



## **Concept of Nature Education Centres management**

**Document produced within the project “Promoting nature education as efficient mean of awareness raising”/”People with nature”**

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## **Table of content**

Introduction	3
1. What is a nature education centre?	4
2. Types of nature education centres	7
3. Planning a nature education centre – why, who, what, how?	12
3.1. Mission and goals	12
3.2. Target audiences	15
3.3. Resources of the place	16
3.4. Activities	17
4. Facilities of the centre	20
5. Team of the centre	27
6. Getting support for the centre	31
7. Getting the message across	33
8. Evaluating the work	35
<i>Appendix 1</i> Equipment for nature education centre	37
<i>Appendix 2</i> References	40
<i>Appendix 3</i> Useful links	41

### **Abbreviations used in the Concept:**

NEC – Nature education centre

NCA – Nature Conservation Agency

TEEC – Tartu Environmental Education Centre

## **Introduction**

More and more people spend their daily lives in cities; they drive fast cars and live in buildings that rise high above the ground. It may seem that there is no room left for nature and being outdoors. However, it can be insidious idea. With each passing year, the number of people who spend their time in nature is increasing. It becomes more and more popular to spend a weekend in the national parks, enjoying the nature walks; people are visiting farms to participate in various field works, the parents send their children to nature camps and themselves are happily learning about the nature. People have realized that the daily rush could be stopped in the nature.

Fortunately the nature in our countries has remained relatively well - we have wonderful forests, meadows, and the sea with sandy beaches, lakes and swamps. In our countries one can still see birds and plants that are elsewhere on the verge of collapse. Besides all of this, it is available to the public both on public and on private lands.

Some people will suffice with being in the nature - walking, watching, admiring and enjoying the "silence". Some people want to learn to "read" the nature - they want to understand how and why nature occurs, how nature affects our daily lives and how we can reduce the impact on it. Excursions in the nature with professional guides are becoming increasingly popular. Family gladly participate in bird watching events, bat watching at night and other activities, which occasionally host a variety of conservation-related organizations.

Understanding people's growing interest about nature and environment, municipalities, conservation authorities have started to develop nature education centres. The project "*Promoting nature education as efficient mean of awareness raising*"/"*People with nature*" is an excellent example of how state and local authorities together with non-governmental institutions work together by establishing nature education centres, in order to provide citizens the opportunity to participate in the nature exploration processes from early childhood to the old age.

The creation of a nature education centre is an exciting process that lasts indefinitely, because the centre is never ready - it changes with the people who work there and who attend. To help enthusiasts move through this process the project "*People with nature*" team decided to create the concept of nature education centres management - a document summarizing all the things one have think about when creating or managing the nature education centre. In this paper the theory interchanges with practical examples, which are taken from both the project partners (case studies coloured in greenish), and from other nature education centres experience (case studies coloured reddish). We hope that this concept will help you build and nurture the nature education centre you have or are just planning.

## **1. What is a nature education centre?**

Interpretive centre, visitor centre, nature centre, environmental education centre and some other terms are used for describing centres that are built for people in order to enhance their environmental awareness and connect them with the special place where the centre is build.

Nevertheless there is a distinction between the visitor centre and other centres. Visitor centres according to literature are facilities that prepare travellers physically, mentally and spiritually to experience a special place. Visitor centres are usually associated with national parks, cultural heritage areas, botanical gardens, zoos etc. It is the first stop for travellers and they provide the following services:

- They welcome travellers and provide for their physical comforts and needs.
- They orient and inform.
- They inspire and instil reverence and awe for the features and events of that special place.

Nature centres educate local communities through interpretive programs, different activities and events. As Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman wrote “nature centers are more than mortar and brick or trails through a natural area. They are human institutions that guide our search for a sense of place. A nature center is a land based, serves a local community and fosters sustainable relationships between people and the earth”.

The Association for Nature Center Administrators provides the following definition: “a nature center brings environments and people together under the guidance of trained professionals to experience and develop relationships with nature”.

