when we can collaborate.”

Earlier this spring, we hosted Dr. Mimely Little’s Herpetology class of about 20 environmental science students to study amphibian life on our campus.

Dr. Homer hopes to consult NJSOC staff to support his colleagues in designing a conservation course at SCCC. He also envisions opportunities for research, for GIS/land surveying projects, and for career and tech students to assist with any building or maintenance needs.

“The sky’s the limit,” says Dr. Homer.



NJSOC Honors Longtime Garwood Public Schools Principal Mary Emmons

NJSOC and Garwood Public Schools share a long history. For fifty years Garwood students have visited Stokes - at one point for five day/four night trips. For the past fifteen years, there has been no greater champion of the relationship than Mary Emmons, the outstanding Garwood principal who is retiring from her position this year.

We spoke with Garwood science teacher KC Bree about Mary Emmons and what she has meant to students, staff, and their ability to access environmental education learning opportunities at the School of Conservation.

"I would not be a teacher if it weren't for Mary," KC says, thinking back to her work as a parent when her child attended Garwood for middle school. Mary saw KC's potential as a teacher and fully supported and encouraged her every step of the way. "Mary sees the positive side of every situation. She has a unique ability to connect on an individual level with our students."

Mary truly values Garwood's special relationship with NJSOC. Every year, she advocated to preserve the annual field trip to send Garwood students to our campus. This year, eighth grade students took a full day trip to the campus for a day that began at 6:30 am and finished at 9:30 pm. The group was exposed to what KC calls "the stokes effect," a sense of joy, discovery and bonding that only happens at an outdoor education environment like at NJSOC.

Mary likes to tell Garwood students about the long history of the school's visits. When her students don't believe that their predecessors have been visiting for up to 50 years, Mary likes to show them something: an old table marker at the dining hall with Garwood student signatures on the bottom from many years ago.

We hope to see Garwood students coming to visit us for the next 50 years. Meanwhile, we are so proud of Mary Emmons for her exceptional service to the Garwood School Community and for preserving the special relationship with NJSOC.



30 Students Visit from McNair High School for Memorable Overnight Trip

Earlier this spring, NJSOC welcomed 30 sophomores from McNair High School in Jersey City for a three day overnight trip — many of the students' first experience away from home. Students participated in Action Socialization Experiences, photography, metal-smithing, and archery activities during the day, and enjoyed time around the campfire at night and the early morning sunrise and jogs in the mornings.

Mr. Eric Black and Mr. Gary Flanagan led the student group and could see their students transform within a few minutes, from initially feeling quiet and hesitant, to coming alive and starting to work together in new ways. "It was those initial Action Socialization Experiences that involved group challenges like weaving rope through a spider web and rolling off a cargo net one at a time that created a new kind of bonding for our kids," they said.

From there, students got to set aside their phones and learn orienteering and navigation skills.

It was the second time a McNair group has come to our campus, and their teachers were happy to see their students comfortable in this environment. In the evening, the group went for two nighttime hikes and spent time around the campfire. Their teachers encouraged them to witness what silence was like and truly be present to experience what Mr. Flanagan calls "the pace of nature."

The moment of silence they tried lasted three minutes, which some the students thought lasted 20 minutes. A number of students chose to wake up early each morning to watch the sunrise or go for a jog and were excited by sounds made by animals in the environment, including the sounds of a woodpecker.

Mr. Flanagan was especially pleased to see his students expanding their scope of research questioning. Whereas before the trip students expressed interest in computer impacts on psychology, students began asking new questions about orienteering and measuring steps as a data point. He found the lessons taught by NJSOC's Master Educators to be exemplary and looks forward to staying in touch with us in the future.

We hope to continue the conversation with Mr. Flanagan and his students and look forward to hosting McNair students for many more visits in the years ahead.



Prioritization In Capital Improvements: Recent Improvements to Lab Building

Facilities Manager Bern Weintraub is always working to find ways to improve facilities around campus, increase accessibility for visitors, and oversee repair projects to ensure all buildings are ready for students, teachers, and visiting researchers.

Regardless of the care with which the prioritization of capital improvements is made, however, emergencies have a way of altering the calculation. This past winter, the Lab Building — the home offices of the NJSOC research effort — suffered some significant plumbing issues. While improvements to the building have been occurring slowly over the past few years, the plumbing issues catapulted the improvement of the Lab Building to the top of the list.

“The lab building is a special resource for us,” says Bern. “A program classroom space, a research office, and a resident apartment — the building serves several important functions.”

The intense freezing this winter damaged the entire water system, impacting the program bathroom, the program kitchenette, and the entire apartment — including a kitchen

and bathroom. Bern immediately oversaw a major plumbing restoration and fixes to all feed lines, as well as gutting and rebuilding the program bathroom and restoring the kitchenette. The building is back and fully functioning. All that is needed are some additional heating and AC upgrades this summer and the full renovation of the emergency shower in the bathroom. The emergency work resulted in the bathroom and kitchenette being restored long before the original prioritization would have predicted.

“We are ahead of schedule,” says Bern. “This building’s functionality is way higher than expected.”

The building now has a modern, comfortable bathroom. The kitchenette is restored. And still there’s more to do! The other classroom in the building — known as the “Green” classroom — which is currently used to store archive materials, will be renovated for program use sometime in the future.

Check back here for a series of posts to facilities upgrades, improvements and repairs throughout our campus in the months ahead!



