



New Canaan Nature Center



Strategic Plan 2016-2020 Nature and Community Growing Together

VALUES

Community: *Unifying* people of all ages and diverse backgrounds with nature

Education: *Teaching* respect for nature through enjoyment, experience and engagement

Protection: *Inspiring* the passion to become environmental advocates and stewards

Preservation: *Saving* nature for future generations

MISSION

The New Canaan Nature Center is an environmental education organization dedicated to inspiring people of all ages to respect, protect and enjoy the world of nature.

VISION

To be recognized as a leader in environmental education, stewardship of natural resources and service to the community.

Strategic Objectives

1

Enrich the community's environmental learning experiences

2

Conserve the Nature Center's Gardens, habitats, buildings and collections



Raise the visibility of the Nature Center's programming and diverse outdoor experiences

4

Ensure the Nature Center's financial stability and growth

The New Canaan Nature Center (NCNC) has been a New Canaan sanctuary for nature lovers for almost six decades. With its reputation as a community asset and its 40 acres of gardens, habitats and buildings, and its dedicated staff and volunteers, the Nature Center's focus on four strategic areas will enable it to retain its reputation and strengthen its position as a treasured community resource.

New and expanded programming will enhance learning experiences for people of all ages. Building from the successes of its current programs and adding programming to address emerging trends such as the therapeutic benefits of health and wellness in nature will enable the Nature Center to offer something for everyone.

The gardens, habitats, buildings and collections will be restored and improved to support the programs and the vision of the Nature Center as a sanctuary for experiencing and learning about nature. Training programs will be designed so that the volunteer corps can better support the property restoration and maintenance.

Increased visibility will raise community awareness about the Nature Center's resources and programs. Marketing and communications will be strengthened to promote the depth and breadth of all that the Nature Center has to offer. An emphasis on nurturing community relationships and partnerships will further deepen the bonds created over the last six decades.

A focus on financial sustainability and growth will ensure the Nature Center's ability to achieve its mission and meet the changing needs of the community. The approach will be fiscally responsible, operationally sound and designed to support the investments in the Nature Center's assets, programs and people.

The Nature Center has been growing with the community for nearly six decades. Its beautiful natural environment combined with its popular programming provides a strong base from which to grow. It is well positioned to be a unique provider of nature-based experiences and learning and to achieve its mission to inspire people of all ages to respect and protect the natural world now and for future generations.

Executive Summary

The New Canaan Nature Center (NCNC) has been a New Canaan sanctuary for nature lovers for almost six decades. In 1959, Susan Bliss deeded her 40-acre estate of buildings, gardens, greenhouses and specimen plantings to the Town of New Canaan. The deed specified that the property be used “for the purposes of an arboretum, bird sanctuary, nature center, horticulture and for passive recreation and related purposes.” In 1960, the Town appointed the newly formed NCNC to manage the property as a community nature center.

To achieve its mission to inspire people of all ages to respect and protect the world of nature, and to move toward its vision of being a valued and shared community resource, the New Canaan Nature

Center has established four strategic objectives, with 12 supporting initiatives:

Enrich the Community’s Environmental Learning Experiences

- Sustain the strength of our core preschool, camp and family programs
- Develop adult horticultural and environmental programs
- Evaluate and strengthen off-site school programs
- Improve the visitor’s experience

Conserve the Nature Center’s Gardens, Habitats, Buildings and Collections

- Rehabilitate the Nature Center’s gardens, trails, habitats
- Restore buildings and collections
- Create a capital improvement plan to restore the Nature Center’s assets

Raise the Visibility of the Nature Center’s Programming and Diverse Outdoor Experiences

- Implement a comprehensive marketing and communications plan
- Reinforce community connections

Ensure the Nature Center’s Financial Stability and Growth

- Increase revenue from existing and new sources

The Nature Center has so much to be proud of...