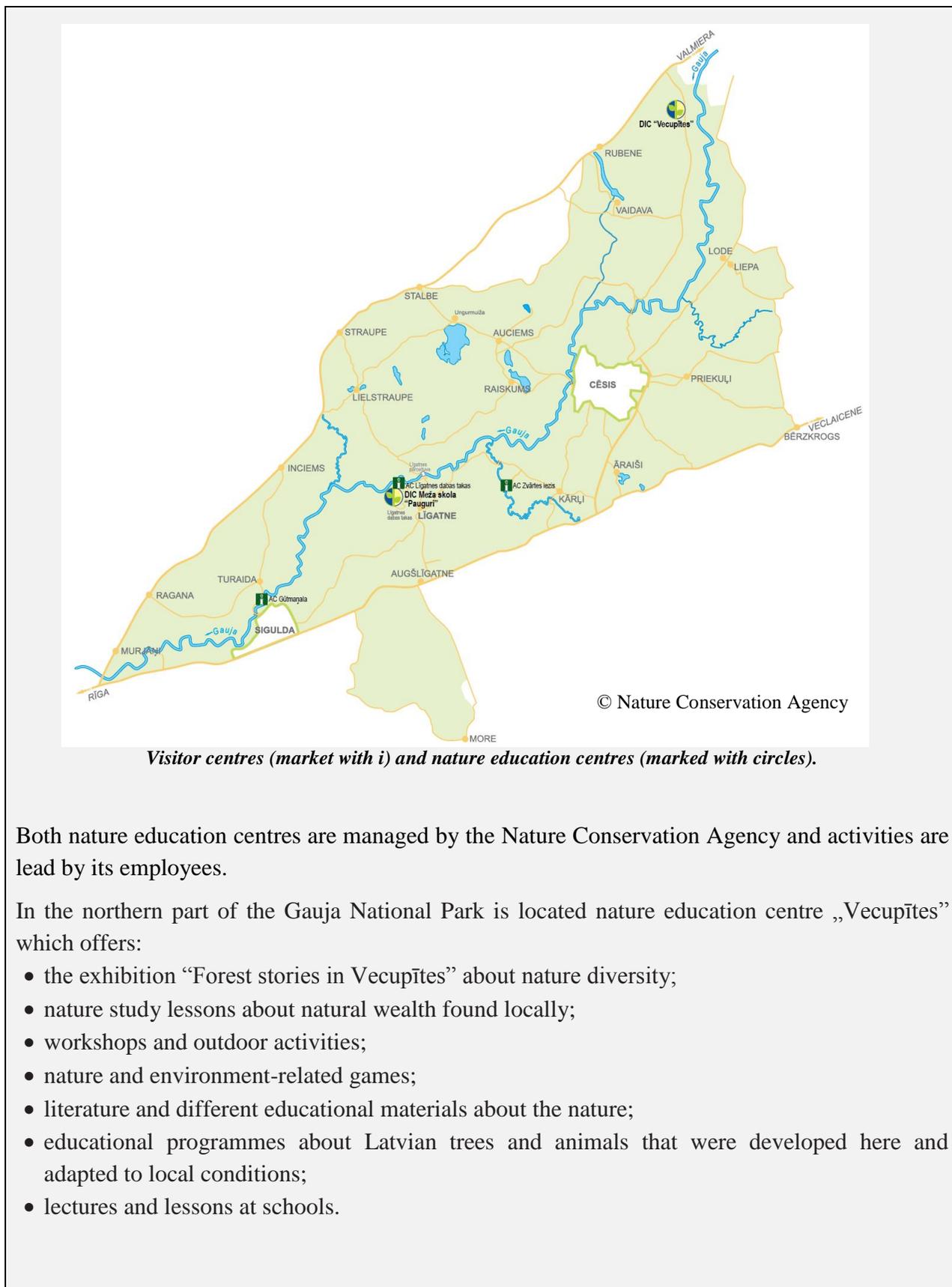
The association has also defined what a nature center consists of:

1. a natural site or home base to conduct educational programs;
2. a separate legal entity with a precise mission statement managed by a governing body;
3. paid professional staff;
4. an established educational program.

