

North Branch Nature Center

2023 Annual Progress Report



Overview

Growth, forward progress, and a strong focus on equity were defining stories for NBNC in 2023.



One defining story of 2023 was certainly the July flood that swept water, mud, and debris down the mountains and rivers, onto North Branch Nature Center's floodplain, and into the hearts of downtown Montpelier, Barre, and other neighboring towns. While NBNC rebuilt our farm road and supported the recovery efforts of heavily impacted neighbors, we also came to appreciate our undeveloped, healthy, connected 28-acre floodplain in a whole new light, bringing climate resilience and environmental stewardship into sharp focus.

Growth, forward progress, and a strong focus on equity were other defining stories for NBNC in 2023. We installed two new trails, doubled our solar energy production to reach Net Zero, and made steady progress towards closing the Nature Equity Gap through free and low-cost nature-based programs and through new and strengthened community partnerships focused on nature connection for Vermont's under-resourced communities.

We welcomed new staff and board members (and said goodbye to a few as well):

- Said goodbye to Sarah Galbraith, Administrative and Finance Assistant; and Arianna Dayharsh, Forest Preschool Director.
- Welcomed Catherine Griset, Community Engagement Coordinator; Matt Delligatti, Administrative and Finance Assistant; and Julia Musto, Forest Preschool Director.
- Said goodbye to board members Richard Littauer and Emily Merrill and welcomed board member Joshua Saxe.
- Hosted three AmeriCorps members: Annie Jackson, Kerry Brosnan, and Sofie Carlson.

Participation in our growing suite of programs continued to be strong, with ECO in 13 public schools, a full Forest Preschool, our first lottery for Summer Camps, our first offsite Educator Institute, high participation in owl banding and amphibian rescues, an exciting roster of Biodiversity University courses and Adventures Afar trips, and a wildly successful Biodiversity Jamboree, which brought more than 400 people to NBNC for a full-day summer festival.

The rest of this report details the progress made towards the specific 2023 Action Steps we set out in the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan, organized within each goal. As we near the end of this plan, we are proud of the progress we have made, and are starting the early stages of the next round of Strategic Planning, with an eye towards the future of NBNC and our important roles providing nature connection and stewarding this special spot in our watershed.



Goal 1: NBNC is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.



Create staff lead on equity.

- Community Engagement Coordinator was hired in January, 2023 and made strong progress in NBNC's justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) work. This included building relationships with community partners; designing and implementing inclusive and affinity-based programming; leading and organizing staff trainings; and integrating equity across all NBNC programs and operations.

Create and engage with community focus groups.

- Partnered with an increased number of community groups, including a BIPOC book club, an Indigenous-led garden group, Capstone Community Action, and the Central Vermont Refugee Action Network.

Fundraise for equitable programming.

- Thanks to dozens of supporters, promoted the availability of financial aid in all program descriptions, received and responded to more inquiries about aid, and awarded more aid than in any year prior: \$28,900 to adult and youth participants.

Staff equity and inclusivity training.

- Increased JEDI staff professional development through externally-facilitated workshops and regular staff discussions, covering Black leaders in conservation, accessibility for birders, diversity awareness, disability rights, racial equity in Vermont, and neurodiversity.

Refine programs and launch new programs.

- Thoughtfully refined existing programs by integrating trainings about access and inclusion across all program areas.
- Growth in programming included programs for adults with developmental disabilities with Central Vermont Friends and Families United, naturalist-supported kayak outings with Northeast Disabled Athletics Association and South Hero Land Trust, hikes with community groups such as Rainbow Bridge Community Center and the Body Liberation Hiking Club, an Educator Institute in Barre, customized field trips to NBNC, and affinity programs such as Pride hikes and Queer birding.
- Increased free and low-cost programming, including tracking, birding, storytelling, family romps, playgroups, campfires, art receptions, and an Earth Day tree-planting celebration.
- Prepared for the early 2024 launch of a Visiting Teacher-Naturalist program; the spring 2024 installation of a yurt for community programs and for a nature-based BIPOC affinity space; and the summer 2024 launch of Camp BranchOUT in collaboration with Outright Vermont.

Acquire hearing-assist devices.