Staff Complete Safe and Positive For All Training

By: Michela Sales, NJSOC Executive Assistant

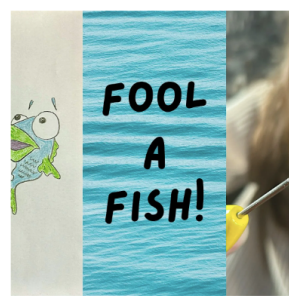
At the NJ School of Conservation, we strive to provide educational programming that is inclusive and accessible to all who visit our campus. We approach every participant with a mindset of presumed competence, while also recognizing the importance of continually educating ourselves on how to better support and include all individuals. To help fulfill that commitment, our staff participates in a variety of professional development and training sessions focused on accessibility and inclusion.

Recently, the NJSOC staff participated in the Safe and Positive For All training session, which focused on creating safer and more inclusive outdoor recreational experiences for individuals with physical disabilities, spinal cord injuries/disorders, mobility challenges, and other special

needs. Presenters Bruckner Chase and Michelle Evans-Chase shared that more than 500,000 New Jersey residents live with spinal cord injuries/disorders or mobility challenges, yet there is little systematic training available for outdoor recreation staff. They emphasized the importance of accessibility and inclusion in outdoor recreation, noting that these experiences can improve physical health, mobility, empowerment, community connection, and overall quality of life.

Bruckner and Michelle structured the training around three key areas: site assessment, emergency planning and response, and safety briefings. These concepts are critical when providing outdoor recreational experiences, as environmental conditions, weather, and safety hazards can impact participants in different ways. The training also highlighted the importance of fostering inclusive, person-first interactions, reducing stigma, planning accessibility ahead of time, communicating openly with participants, and asking individuals what accommodations would improve their experience.

Our staff found this training both valuable and impactful. Opportunities like this help us become more proactive planners and educators while ensuring that all students, teachers, community members, and visitors feel welcomed, supported, and empowered to fully experience all that NJSOC has to offer.



Public Programs

June 6 @ 10:00 am - 1:00 pm

Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs – Youth Fishing Challenge 2026

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

Spend some quality time fishing with your family at Lake Wapalanne! This fun fishing event is open to all youth (17 & younger). Your child will need to bring their own fishing gear. Registered youth participants may be eligible to receive prizes for the fish they catch during the event. (Youth must be present at the end of the event to be awarded prizes.)

<https://njsoc.org/event/wings-over-the-water-a-dragonfly-damselfly-workshop/>

June 7 @ 9:00 am - 12:00 pm

Fool a Fish? – One on One

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

A fun fly tying fishing challenge designed for curious and creative kids ages 10–16 Have you ever wondered if you could design your own fishing fly and actually catch a fish with it? Now's your chance to find out. Join us at Lake Wapalanne on the NJSOC campus for a hands-on program where you'll learn how to tie your very own fishing flies from scratch.

<https://njsoc.org/event/climate-change-education-empowering-new-jerseys-nonformal-educators/>

June 12 @ 4:00 pm - June 13 @ 4:00 pm

Learning in the Living Lab: An Educator Workshop for Grades 6-8

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

Join us for a field based, hands-on Project Learning Tree workshop, helping grade 6-8 educators bring environmental learning outdoors. Join us for an immersive Project Learning Tree (PLT) workshop at the New Jersey School of Conservation, designed for educators working with students in grades 6–8. This experiential professional learning opportunity uses the natural setting as a living laboratory to strengthen environmental literacy and engage middle school learners through hands-on, inquiry-based instruction.

<https://njsoc.org/event/wapalanne-womens-wellness-weekend-summer-edition/>

June 14 @ 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Wings Over the Water: A Dragonfly & Damselfly Workshop

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

Get ready to spot and learn all about dragonflies and damselflies in this fun, hands-on outdoor workshop! Did you know that Sussex County, NJ has more dragonfly and damselfly species than any other county in the US? In fact, we have more “Odonata” in Sussex County than the entire state of California! Spend a day alongside the ponds, streams, and wetlands of Stokes State Forest as you discover the remarkable world of dragonflies and damselflies — some of the most ancient and acrobatic insects on the planet.

<https://njsoc.org/event/wings-over-the-water-a-dragonfly-damselfly-workshop/>

June 17 @ 4:00 pm - June 18 @ 4:00 pm

Climate Change Education: Empowering New Jersey's Nonformal Educators

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

Join us for a field based workshop that will empower NJ's nonformal educators with tools, activities, and confidence to teach climate change. In 2020, NJ became the first state in the US to incorporate climate change education into all K-12 content areas. This professional learning workshop is designed to support New Jersey's nonformal educators in confidently and effectively teaching climate change through engaging, learner-centered experiences.

<https://njsoc.org/event/climate-change-education-empowering-new-jerseys-nonformal-educators/>

June 26 @ 5:00 pm - June 28 @ 1:00 pm

Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend — Summer Edition

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

Join us for the Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend where you can relax and refresh in nature. Welcome to Wapalanne Women's Wellness Weekend on the historic NJSOC campus in the middle of beautiful Stokes State Forest! Come and enjoy a weekend to refresh your mind, body, and spirit with nature journaling, hiking, archery, yoga, boating, campfires and much more.

<https://njsoc.org/event/wapalanne-womens-wellness-weekend-summer-edition/>



Click logo to make a donation. Or click [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.

[Visit Our Website](#)

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