



Executive Director Caroline Eliot Remarks at 2021 Annual Meeting

Welcome everyone, and thank you for coming! It's so nice to see everyone's faces!

What a year to reflect on! Part of me wants to celebrate simply that CREA survived. But in fact, I could argue that we emerge from 2020 strengthened by what we learned and inspired by the support of so many who share our mission. So, while not sorry to see 2020 in the rearview mirror, I do view it with gratitude.

A few notes on what made it possible to navigate the turbulent waters of 2020. Thanks to two grants from the Onion Foundation for operating support, we had the flexibility to innovate and pivot. We also received a generous grant from Merrymeeting Bay Trust that helped us adapt our programs to COVID. We received two PPP grants enabling us to maintain staffing levels.

And you, our donors, stood by us. You didn't just maintain 2019 donation levels. You exceeded them, giving us the resources and the confidence to keep moving forward.

While it was a challenging year, 2020 was also a year of growth and creativity. Here in our new office, we deepened our partnership with office neighbor and mission partner, Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust.

Together with BTLT, we launched Wild Wonders to bring nature-based activity kits to children at home. Our primary distributor of the kits, MidCoast Hunger Prevention, said they flew off the shelves, gone in one day. And I have to give a shout out to the loyal volunteers who showed up, fully masked, week after week, to assemble these kits for us.

We also collaborated with BTLT to renovate trails adjacent to the new Kate Furbish School in Brunswick. BTLT provided the muscle for trail improvements, while CREA provided a bridge (which proved to be very popular with the young hikers), 'museum boxes' for outdoor display of natural treasures, and guidance on siting of outdoor classrooms. Further, while the Preserve was closed, BTLT offered its properties for CREA nature walks. These collaborations were productive and easy to execute. To discuss details, all we had to do was walk through a door!



In the unique circumstances of the past year, CREA looked for ways to create self-guided adventures and to reach new audiences. For example, we moved our Storywalk to the meadow behind our office. There's plenty of housing at Brunswick Landing, including lots of young families. When we learned that a number of New Mainers live just one block away at Pegasus Landing, we created translations of our Storywalk books into French and Portuguese. (Shoutout to our brilliant translation team.) Now, the Storywalk is used not only by New Mainer families with children, but also by New Mainer adults and their mentors working on English skills.

Storywalk is also a regular destination for the YMCA, which walks groups of children over to enjoy the stories. We love to visit with everyone who comes, giving us a great opportunity to get feedback, offer suggestions for other outdoor adventures, or even share an activity.

One April day, we sent a group of YMCA youngsters scampering off into the woods on a scavenger hunt for signs of spring. A week or two later, an eight-year-old boy from this group returned to share the Storywalk with his grandmother. He was also entranced by and wanted to share our beautiful red fox with her. You never know what is going to captivate a person. (For some youngsters, it's the numbers on the base of the storyboards. They set up like track stars as their caregiver reads the page, poised to race to the next one.)

In the schools, this was a year in which outdoor learning got a big boost. Suddenly, everyone wanted to do it. And even though we couldn't do it ourselves, in person, due to COVID restrictions, we facilitated a LOT of outdoor learning. We guided local districts with outdoor learning techniques and strategies in myriad ways - print, video, and in-person trainings. We kept elementary students engaged with science and nature by providing high quality content.

Now, I can't talk about our school programs without acknowledging the incredible work of our program staff – Sarah, Carey, and Jenny – this past year. Like many parents, last spring they found themselves suddenly tasked with overseeing their children's education 24/7. They got a slight respite in the fall when their children returned to in person schooling two days a week, but 12 hours a week is not enough when you have to develop a completely new model for your program, and learn new tools and technologies along the way.

We moved our staff meetings to 8:30 pm, and our staff did much of their work in the wee hours of the night. As educators, they are all about face-to-face education and don't much relish making videos. But they got it done and the quality of their work speaks for itself. Just watch one of the videos they made for



students and tell me it's not engaging! My Chicago-based mother-in-law was only one of several people who told me she watched a 15-minute-long video on Bird Feet, distributed via our e-news - and she loved it! And learned a lot! I did not tell her that the lesson was created for third graders.

Now, you can't talk about 2020 without mentioning Zoom. We loved it and we hated it. But it was a godsend and it gave us a new tool that we will continue to use – when appropriate. Zoom gave us access to speakers who would not have been available in person and we reached far more people. 77 people registered for our December 21st program – astonishing! Over one hundred registered for several others! Just yesterday, a CREA member expressed her appreciation for the quality and variety of our speakers and topics, saying they helped to get her through the winter.

So our twentieth year was filled with challenges that proved to be a pathway to growth. We learned to use our website and social media in new ways. We learned new tools with which to advance our mission. We used the pause to make some much-needed improvements to the Ecology Center, thanks to the boundless energy and quiet guidance of Board Member and volunteer Facilities Director Ron Strand. And we are listening and looking to the future – taking a close look at our programs to ensure they are inclusive, welcoming, and reflect the richness of all human history and experience.

We are profoundly grateful to you for your steadfast support, which brought nature-based education to so many last year. More people are waking up to the natural world's importance to us – physically and emotionally – and on a larger scale – ecologically.

As photographer Ben Horton says, "Getting people to fall in love with our world is the first step to getting them to protect it." I offer a heartfelt thank you to all of you for your support in 2020 and I look forward to continuing this work together.