Many visitor centres may involve interpretive and educational programs but that is not their primary task, whereas in case of nature centre education and interpretation is the main task. To highlight this mission – educate community to promote the conservation and foster sustainable life-style, some nature centres call themselves nature education centres.

**In the Gauja National Park** (in Latvia) are located 3 visitor centres and 2 nature education centres.

The visitor centres are located close to the most significant sightseeing places of the park and are visited by thousand and thousand tourists from the entire world. Here they can get information about the place, where to stay, eat, rent bicycles, what else can be seen in the national park. These centres are managed by third parties under strict supervision of the Nature Conservation Agency.



*Visitor centres (market with i) and nature education centres (marked with circles).*

Both nature education centres are managed by the Nature Conservation Agency and activities are lead by its employees.

In the northern part of the Gauja National Park is located nature education centre „Vecupītes” which offers:

- the exhibition “Forest stories in Vecupītes” about nature diversity;
- nature study lessons about natural wealth found locally;
- workshops and outdoor activities;
- nature and environment-related games;
- literature and different educational materials about the nature;
- educational programmes about Latvian trees and animals that were developed here and adapted to local conditions;
- lectures and lessons at schools.

In the southern part of the Gauja National Park is located the second nature education centre - forest school "Pauguri". The primary purpose of the nature education centre is to introduce people to the flora and fauna of Latvia, as well as to educate them in the field of the nature protection, offering to discover, explore and feel the diverse presence of nature through

- interactive exhibition "Hide and seek" (about forest animals);
- the days of biodiversity: Water Day in spring, Bat's Day in summer, Mushroom Day in autumn, and Nature Day in winter;
- possibility to try stations of feelings;
- nature education materials (worksheets, guides to nature exploration and practical experiments).

## **2. Types of nature education centres**

At first sight all nature education centres may seem to be very similar, yet each and every centre is unique. The uniqueness is determined by several factors:

- the location of the centre;
- the facilities of the centre;
- the ownership of the centre.

### **The location of the centre**

In most cases nature education centres are located in or near the undeveloped land, in the area that is close to or within the city or the town. Usually these centres have direct access to the nature – local flora and fauna, which is unique and characteristic to the area or larger region, and are within easy reach of the local community and visitors.

Since more and more people are living in urban environments and have less or no access to the nature the green parks, corridors, backyards and even balcony become worthwhile. People living in the cities are trying to reconnect to the nature as much as possible in the given conditions. This has led to the fact that some of the nature education centres have entered the cities.

One may wonder how the location influences the centre. The natural values and cultural history of the area are the key sources for the interpretive themes and topics – the natural resources you have will shape the content of your centre. And that in many ways will be unique to your centre.

The location of the centre determines also the target-groups you will be working for/with. The local community consists of many interest groups – school children, kindergarten children, elderly people, activist group that is interested in nature conservation activities, farmers, families, birdwatchers etc. Every target-group has its needs and motivations. Families living nearby the forest, meadow or sea may want to teach their children to feel safe in the natural environment, know the medicinal plants, whereas families living in the city would love to learn about the gardening possibilities there, bird watching in the parks and gardens. Farmers could be interested in farming practices that would not threaten the biodiversity of the area.

**The Tartu Environmental Education Centre** (in Estonia) locates in the Tartu City Centre, just five minutes' walk from City Hall and Bus Station. The building is called Tartu Nature House. Around the house there is a big green park area ( $\approx 10\,000\text{ m}^2$ ) for different educational and cultural activities. Park is jointly used with neighbours from Tartu Centre for Creative Industries and Private School and Kindergarten. It is an open area and everybody can use it. There grow around 140 tree and shrub species and more than 200 herbs species. There are also a small water body, children's playground, nature trails, sun clock, viewing platform, beaver's nest, orchard and food plants area. The biodiversity is good to introduce Estonian natural plants and also a common foreign and gardening species.



