



CREA Annual Meeting – June 27, 2022
Comments by Executive Director, Caroline Eliot

Welcome everyone! Thank you for coming to hear about what the Cathance River Education Alliance has been up to and to keep our Board and officers current. It's always a treat to spend time with the people who make nature-based education possible.

I hope you've had a chance to see our 2021 Annual Report. Some copies are on display here. You can also access it from our recent Annual Meeting notice email or find it on our website. It doesn't tell you everything we did last year, but it gives you a sense.

These days, every year is different as we navigate the new reality that makes planning anything – whether it's days, weeks, or months - a little more challenging. We have all been affected by Covid. It has exposed vulnerabilities, and created tremendous pain, loss, and isolation. But it has also highlighted the power of disruption to spawn innovation, adaptation and resilience. I would say that, for us, the focus of 2020 was innovation, and the focus of 2021 was adaptation.

Our mission and work are unchanged. We continue to use the natural world as a classroom to engage and to inspire learning. We continue to motivate people to care about and to care for the earth so the next generation has a sustainable future. But we have also adapted to circumstances brought about by the pandemic and I would argue that the upheaval of recent years has made us more resilient, though still respectful of how quickly things can change.

So, I'd like to share a few thoughts about 2021 as it recedes into the distance.

Needless to say, we were thrilled when the Cathance River Nature Preserve re-opened in April of 2021. As an organization whose mission is all about in-person programs, the closure was challenging. We worked closely with our longstanding partner, Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust, to convince the Preserve landowner that it was safe to reopen if done properly. We then

implemented the re-opening plan and did so in a way that didn't overwhelm the Preserve with too many visitors. The re-opening was seamless and it was truly wonderful to make guided walks, on-site school programs, and CREA camp available to the community once more. Thanks to you all for your patience and support during the closure.

In 2021, we were able to more fully benefit from our proximity to BTLT, whose offices have abutted ours since July of 2020. This easy access enabled a deeper, more productive connection between our organizations, which have compatible, yet complementary missions. We hosted walks on their properties during the Preserve closure, we continued our collaboration to produce and distribute nature-based activity kits for youngsters, we co-sponsored events – taking advantage of our larger combined audiences, we continued our co-management of Preserve trails, and we shared administrative and other resources. Good partners are worth their weight in gold, and we are grateful for this ongoing relationship.

In our work, we plant seeds. We are most effective when we build on what has come before. We know from research that, particularly with young people, repeated exposure to nature-based learning has the greatest positive impact. That's why we try to achieve multiple touchpoints with students in local districts.

Toward that end, and to reach more students, in 2021 we continued our multi-year collaboration with local school districts. Most recently, we've been helping them develop a more robust elementary science curriculum that aligns with national standards. That sounds pretty dry, but in truth, it's exciting and important work.

First, we're guiding teachers toward the 5E model of teaching science, which is a more student-centered approach to teaching. The traditional model teaches from a textbook, involves lots of memorization, doesn't necessarily connect science to students' daily lives, and isn't particularly engaging to many youngsters.

The 5 E's are - engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate. The 5E model STARTS with hands-on exploration of a topic or phenomena to stimulate curiosity and interest. Only then are concepts and vocabulary introduced.

I have learned a lot from watching Sarah, Carey, and Jenny in action. They don't generally answer questions. Instead, they turn them back to students or campers. "What do YOU think?" "Why do you think it does that?" We don't generate engagement by answering

questions or giving a name to something. We generate engagement by empowering people, especially children, to think for themselves, to trust their powers of observation, to be curious.

Apologies for going into these details, but as someone who is part of the generation that learned principally from times tables and textbooks, I am fascinated by and a bit jealous of these new approaches.

Most teachers welcome these new approaches, and CREA plays a crucial supporting role in providing professional development that facilitates the transition to this new model. We also advocate for using nature-based lessons and hands-on activities - rather than tests - as the basis for student evaluation whenever possible.

