

Chattahoochee Nature Center

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The Mission of the Chattahoochee Nature Center is to provide unique learning experiences focused on the Chattahoochee River that connect people to the natural world and empower them to positively impact their local environments.

Knowledge is the Foundation of Advocacy

Within the spectrum of environmental discussion, there are organizations whose goals and tactics are in apparent opposition. Many voices are raised in defiance of each other; the issues that create such polarization are complex. Nature centers as a whole and the Chattahoochee Nature Center specifically, work to provide a solid foundation of natural science and ecology within a framework of many opinions. By bringing the biological sciences to life, CNC educators and community volunteers offer people the experiences and knowledge they need to understand the impact of their actions on the natural world.

Knowledge is power.

How CNC Programs Complement Environmental Education

CNC's primary role in environmental education is achieved through partnership with local schools, both public and private. A formal partnership agreement with both the Fulton and Cobb County School Systems provides students vital hands-on learning experiences in natural settings, fostering environmental stewardship through critical thinking, awareness and knowledge of local ecology. Currently, CNC offers field studies aligned with the state curriculum for Grades K-12 which meet the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). Programs are age-appropriate and range from an introduction to the natural world for young students to water ecology programs for middle and high school students. Student fees and scholarship grants fund all programs. With 75% of the population in the U.S. living in an urban setting, fewer children spend time catching frogs in ponds or inspecting bugs in the soil. Without this connection to the outdoors, the goals of environmental education may never be achieved. CNC school programs will reach more than 35,000 students in the school year 2005-2006 through a combination of field studies and school outreach programs.

The experiences gained through field studies improve classroom performance.

Extending the Programs to Children with Special Needs

CNC has a goal of extending our education programs to metro Atlanta's under-served youth population. Grants allow CNC to deliver scholarship-based field studies, school outreach and after-school programs to student populations who cannot afford the fee-based programs. A minimum of 25% of all student scholarship grants is reserved for the under-served school population. Following are some illustrations of these programs:

For five years, CNC had a yearly partnership with Mimosa Elementary School (Fulton County School System) for an after-school program that served the area's growing Hispanic population. Building on this partnership, CNC completed a series of in-school programs at Mimosa that were funded by a grant from The Arthur Blank Foundation. In addition to providing a knowledge base in the natural sciences, these programs teach values and citizen action skills to an expanding Hispanic student population.

In February 2002, The Chattahoochee Nature Center received the Spirit of the Land Award from the Salt Lake City Olympics for excellence in environmental education for a five-part series of school outreach programs taught at William M. Boyd Elementary School (Atlanta City Public School System). This program, funded by The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, was chosen from among over 100 entries for its measurable impact on a minority school population previously limited in contact with the natural world.

CNC and The Lionheart School are pioneering a successful pilot program for students with severe and diverse learning disabilities. Stressing hands-on, active participation of students, the outcomes of this program have been far beyond normal expectations. Children with severe communication problems have begun to talk about their Nature Center experiences later, out of the moment, so they can connect to other people - a real difficulty for some of these children.

The positive impact of environmental education is profoundly evident with "at risk" children.

Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning (EIC)

CNC is engaged in a school improvement initiative coordinated by the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER). During the last three years, CNC has worked with Duluth's Shakerag Elementary School in this program. One of only ten schools initially selected in Georgia, Shakerag has adapted its educational focus to incorporate new strategies that include using community and natural settings as contexts for instruction. The Ga. Dept. of Education, the Ga. EPA, the University of Georgia and the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia support this pilot program. *EIC has produced extremely positive results in other states: improvement in overall test scores, reduced absenteeism and less discipline problems among students.*

Learning about the Dangers of Habitat Destruction

A major outdoor exhibit, *Georgia's Living Wetlands*, replicates five of Georgia's most endangered wetland habitats. Interpretative signs tell about these critical habitats, where they still exist today in the state and the vital role they play in a healthy ecosystem.

A field study program for students that focuses on Georgia's bog turtle is offered. This little turtle is being pushed to the brink of extinction by the destruction of Georgia's mountain bogs, one of the habitats demonstrated in the *Georgia's Living Wetlands* exhibit. CNC is also breeding and releasing the bog turtles on state-protected land in partnership with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Demonstrating the connection between man's activities and the fragile web of life is the foundation for conservation.

A Growing Focus on Horticulture and Native Plant Conservation

A natural outgrowth of environmental education is conservation. Over the past five years CNC has partnered with a number of other organizations in the rescue, propagation and re-introduction of many threatened and endangered native Georgia plants. In order to educate the public about the value of native vs. exotic plants, CNC horticulture staff and volunteers are available for consultation in the greenhouses at special native plant workshops. Two major native plant sales are held annually and thousands of Georgia's native plants are introduced to the environment through these efforts. *Native plants are drought resistant and require no chemical fertilizers or pesticides, resulting in minimum damage to the environment.*

The Native Wildlife that Support our Education Efforts

CNC has long been known as a place where native wildlife can be seen and enjoyed by students and the visiting public. Unlike zoos, no exotic animals live at CNC. All resident animals are native to Georgia and are our partners in education. Each animal lives in captivity only because human imprinting or injuries prevent it from surviving in its natural habitat. Currently there are more than 75 resident native animals under the care of our Wildlife staff, including an American bald eagle, five hawk species, four owl species, turtles, snakes, opossums, and an American beaver. Many of CNC's education programs feature native animals, as they are great favorites with the students.

The plight of another living creature touches the heart and demonstrates the connections in the web of life.

Cobb Public-Private Partnership Models Georgia's Performance Standards

CNC was charged by Cobb County Chairman Sam Olens to forge a program in partnership with the Cobb County Parks and Cultural Affairs Department and Cobb County Schools to provide Cobb students with the opportunity for science field studies in their area. The county acquired and developed specific parcels of land for conservation. CNC worked with Cobb County Schools to unpack the new Georgia Performance Standards, developing a five part series with a curriculum targeted this year to third graders and this coming year to fifth graders. Twenty schools participated in the first full year during 2005-6 and hands-on learning in real-world situations is now modeling the GPS in a partnership model that can be replicated statewide.

If we can excite their curiosity with these experiences, we will encourage them to take initiative to learn more about the natural world.

Turning our Knowledge into Community Programs

CNC bundles our knowledge about ecology with our effective hands-on teaching methods to offer the general public many opportunities to experience the wonders of nature through our community programs. More than 100,000 adults and children visit CNC each year to attend special events and festivals, participate in Scouting programs, hike the woodland and wetlands trails, take part in nature studies, observe the wildlife and volunteer as a community naturalist. The strong natural science foundation of our education staff, combined with finely tuned interactive teaching methods, produces exciting and innovative programs that reach people of all ages with the message of environmental stewardship.

We do not inherit the land from our ancestors ---

We borrow it from our children

Native American Proverb

