

North Branch Nature Center

2024 Annual Progress Report



Overview

We are enormously proud to share that we have completed North Branch Nature Center's 2020-2024 Strategic Plan! This was an ambitious plan that called for growth in programs, personnel, operations, and property, and that encompassed a global pandemic, a leadership transition, and two 100-year floods. In 2024, we completed a few major projects, adding a yurt to the property and addressing drainage issues near the farmhouse foundation, and put finishing touches on many aspects of the plan. We also celebrated the accomplishments of the past five years (Program and staff expansions! Improved benefits! Capital Campaign completion! A Universal Access trail!) and dove into planning our next five, with input from staff, board, and community. Our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan has been used as a gold standard by other nature centers — a true testament to the success of the plan and the leadership of all NBNC staff, who made it come to life in our programs and on our trails.

In 2024, we welcomed new staff and Board members (and said goodbye to a few as well):

- Welcomed Harriet Hart, Forest Preschool (FPS) Co-Teacher; and Erik Erbes, FPS Aftercare and Robin's Nest Teacher.
- Celebrated new roles for Jenna Plouffe, FPS Director; Megan French, FPS Teacher; and Matt Delligatti, Finance and Development Assistant.
- Hosted three AmeriCorps members: Sofie Carlson, Laura Styer, and Ana Maria Arroyo.
- Welcomed Board members Catherine Coteus, Curt Lindberg, and Mark Martin.
- Welcomed new Board leadership, President Richard Campbell and Secretary Josh Saxe.



Participation in programs continued to be strong, with ECO (Educating Children Outdoors) in 15 public schools, vibrant and full Summer Camps, our first two Visiting Teacher-Naturalists, high participation in owl banding and amphibian rescues, new staff leadership on Adventures Afar trips, increased weekend and evening programs, and a successful Biodiversity Jamboree. All together, 5,100 people participated in NBNC programs in 2024, and more than 17,000 visited our property.

The rest of this report details the progress made towards specific goals in the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan. We look forward to sharing our 2025-2029 Strategic Plan soon!



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

Analyze public surveys

- As part of the community engagement process for our next Strategic Plan, we conducted 20 interviews, surveyed community members (and got 225 responses!), and held a focus group of ECO teachers. We heard that NBNC is a valued community resource, that time outdoors in nature is more important now than ever, and that our core programs are cornerstones of environmental education, conservation, and recreation in Central Vermont.

“NBNC is a shining star of excellence, an example of how a nature center can thrive and service a community.”

~ NBNC survey participant

Fundraise for equitable programming

- Planned and filled our first two lower-cost Adventures Afar, one to Arizona and one to Oregon, attracting new travelers, widening the field of who can afford and enjoy these trips, and making this an annual goal going forward.
- Gave out more than \$31K in financial aid to 90 families across youth, adult, and family program areas, as well as an additional \$55K of financial support for ECO programs.

Staff equity and inclusivity trainings

- Continued staff professional development on equity topics, including racial equity, neurodiversity, and Abenaki history. Held monthly staff JEDI discussions about accessibility and disability in outdoor programs, the stories of refugees and asylum seekers in Vermont, and the experiences of Black people and People of Color in the outdoors in Vermont, among other topics.

Refine programs and launch new programs

- Launched Visiting Teacher-Naturalist (VTN) program area and welcomed our first two VTNs: natural fiber artist Noelani Jones in the spring, and community leader Dr. Opeyemi Parham in the winter.
- Held the first Camp BranchOUT, a nature-based summer day camp designed for Queer and gender questioning youth, developed and run in partnership with Outright Vermont.
- Developed and continued other partner programs, including with Northeast Disabled Athletics Association, Central Vermont Refugee Action Network, and Upper Valley Services Peer Learning Group.

Acquire hearing-assist devices

- A new partnership with Vermont Hands and Voices provided us the chance to learn what is needed by, and how to best develop programs for, the Blind, D/deaf, Hard of Hearing, and/or Deafblind community.
- Offered ASL interpretation at two large public events.



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

Visitor Experience installations.

- Installed a donated yurt on the NBNC property, and celebrated its opening with a Juneteenth celebration.
- Developed and launched two new seasonal displays in our lobby, one on animal tracks and another on butterflies, and completed a second NBNC nature guide pamphlet, covering our meadow ecosystem.
- Installed eight stewardship signs around the property that explain how and why NBNC is caring for the land, covering topics from forest succession to invasive species to climate change.
- Added a Conservation Nursery to grow native seedlings for use in riparian restoration, thanks in large part to Vermont Master Naturalist, the Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program, and the UVM Ecological Planning Laboratory.
- Rebuilt the much-loved Mud Kitchen in our Nature Playscape, which now features long, sturdy counters for small chefs, a water pump, and a shade sail.

Expand evening/weekend open hours and programming

- For the first time, offered open hours on summer weekends, staffed by volunteers. Also piloted volunteer-led Robin's Nest Playgroup sessions, continuing this fixture of Central Vermont's early childhood education through the summer.



Complete Capital Campaign facilities renovation

- At long last, completed the final step in our Capital Campaign facilities renovation by addressing farmhouse foundation issues through excavation, drainage, and landscaping, including native plantings to absorb runoff.

Grow Property Management/Volunteer Coordination position; implement Property Management Plan (PMP).

- Took down a few older trees around the property, and planted 10 large oak, maple, sycamore, and walnut trees to provide shade, thanks to a grant from the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission.

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

Improve program design and evaluation process

- Created program design checklist to ensure that all programs are designed carefully and with NBNC's core values in mind.

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 a part-time Development Coordinator, leading to increased fundraising capacity and event support, and contributing to strong fundraising results for 2024.

Establish Reserve Fund

- Reached \$100K goal for Reserve Fund, NBNC's "rainy day" fund.
- Created Capital Asset Maintenance and Improvement Fund to support facility improvements and repairs.
- Established a board-designated Nest Egg fund to provide long term support for NBNC's future, started with \$200,000 from our Employee Retention Tax Credit.

Grow donor outreach programs and increase contributed income.

- Raised \$646K in contributed income. This 16% increase over 2023 was spread across all giving sources (individuals, foundations, businesses, and government entities), including renewed and increased multi-year pledges from many donors; increased giving from several long-time donors; and gifts from several new donors.
- Celebrated philanthropy at NBNC at a fall donor evening.
- More than doubled the number of known participants in our Planned Giving Program to 11.
- Welcomed 10 new businesses to our business membership/sponsorship program.
- Secured 21 grants, including from the Canaday Family Charitable Trust, Harris & Frances Block Foundation, Vermont Community Foundation, Larsen Fund, Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program, Lintilhac Foundation, and Lake Champlain Basin Program, the last of which will support a series of watershed education programs in 2025 and 2026.
- Received NBNC's two largest-ever gifts, one from a longtime donor wishing to make a "transformational" gift; and another, in the form of a charitable gift annuity, from the passing of Gale Lawrence, a Vermont environmentalist and educator. Thanks to the latter, there is now a North Branch Nature Center Planned Giving Fund at the Vermont Community Foundation. Both gifts helped support substantial staff raises for 2025 and will continue to do so into the future.

Improve data management software and systems

- Set the stage for a few major software changes and website redesign in 2025.

Increase staff compensation, benefits, and HR support.

- Increased staff compensation 5-8% in January, and gave summer bonuses in late May.
- Surveyed staff on benefit needs and researched ways to improve offerings, ultimately deciding to increase NBNC's health plan cost share and offer flexible spending and dependent care accounts starting in 2025.