**The Nature Education Centre "Mežamāja"** (in Latvia) is located in town Ķemeri, on the shore of the Vēršupīte River surrounded by humid forests. The centre is surrounded with intact high moss marshes, damp black alder forests, floodplain meadows and seaside lakes rich in birds. The centre offers activities about world of swamps, forests, coastline, floodplain meadows and birds.

**The Nature Education Centre "Jaundome"** (in Latvia) is located 8 km away from small town Dagda. It occupies the former grain barn of the manor estate. 700 metres away from the center is located the lake "Ežezers" – it is the only lake in Latvia that has so many islands. Due to this fact the main theme of all activities is the water.



### The facilities of the centre

Nature centre facilities vary considerably. Some centres are placed in separate buildings that are built for them, and some share the buildings with other organisations. Some centres have many thousand visitors, and some just a few hundred visitors. There are centres that have educational programs for very wide-ranging target-groups, and there are centres that have just a

few educational programs. You may have neither a room nor a staff, but it doesn't mean your centre is worse or less valuable than the one with all kind of facilities. The nature centre is all about experiences you provide for your visitors and not the fancy facilities. Most nature education centres have started with just a little.

The absolute minimum of the facilities one centre should have is the enthusiast/s that want to share the passion about nature, natural area where to host educational activities, educational program/s and a room that serves both as an office for educator/s (phone, computer, mail, internet, copier, printer) and a storage room for equipment.

**The Sebezhsy National Park** (in Russia) has a mobile nature education centre. The mobile centre is equipped with minibus, sound and lighting equipment, tent, folding furniture, equipment for demonstration of puppet shows and movies, exhibition equipment. The centre travels around the region's educational institutions, cultural centres and other NECs. There are 3 staff members who are bus drivers, actors, producers, writers etc. at the same time.

**The Tartu Environmental Education Centre (TEEC)** (in Estonia) – operates in a new building that is specially designed for environmental educational activities. The building is named *Tartu Nature House* and it was opened in September 2013. The building belongs to the Tartu City Government and it is given to the TEEC responsibility for 10 years. The House has two floors and the total area of the house is 1480 m<sup>2</sup>. There are big auditorium, 6 classrooms, laboratory, library, pets' room, workroom for fixing and woodwork, storage rooms, kitchen, and 5 offices with 18 workstations. The centre has a winter garden with more than 150 species of plants. In the lobby there is an environmental information centre. On the second floor there is a resting area for children. The House is surrounded by the park where different nature study areas and tracks are placed. There is also a parking area for bicycles and vehicles.

TEEC is a foundation that owns and manages Nature School for youth and children. Nature School is an informal educational institution for schoolchildren interested in nature and environmental issues. At the School there study 700 children every year. They gather together and do their activities twice a week after schooldays.

The average number of people involved in educational activities is 25 000 people per year. Circa 50% of them visit the Nature House and 50% participate in different open events outside the House.

**The Nature Education Centre "Rāzna"** (in Latvia) is open to public since December 2013. The centre rents its facilities from local municipality and shares the building with parish administration and kindergarten. NEC has a separate entrance and 4 rooms – exhibition/activity room, storage room, the lobby with visitors' counter that serves also as a manager's working place. The NEC has a sensory trail nearby the building. The NEC staff consists of 1 person who fulfils wide range of tasks - it is administrator, teacher, nature guide, communication officer etc. In case of larger events or numerically large visitor group, up to 3 additional staff members from the Nature Conservation Agency are involved.

The main target groups of the centre are pre-school and school children, teachers. But the centre is getting popular among families and tourists who willingly visit the exhibition. Within the first eight months of operation the centre had 1600 visitors, 643 of them participated in educational programs.

### **The ownership of the centre**

Nature education centres are founded by different actors – state, local governments, community, nongovernmental institutions, private persons etc. The ownership influences the centres mission and vision, thus the interpretive activities; it also impacts the funds available for the centre. Every form of ownership has its pros and cons.