In 2021, Sarah and Carey began developing new science units collaboratively with district science teachers. This is a great model because teachers get even more excited about teaching units when they're part of the team that develops them.

Now that's just our work with the schools. In 2021, we also hosted 35 community programs. Our in-person rambles ranged from full moon lantern walks to community Storywalks to explorations of what the preserve landscape reveals about its past, and many more. The topics vary, because you never know what's going to spark a response or kindle someone's curiosity. You never know when the magic will happen.

We continued the virtual format for our speaker programs, taking advantage of the larger pool of speakers and audience members that it made possible. Topics varied from bird decline to fish restoration to turtles to chestnut research to rewilding landscapes, and more. We often receive appreciative emails from enthusiastic attendees which tells me we must be doing something right.

I can't talk about 2021 without speaking about the joyous event that was the return of CREA camp. Every time I visited CREA camp last summer, I left with a spring in my step and a smile on my face. It was deeply satisfying to witness the joy and energy of young people enjoying the outdoors with their peers, especially after the difficult year they had. Our youngest campers, the six-year-olds, despite the fact that many had never experienced a normal school year or been part of a large group, ran (not walked) to the stairs with their enormous backpacks on day one of their camp week. Often leaving behind a surprised parent who was fully expecting the anxious or tearful goodbye.

All summer long, campers were fully immersed in games of Poison Dart Frog, Porcupine Tag, Beckon, Camouflage, and more. Wide-eyed youngsters were touching and holding frogs and turtles, many for the first time. On the last day of each camp week, you could witness the transformation of neatly dressed campers exiting from air-conditioned cars in the morning into hot, happy, disheveled youngsters sporting mud tattoos after the afternoon hike to Clay Brook. I asked Jenny if they try to get the campers to rinse off and she said, “No, we just tell the parents to bring a towel for the back seat when they come to pick up.”

This is the kind of exposure today’s children need – physical activity, entire days outdoors in nature (even when it’s wet), and communal exploration and discovery. We do this really well, thanks to Jenny’s brilliant curating of the CREA camp experience and your support.

I hope you all recognize what an important role you play in support of this work. We are a small, lightly staffed organization. We do not have deep capacity for communications or development, but we do big things with the resources we have. In 2021, excluding noncash expenses, with \$175,000, we reached over two thousand students, over a thousand adults and families, and over two hundred campers.

The intangibles are equally important, sometimes more so, as I’ll describe in closing. Here’s a story from this spring that beautifully illuminates the intangibles of nature-based education. Sarah and Carey have been working with Headstart preschoolers in Bath and Brunswick this spring. It can be a challenging population to work with – there are behavioral issues, easily distracted youngsters, and sterile playgrounds to work in. Despite these obstacles, Sarah and Carey found ways to engage the kiddos. For example, one day, they brought ‘aged’ acorns for the preschoolers to dissect. Here’s an excerpt from the final grant report describing how this activity was received.

“LOOK!!!” and other enthusiastic shouts filled the room as kids opened their acorns to find little worms crawling inside. They named their worms, made “houses” for their worms, made sure their worms were safe and had food and weren’t feeling scared... All those developmental skills of empathy, care for others, etc happen so naturally when taking care of living things (even if only a tiny white maggot). The kids were incredibly gentle with their discoveries, and had a wonderful time sharing with their peers. This went on for 20 minutes – The classroom teachers couldn’t believe how long the kids remained engaged with these acorns! It was a great experience for all, and a great chance for teachers to see

their students behaving in unexpected ways in the classroom. We loved seeing the student -who had not been engaged in any of the previous activities and who clearly struggles with behavior issues regularly with his teacher – spend 20 minutes picking apart an acorn to see what he would find inside. This showed that, if given the right setting, kids can be great observers. You never know what will hook a kid, so we have to keep trying different techniques.

This is the kind of work that can only happen one program at a time, one person at a time. We open minds and senses to the wonder, the resilience, the fragility, and the importance of the natural world. I want to thank all of you for your support which gives life to CREA and our mission. You make these spaces for exploration, connection, and learning possible.

Thank you.