- Expanded scope to include focus on accessibility more broadly, including Universal Access trail installation, increased signage, QR codes for language interpretation, photo descriptions on social media, ASL interpretation, sound system, and improvement to enrollment form questions.

Goal 2: NBNC is a well-known, engaging, inspiring, and educational place to visit, any day of the year.

Visitor Experience installations.

- Installed and publicly celebrated two new trails: a Universal Access trail; and the Nature Connection Trail, featuring eight new interpretive panels. Outfitted the trailhead kiosks with benches, maps, and information, and installed wayfinding signs around the property. Completed digital extensions of interpretive panels, featuring the voices of community members, Spanish translations, and Abenaki vocabulary.
- Installed two new climbing structures in the Nature Playscape.
- Installed two new rooftop solar arrays.

Consider new major Visitor Experience installations.

- Laid the groundwork for upcoming installations: seasonal displays in the Rock Creek Room, entry area by the front stairs, expanded Universal Access trail, composting toilet, and yurt.

Grow Property Management/Volunteer Coordination position; implement Property Management Plan.

- AmeriCorps Conservation Stewardship Technician tended and added to plantings, removed invasives, maintained trails, and made progress on Property Management Plan.

Increase Facilities Rentals.

- Increased facility rental income 19.6% over 2022 due to high levels of interest.



Goal 3: NBNC cultivates current and future generations of environmental stewards.



Integrate stewardship and Community Science into NBNC programming.

- Tied climate resilience and environmental stewardship into programming, including a post-flood floodplain and watershed field walk, stewardship during onsite education programs, and mushroom community science during ECO. Laid the groundwork for more integration in 2024, including a climate change book club, Naturalist Journeys focused on climate change, and native plant propagation and restoration projects.
- Hosted Biodiversity Jamboree and FungiFest, two major events that focused on participation in Vermont-based Community Science projects.

Strengthen existing and pursue new partnerships.

- Inventoried NBNC partnerships, strengthened existing partnerships, grew new ones, and continued to be grateful for the groups and organizations with whom we partner.

Goal 4: NBNC is a financially sound organization, providing sustainable and rewarding opportunities for employment, volunteerism, and philanthropy.

Grow the administrative team and increase development staff-hours.

- Hired new Administrative and Finance Assistant, and increased to 20 hours/week.
- Finalized a new part-time position, Development Coordinator, to be hired early in 2024.

Craft a five-year budget.

- Toward this objective we adopted a Financial Management Plan, outlining long-term financial management strategies. Built asset inventory to anticipate capital maintenance and improvement needs.

Grow donor outreach programs and increase contributed income.

- Raised \$573,550 in contributed income, 4% over 2022, including significant grants from the Canaday Family Charitable Trust, the Harris & Frances Block Foundation, and the Vermont Arts Council; multi-year pledges from many donors; increased giving from several long-time donors; and significant gifts from several new donors.
- Celebrated multi-year pledge donors at summer gathering and met with many major donors.
- Created long-term development plan and launched new fundraising efforts, including a membership overhaul featuring a sliding scale model and resulting in a 10% increase in membership income.
- Applied for 25 grants with 80% success rate, including receipt of \$15,550 in flood recovery grants to support \$24,550 in lost revenue, repair, and recovery costs related to the July flood.



Improve sustainability of NBNC workforce.

- In addition to administrative additions mentioned above, added hours for Forest Preschool teachers and full summer seasons for all Teacher-Naturalists.
- Enjoyed first year of new employee benefits, with staff most appreciating doubled sick time, retirement accounts, and clarified time off/flex time policies.
- Continued monthly staff meetings, held a winter staff retreat, brought Education Staff to Groton State Forest for a pre-summer overnight, and enjoyed good camaraderie, high morale, a healthy dose of office antics, and lots of meaningful shared experiences.

Increase staff compensation, benefits, and HR support.

- Increased staff compensation ~4% or more in January, and gave summer bonuses in late May, with a continued commitment to increasing staff compensation. We are proud of the progress we've made on this front, and are deeply appreciative of our donors and members who have helped make this possible.

For more information, visit or call:

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NorthBranchNatureCenter.org