State owned nature education centres' will always have access to nature, all the infrastructure (nature trails, wayside exhibitions, information stands, demonstration areas, printed materials etc.) for learning outdoors. These centres usually are placed in or nearby the national parks or reserves. In most cases these centres would have an office and some staff to run interpretive activities. The centres are funded and administrated through the supervising state institution. This means that the mission and objectives of the centre will be influenced by the policies, mission and objectives of the supervising institution. These centres will serve for wider audience than local community.

**The Nature Conservation Agency** (in Latvia) has 5 nature education centres. Four of them are located in the national parks, one in biosphere reserve. The employees of the centres are paid by Nature Conservation Agency. Most of the centres are located in the premises of the Agency, or the Agency rents the facilities from other institutions. The maintenance expenses are also included in the Agency's annual budget. Although the main target-groups of these centres are the local communities living in the territories of national parks and biosphere reserve, the visitors from whole country and even abroad are welcomed to participate in the activities. NEC activities are free of charge to all visitors regardless of where you come from and who you are – local community member, foreigner tourist, adults or children. All activities, educational programs and events organised by NCA's nature education centres foster the nature protection and conservation ethics.

The situation is different if local community establishes the centre. Local community may be represented by local government, local schools, NGOs etc., it can be a public and private partnership. These centres are specific to the local environment; they serve the local community and must answer more directly to their local constituencies. As Brent and Carolyn Chipman Evans wrote "community-based nature center may or may not be associated with publicly administrated lands, but it is integrally related to the surrounding community". From this you may understand that community-based centres may not have their own natural grounds, publicly available grounds are used for the outdoor activities, these include the local parks, rivers and streams.

The community-based centres not always are funded and administrated through the local authorities. In many cases they have received financial support for the start-up and henceforward have to raise their own funds. In some cases local government provides financial support for the staff and covers the costs of the buildings, but other costs like materials and equipment have to be covered from other sources. If the centre is established by community it is its needs and motivations which drive the centre and determine centres mission, goals and content.

**The Tartu Environmental Education Centre** (in Estonia) was established by 8 organisations – Tartu City Government, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Tartu Water Ltd, Estonian Fund for Nature, Estonian Ornithological Society, Tartu Student Nature Protection Circle, Estonian Green Movement-FoE and Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Cooperation. The foundation is managed by the Council that consists of 8 members. Centre’s everyday work is lead by executive director.

Tartu City government ensures the financial basis for management of the Nature House and the Nature School. The support from City Council forms circa 30% of the total budget. 60% comes from different funds (support from EU and Estonian Environmental Investment Centre) and 10% comes from environmental educational services: birthday parties on nature theme, workshops for companies on environmental issues, training courses on nature and environmental topics, guided tours in the Nature House, consultancies on nature trail development, nature activities etc.

Since the consortium of the founders is broad, the centre’s activities foster achievement of all organisations objectives. The centre, besides the work with schools and children, provides environmental information and consultations, organize courses and seminars for adults, and workshops and movie nights for families.

### **3. Planning a nature education centre – why, who, what, how?**

All nature education centres start with a dream about them and a plan that helps the dream come through. Before you build a building or move to existing one, start fundraising activities or promote the centre to the public, you do need to get consensus with all parties involved about what this centre is all about.

Very often we assume that everyone who is involved in the process shares the same dream, vision about the centre. Too often this is not the truth. The praxis shows, even if all people involved want to establish a nature education centre, they all have a different comprehension about it. The different experiences, formal education, skills and competences, internal motivations influence every person's vision about the centre. As long as you are aware of it, it is your strength, because all that diversity can bring a positive impact on your centre. Yet, a great variety of opinions and comprehensions may cause misunderstandings, false expectations and awkward situations later on.

Before you start a centre it is good to clarify all opinions, comprehensions and expectations every group member has. You need to develop consensus and shared vision about the centre you are going to develop. You have to be clear about:

- Motivation – why do you want to do it?
- Users of the product – who will be the users of the centre?
- Resources of the place – what is so important about the place (nature, history, culture) you want to share with others?
- Activities – how you are going to reveal the beauty of the place to the users of the centre?

