

Shaver's Creek Environmental Center takes its engagement to new heights

Turning Over a New Leaf

BY KAREN WING

After 30 years of outreach, research and education, Shaver's Creek Environmental Center is coming out of the woods, so to speak.

From summer day camps, to the Outdoor School, to the annual Birding Cup event, to the Raptor Center (with 20 birds of prey), the center is already on the map when it comes to attracting the public on all-things outdoor. Now, a series of initiatives exemplifies a new level of engagement at Shaver's Creek, with added opportunities for the center's many loyal constituency groups—Penn State undergrads, schools, youth and the community.

"Things have been evolving at Shaver's Creek, and we have a very good foundation from which we can express what we do so well," said Mark McLaughlin, director of Shaver's Creek.

Classroom Without Walls

That foundation has served as an inspiration for many. For example, when Assistant Program Director Ellen Will conducted a study of more than 200 former Shaver's Creek interns, she found that the internship experience helped shape their career choices and outlooks on the environment, with almost 70 percent going on to work in an environmental or educational field.

Shaver's Creek is seeking to build on that impact, with an intensified

effort to partner with Penn State academic departments. These new partnerships aim to create opportunities for students to gain teaching experience, leadership skills and environmental knowledge, in addition to college credit.

"We have had a long relationship with the College of Health and Human Development, but we are also working to establish opportunities for students in engineering, landscape architecture, architecture and horticulture, to name a few," said McLaughlin.

Dr. Robert Burkholder, associate professor of English, has worked with Shaver's Creek on his Penn State Wilderness Literature Field Institute, a course that combines backpacking, white water rafting and rock climbing with the reading and interpretation of literature.

"In 2000, when I initially had the idea of teaching a literature course wrapped up in an adventure, Shaver's Creek, and specifically Mark McLaughlin, were there to not only support but also to help teach the course," said Burkholder. "Since then I have used Shaver's Creek

to help with freshman seminars, summer seminars for high school teachers and interdisciplinary graduate seminars, and whatever I have done with them has benefited from their enthusiasm, knowledge and professionalism."

Last year, Shaver's Creek hosted 29 different courses—an increase of 18 percent from the previous year;

A study found that nearly 70 percent of former Shaver's Creek interns went on to work in an environmental or educational field.

A Gift for Children

A new \$50,000 endowment from a recently retired senior research engineer in Penn State's Applied Research Lab, Mark McBride, boosted Shaver's Creek Environmental Center's total endowment past \$1 million. "As a member of the Penn State family for over 40 years, I have received many benefits," said McBride. "I feel privileged to be able to support Shaver's Creek in their mission through this donation and by participating in their programs." The gift is earmarked toward providing additional environmental programming to the region's children.

657 Penn State students from 45 different majors in 13 of Penn State's academic colleges took credit classes; 310 noncredit programs served the needs of 9,643 students.

Another new scholarly activity focuses on nature writing. In the recently launched Shaver's Creek Ecological Reflections Project, two visiting authors are invited each year to the center to reflect and write about eight designated spots. The writings are being collected in a journal that will grow each year—with the intention

of continuing for 100 years. The inaugural authors were Dr. Ian Marshall, Penn State Altoona professor of English and environmental studies, and author and naturalist Scott Weidensaul. Weidensaul has written more than two dozen books on natural history, including the Pulitzer Prize finalist "Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds."

Weidensaul said of the project: "I was really drawn to the idea by the timescale of it—the idea of observing a piece of the landscape over the course of multiple human lifetimes. By its very nature, this project will produce a fuller understanding of how the landscape at Shaver's Creek changes with time."

The following is an example of an entry from the inaugural year, 2006:

*spring shoots
the pines show them how
the green thing is done*

—Dr. Ian Marshall, professor of English and environmental studies, Penn State Altoona

Shaver's Creek is also serving as a connector for other, like-minded Penn State organizations. McLaughlin recently initiated the formation of the Museum Group, a committee composed of representatives from the All-Sports Museum, Palmer Museum of Art, Frost Entomology Museum, Matson Anthropology Museum, Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum, Center for Sustainability and Pasto Agricultural Museum.

The goal of the Museum Group is to collectively provide some strategic vision to each other's activities. "We're hoping to share resources, explore grant opportunities and basically help each other out," said McLaughlin. And for Pennsylvania K–5 teachers, Shaver's Creek worked with WPSU to produce a new iWonder series, which provides standards-based environmental lessons to use in the classroom (<http://www.wpsu.org/edservices/iwonder>).

A new wetlands boardwalk offers an up-close look at wildlife.

Green From the Start

Long before the release of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth," and before advertising giant JWT added "environmental causes" to its list of "70 Things to Watch in 2007," Shaver's Creek has championed eco-friendliness. Summer day campers are required to bring no-waste lunches; injured birds of prey are tended; and visitors can learn about watershed life cycles and how to reduce their carbon footprint.

Recently, the center has stepped up its effort to promote skills for minimizing the public's impact on the outdoors. Last year it became an organizational partner of the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, an international organization dedicated to inspiring responsible outdoor recreation through education, research and partnerships. A team of master educators and trainers is available to set up discussions or workshops for community groups.

Also, to encourage more walk-in visitors, Shaver's Creek made two important enhancements: It reopened its wetlands boardwalk, a helical pier that provides an up-close and personal view of wetlands wildlife, and it eliminated its entry fee.

"After we made that change, walk-in visitors increased by 50 percent," said McLaughlin. In 2006, the center had 6,100 visitors; membership also shot up 16 percent. For more information, visit Shaver's Creek online at <http://www.ShaversCreek.org>. 🍀



Dr. Ian Marshall from Penn State Altoona spearheaded a new nature-writing project at Shaver's Creek.

50 Years Young

This year Shaver's Creek Outdoor School celebrates its 50th anniversary as a four-day residential program for upper-elementary students. Founded with the mission of incorporating "outdoor education and school camping" into the Pennsylvania school curriculum, the Outdoor School has grown into a premier program that provides youth with a positive outdoor education experience.

Each spring and fall, students from Centre, Huntingdon, Mifflin and other surrounding counties spend time in the winterized cabins at Camp Blue Diamond—learning about the natural world through hands-on lessons and guided exploration with Shaver's Creek staff and Penn State students.

The Outdoor School curriculum supports the Pennsylvania education standards for Environment and Ecology.



Upper-elementary students learn about the natural world through the Outdoor School.