

## **An Urban Nature Center: Take 2. My Journey to Sustainability Education in Rebuilding a Nature Center**

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**Abstract:** Rebuilding a nature center and its educational programming in 2017 for 12 years following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina required a very different approach in creating programs and activities. Over the last ten years, environmental education has turned its focus from recycling and litter abatement toward sustainability lifestyle education. Nature centers have become more than trails and field trips focused solely on identifying native plants and animals. Nature centers now stress the benefits of nature to human health and the interconnectedness of all living creatures. My journey began as an effort to create programming and opportunities that are multigenerational and focus on the value of nature for the health and well-being of the community, along with creating a sense of stewardship for the local environment.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Nature Centers, environmental education

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina cut a swath of destruction across Louisiana and Mississippi. One of the hardest hit communities was Eastern New Orleans. In the middle of this large section of New Orleans was an 86-acre nature center - the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center. For over two decades prior to the hurricane, this urban nature center educated school children and visitors on the importance of the wetlands and its plants and animals. The aftermath of the hurricane left the nature center and most of New Orleans East destroyed by floodwaters.

Challenges with FEMA, funding, contractors, national and local politics made the rebuilding of the nature center process a slow one. It took over 12 years but the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center is rebuilt and open to the public. As Director of Education Projects for Audubon Nature Institute and the person in charge of educational and community programming, I realized that nature centers and environmental education had changed significantly since the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center was originally opened in 1980. As the re-opening approached I realized that not only was sustainability education important as part of a new nature center's core programming, it was important to a local community still struggling to rebuild after the hurricane's devastation. The programming must speak to locals who may require a different approach to environmental education and connecting to nature, but who may not understand how this sustainability education can affect positive change in their lives and community. My journey toward updating the nature center's educational and programming focus is ongoing. This essay describes the processes and challenges of inserting sustainability education into familiar programs, creating new programs and activities, and reaching specific target audiences.

The community surrounding the nature center suffers from urban decay and the lack of capital investment in its neighborhoods. This was true before the storm but is even more problematic in a community facing innumerable challenges after Hurricane Katrina. According to the 2000 and 2010 Census, the population of East New Orleans decreased from 14,963 (2000) to 9,064 (2010) with an estimated rebound by 2016 to 10,547. The New Orleans East neighborhood has a median household income below the state average, while unemployment is above the state average and 29.6% of the residents live below the poverty level. This diverse community is comprised mainly of African American, Asian American, and Latino populations (City-Data.com). Currently, this large geographic area has only four grocery stores that carry produce and meats/seafood: a Walmart Super Center, Winn-Dixie, and two small Vietnamese grocery markets. The most predominant businesses in the area surrounding the nature center are fast food restaurants.

This community desperately needed opportunities for engagement in healthful activities and education programs delivered from an ecological perspective. At the same time, it was also important that all programming be appropriate across social, ethnic, cultural and class boundaries. I felt strongly that by offering a variety of programs focusing on environmental knowledge, sustainable living skills, positive attitudes, and behaviors towards nature and a healthy environment, I could then make a connection to healthy economic growth. The CDC defines sustainability as "A community's ongoing capacity and resolve to work together to establish, advance, and maintain effective strategies that continuously improve health and quality of life for all." (CDC's Healthy Communities Program Sustainability Planning Guide, 2009) This definition was used to establish my goals for programs offered at the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center.

## CREATING NEW COMMUNITY PROGRAMS WITH A FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

I remember the first Earth Day in 1970. I was a teen 4-H'er and this special event involved picking up trash and wearing a free Earth Day t-shirt at the Illinois State Fair. This first Earth Day was the birth of environmental education and action in the United States. Early environmental education was concerned with issues like pollution, deforestation and illegal dumping. The Audubon Louisiana Nature Center opened in 1980 with an interpretive center and trails. Environmental education consisted of field trips and curriculum on local wildlife and environment. Community engagement and calls to action for the environment were not a part of conservation education's strategic plan. In the 1990's the term "sustainability" began to appear in the language of environmental education. In the 2000's educators at the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center began changing the curriculum to better inspire our guests to make personal changes that could help the environment. When the nature center was destroyed in 2005, environmental education and programming were still singularly focused on school children and class field trips.

The Audubon Louisiana Nature Center was destroyed in 2005 and it was not until 2014 that plans for rebuilding the nature center and designing new programming began. With the new building came new opportunities to think about environmental education and our community. I was enthusiastic about new opportunities to involve the local community in creating programming and partnerships. They had been vocal about their desire and need for this nature center to be rebuilt since the communities surrounding the nature center were still struggling to rebuild from the hurricane's destruction. Area leaders and citizens wanted to see that the city was invested in their community since many of the businesses in the area did not return after the storm. They needed to see new construction and an opportunity for some positive economic development. The Audubon Louisiana Nature Center was a physical sign of hope for the community.

My goals and my organization's goals did not initially mesh. Many wanted to see the "old" nature center, not only in its design but also in its programming. I decided to create a strategic plan that focused on sustainability education. It would need to cover both global environmental issues, such as climate change and single-use plastics, and local community-based environmental and sustainability issues. My ideas for programming would focus on community rather than the individual. Programming would be intergenerational, including everyone from toddlers to senior citizens. School groups were important and helped generate revenue, but the education goal was much bigger than that now. The educational strategic plan was created and delivered in the spring of 2017.