Answering these questions will help you develop the common vision and establish a conceptual plan. It is important that everyone with an interest participates in this process. The plan you will develop doesn't have to be a big document, at the end of the process those may be just a few pages. The most important are discussions you have with your colleagues, the common ground, shared vision and inspiration for the future work.

The following chapters will guide you through the planning process. You don't need to follow them exactly the way they are described; you may plan in a different order or combine elements of different planning models and methods. But remember, planning will help you to produce successful nature educational centre and avoid wasting resources.

#### **3.1. Mission and goals**

The mission is the statement that describes why you are creating nature education centre. The mission shall provide everyone – general public, employees (existing and potential), sponsors etc. with a clear idea of why it exists, what is its basic purpose. The mission statement will always remind you what is really important, what is this all about. Sometimes we tend to lose the focus while dealing with everyday tasks and solving all kind of issues. The mission

statement will always help you “get back on track”. Be sure that all parties interested in the nature education centre are participating in the mission development process, this will increase creativity, ownership of ideas and consensus, leading to more smooth everyday work at the centre.

The mission statements usually describe what the organisation is going to do, and why it's going to do that. Mission statements are "action-oriented". Some general guiding principles about mission statements say that they are:

- *Concise.* The mission statement should get its point across in one sentence.
- *Outcome-oriented.* Mission statement explains the overarching outcomes your centre is working to achieve.
- *Inclusive.* While mission statements do make statements about your centre’s overarching goals, it’s very important that they do so very broadly. Good mission statements are not limiting in the strategies or sectors of the community that may become involved in the project.

The mission might refer to a problem, such as low awareness about human impact on environment, or a goal, such as providing access to nature education for everyone. The following mission statements are examples from four nature education centres in USA:

The American River Natural History Association (ARNHA) and the Effie Yeaw Nature Center are dedicated to bringing awareness of the beauty and diversity of the natural world to children, families, and the community through education initiatives that foster appreciation, enjoyment, and stewardship of the unique natural and cultural resources of the Sacramento region.

The mission of the Chattahoochee Nature Center is to provide unique learning experiences focused on the Chattahoochee River that connect people to the natural world and empower them to positively impact their local environments.

The mission of Blandford Nature Center is to educate, engage, and empower our community to become stewards of the natural world that sustains us.

The mission of White Mountain Nature Center is to connect people with wildlife through educational experiences inspiring appreciation, responsibility, and respect for the inter-relationships among humans, other living organisms, and the natural world we share.

If the nature education centre is part of larger organization, the mission statement should correspond to the mission statement of that organization. There might be a case where you don’t have to create your own mission statement because the organization’s mission statement is so broad and inclusive that it provides answers to your why and what as well. Yet it is wise to discuss the mission statement provided, in order to make sure that all parties involved understand the same and you are staying at the same platform. Don’t be surprised if during discussion you will decide to create your own mission statement.

**The Nature Conservation Agency (NCA)** ensures implementation of unified nature protection policy in Latvia. The mission of NCA is to preserve biodiversity and promote the human and natural coexistence. The NCA has six different functions, one of which is to educate and inform society about nature conservation. It was decided to establish 4 nature education centres in three national parks and one biosphere reserve. When developing mission statement for the newly formed education centres the staff had to take existing mission statement into account. Centres' mission couldn't contradict the main mission.

NCA mission statement: to preserve biodiversity and promote the human and natural coexistence.

NECs mission statement: to offer education experiences in nature, to encourage awareness and appreciation of nature and inspire people towards sustainable practices.

Developing effective mission statement is one of the most important tasks your centre will ever do, because almost everything else you do, will be affected by this statement.

When you have a mission statement that everyone agrees about, you can move forward and develop the goals that will help to make your mission a reality. The goals are general statements about what you need to accomplish to meet the mission. They are long-term, for 3-5 years. You may have only one goal or you can have more than 5 goals.