- *Education staff qualifications—all have backgrounds in environmental education; some have advanced science degrees*
- *10,000 number of children and adults served annually by our youth, family and community programs*
- *750 family and individual members*
- *The first US nature-based preschool celebrating its 50th anniversary operating at capacity with 100 students*
- *850 campers in the Summer Nature Camp*
- *40 acres of outdoor classroom—A mini “botanical garden” with a unique combination of gardens, habitats, ponds, forests, greenhouses, trails, an apple orchard and arboretum.*
- *A strong volunteer force of 500 contributing over 25,000 hours*

- Strengthen management infrastructure and processes



The New Canaan Nature Center Today

The New Canaan Nature Center (NCNC) is where the community comes to enjoy and better understand the natural world around them. It is where environmental educators are empowered to make the wonder that is nature more comprehensible and exciting to both the very young and the young at heart.

Gardens, Trails and Habitats

Our land features 40 acres of diverse habitats, including wet and dry meadows and woodlands, two ponds, dense thickets, an apple orchard and a cattail marsh. Two miles of trails criss-cross the site that is one of the six largest parcels of open space in New Canaan. In addition to the natural trails that traverse the habitats, visitors are welcomed to enjoy an arboretum and a variety of gardens. The Nature Center's trails, habitats, gardens are open dawn to dusk and are free to the public.

Buildings

Many of the Nature Center's buildings are renovated structures from the former Bliss Estate. The interactive Discovery Room, Nature Gift Shop, multi-purpose Sturgess Room and administrative offices are located in the Visitors Center. The Animal Care Building houses the animal teaching collection and a live Birds of Prey exhibit. The Bliss Education Building and Education Annex house the Nature Center's preschool as well as serve as classroom for Summer Nature Camp, Birthday Parties, Scout programs and many other community, youth and family programs. The 4,000 square-foot, award winning Teaching Greenhouse features living exhibits along with work areas and a classroom.

Income

Membership fees, program revenue, special events, individual and corporate donations and grants, fund the annual \$1.6 million operating budget. Programming revenues contribute 60% to the annual budget. The Town of New Canaan provides in-kind maintenance of land and buildings.

Human resources: Board, Staff and Volunteers

The Nature Center is governed by a 15 member Board of Trustees and employs more than 25 full-time, part-time and seasonal staff. Volunteers, numbering over 500 and contributing over 25,000 hours annually, are an important asset in helping the New Canaan Nature Center achieve its mission.

Comprehensive Nature-Based Programming and Community Events

The Nature Center offers a comprehensive portfolio of nature-based programs and events.

The Nature Center founded the first nature-based pre-school in the US and since its inception in 1967, the pre-school is considered to be the premier nature-based program. For the past 26 years, the Nature Center has been awarded LINKS, a state-funded environmental education grant that brings 30 fourth grade classes of inner city and urban students from Lower Fairfield County together for an integrated learning experience. The Nature Center developed and delivers the science curriculum for this program. Other programs include: Summer Nature Camp, Adventure Birthday Parties, on-site and off-site school programs. Community events include: Harvest Fest, Fall Fair, Winter Wonderland, Rock the Winter Blues, and Secret Garden Tour.

The Challenges

While the Nature Center's reputation remains strong and its environmental programs and community events are well attended, the Nature Center faces two main challenges: 1) an increasing number of organizations offering nature-based programming 2) increasing competition among not-for-profits for a limited pool of charitable dollars. The Nature Center's strategic plan will address these challenges by creating programming to attract larger, more diverse audiences, investing in the maintenance of its unique assets – gardens, trails, habitats and buildings –and ensuring that the organization is financially secure and operationally sound.

Looking forward

With its reputation as a community asset; its 40 acres of gardens, habitats and buildings, and its dedicated staff and volunteers, the Nature Center's focus on four strategic areas will enable it to retain and strengthen its reputation as a treasured community resource and continue to be the 'go to' place for nature-based inquiries, involvement and education.

The Nature Center has been a gem of the community for nearly six decades. Its beautiful natural environment combined with its popular programming provides a strong base from which to grow.

It is well positioned to be a unique provider of nature-based experiences and learning and to achieve its mission to inspire people of all ages to respect, protect and enjoy the world of nature for now and future generations.

The New Canaan Nature Center Nature and Community Growing Together

*Unifying people of all ages and diverse
backgrounds with nature
nearly six decades*



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