To make sure that the nature center involved the local community in sustainability education, I set my goals on creating teaching gardens and a future farmers market on the grounds of the nature center. These two major projects give the nature center an opportunity to teach through hands-on activities the connections between food and the environment. The key to this new type

of education is multi-generational learning and activities. This vision is slowly becoming a reality with several small successes already achieved. I found funding to begin the construction of raised garden beds, purchase plants and seeds, and provide funding for staff. Leadership gave the green light to start the process of permitting and developing a timeline for the farmer's market. While internal and community leaders have expressed support for a farmer's market at the nature center the challenge remains as to whether the local community will embrace the farmer's market in the long term. The nature center sits in the center of a community with the challenges of diverse cultures, poverty, and slow economic growth. Literature shows that key attributes such as: farm to table products, better taste, seasonal choices, lower carbon footprint and obvious socioeconomic benefits for the community, do motivate farmer's market patrons (AMS 2017), However, that research is focused on farmer's market patrons and not the general population of the surrounding area.

To get a better understanding of my local community I did a small study that explored the incentives and disincentives of this diverse general population that lives within a few miles of the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center (the actual location of the planned farmer's market) for attending and supporting a neighborhood farmers' market. My study was designed to reach demographics not generally observed at farmer's markets. The study included families, senior citizens, low-income households and a diverse sampling of groups living in the survey area. To evaluate the potential differences in perceptions of farmers' markets, food purchase choice preferences and possible obstacles to shopping for local produce, several types of surveys and focus groups were created.

This initial study is one of the first steps in achieving my goal of starting a farmer's market at the nature center in 2019. Based on research that shows farmer's markets can have a positive effect on the community, socially and economically, (Brown & Miller 2008) I feel strongly that offering a farmer's market on the property of the nature center is strategic in connecting the nature center with the community. A farmer's market is important for both the physical health of local residents and for the community's economic health. The farmer's market is an integral part of my strategic plan for multi-generational sustainability education. Data from this study was preliminary work to get a perspective on how we can move forward with the farmer's market. Unfortunately, information from this study had too small of a sample size to accurately measure the attitudes of the whole community towards their shopping preferences for healthy options, their interest in a local farmer's market or their understanding of sustainable living practices. However, we did gain valuable insight into possible barriers such as the price of items, time and day conflicts, a competing farmer's market in the Vietnamese community on Saturday mornings and more. The next step will be to add more surveys and focus groups to gain information on preferences and possible challenges from the community specifically centered on the creation of a neighborhood farmer's market. To make this project sustainable, it is important that the voice of this large and diverse community is heard. In the next few months, I will schedule town hall meetings in each of the surrounding neighborhoods. During this same time, initial steps will be taken to attain the proper permits and access to SNAP/EBT credit machine since acceptance of food stamps and WIC are critical to the needs of the community.

## SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION AND TRADITIONAL NATURE CENTER OFFERINGS

Sustainability education programs and objectives that focus on including members of surrounding neighborhoods are important for connecting the community to the nature center, but traditional revenue-generating programming are also important for the success of the facility. My expectations for inserting sustainability education into standard presentations had some unexpected challenges.

The Audubon Louisiana Nature Center began offering scout badge clinics and overnights to both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in October 2017. Applicable badges from the boy scouts and girl scouts were offered. In 2013 the Boy Scouts of America created a Sustainability Merit Badge. This badge focuses on water use, food production, carbon foot printing, materials and product consumption and ecosystem health. It was a priority based on our sustainability education objectives that this badge become an option for nature center badge clinic offerings. While the girl scouts do not have a “sustainability” badge at this time, they do have individual badges that contain components of sustainability education. These themed badge options offer a positive and seemingly simple opportunity to host scout badge clinics that support sustainability education. I eagerly awaited requests for sustainability badge clinics to be booked; however, six months later badges on sustainability are rarely requested when scouts book badge clinics.

In the meantime, while I waited for scout groups to sign up for sustainability badge clinics, I watched in horror as scout leaders brought in supplies for their booked overnights: cases of bottled water, paper cups and plates, paper towels, wet wipes, single-use snacks and more. I realized that we needed to educate them before they set foot on grounds. I created a pre-visit FAQ that included info on reducing their carbon footprint while traveling to the nature center, alternatives to single-use products and healthy meal choices. We also created our own Eco Badge that was available to the scout overnight groups for following the same objectives set in the BSA Sustainability Badge.

Finally, I focused my efforts toward our early childhood programs and birthday parties. Our smallest visitors learn to be instant gratification consumers at an early age. Programming needed to be designed with messaging that was understood by both parents and children. Curriculum objectives had to be about attitudes, values, and actions. Eco-friendly, nature focused birthday parties are still being evaluated to measure their success and their effects, but encouragingly, parents are embracing the sustainable education options such as nature play, green party options, tips and resources for sustainable daily living and more, offered by these programs.

The popularity of eco-friendly birthdays and at the same time the lack of participation in eco-friendly badge clinics is perplexing. Gathering information from scout leaders will be part of process moving forward.

## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The education strategic plan for sustainability education is moving forward in small steps. I am confident that the goals and plans discussed in this article will continue to develop and come to fruition. I am also hopeful that our efforts to reach out and encourage our neighbors to see themselves as partners in our mission will be successful. This nature center is not the nature center it was pre-Katrina. The surrounding community is not what it was 12 years ago. The need for sustainability education is greater, as is the need for the nature center to create it. Nature Center: Take 2 must embrace the mission of encouraging the surrounding community to live a more sustainable life from cradle to grave.

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