The Chattahoochee Nature Center has two goals:

- The goal for the youth community: to foster an active awareness and understanding of the ecology of the natural world through interactive, hands-on learning experiences.
- The goal for the adult community: to provide a local place for adult learning experiences, volunteerism, and outdoor family activities that strengthens the environmental stewardship commitment within the community.

The Blandford Nature Center has three goals:

- Educate our community to understand our environment, our heritage, and our connection to natural systems.
- Engage people to actively use natural spaces and become stewards of the natural world.
- Empower people to embrace nature, new perspectives, and sustainable practices.

The White Mountain Nature Center has six goals:

- Offer education and recreational activities to foster appreciation of nature.
- Promote stewardship of our natural resources.
- Be a clearinghouse for all things nature, environmental, and wildlife-related.
- Promote sustainable living, “green” building, and FIREWISE and healthy forest principles.
- Diversify and promote a healthy local economy.
- Be a place where people have FUN learning about and discovering nature!

As you can see all goals mentioned above support the mission statements nature centres have developed. Yet they are not as specific as objectives that you will need to create at some point in planning process.

Remember, the mission and goals are not static, you can always come back to them, review and change if needed.

### **3.2. Target audience**

When you are clear about the mission, why and what you are going to do and your goals, it is time to determine who will be the primary users of services provided by your centre. It is time to choose the target-groups.

You can divide the potential target audiences according to several criteria:

- age (children, teenagers, adolescents, young adults, seniors, mixed groups, families),
- residence (local visitors, regional visitors, people living in the country, foreigners, people from the cities, people from the country side),
- occupation (biologists, teachers, bankers, nature educators, farmers, artists etc.),
- needs (entertainment, professional development, recreation etc.),
- physical condition (seniors, parents with baby strollers, people in wheelchairs, junior rangers etc.).

Write the list with all target groups you would be interested working with. Consider your mission, goals and potential staff. Don't be afraid if the list is short and you have chosen just one or two groups. This is just a beginning. You can always add target-groups and expand your audience.

Determining target-groups is not just about making list, it is also about looking closer to each target-group. Try to answer the following questions about every target-group you have decided to work with:

- What are the needs of the target-group? What are they seeking?
- What do they want to experience?
- When they would come – during working days, on weekends, in the afternoon, during working hours, on holidays?
- How much time they would be ready to spend at the centre?
- How often the target-group would visit the centre?
- How many representatives from the target-group would visit the centre per month/year?

If you have chosen school children as a target-group, be aware that teachers and parents are the real target-group. They will decide whether to take their students to the centre or not. In this case you will need to meet their needs, which are based in school curricula, while providing enjoyable experience and fun for children.

If you have many families that are ready to visit centre you should do something special not only for children but also for parents. Children are happy to be outdoors all year round, but there has to be something in it to motivate adults to accompany their children. After all, it has to be a family time, something that is experienced by all family members not just children or adults.

If you have target-group with particular interests you should interpret what they are interested in.

It is important to gather as much information about your target-groups as possible. For this you can use desk research, interview the colleagues from other centres, representatives from the target-group, analyse statistics from the tourism information centres etc. Putting all data in the matrix will help you plan the time, resources and activities.

### **3.3. Resources of the place**

Before creating more detailed plans or decide where to build/place the nature education centre you should assess resources of the place – natural, cultural and historical. Look around and try to describe not only the landscape, habitats, plants, animals, ecosystems, geology but also cultural and historical aspects of the area. Lives of people living here for generations, myths, historical sites, and early settlements – this is a resource that can't be underestimated. It is good to assess the existing infrastructure that might be useful for nature education – trails, outdoor classes, roads etc.

**The Ķemeri National Park** (in Latvia), like a fragile jewel, contains natural values, which have already become rare in Latvia and Europe – intact high moss marshes, damp black alder forests, floodplain meadows and seaside lakes rich in birds. It is a shelter and place of residence for many rare and protected plant and animal species – glorious and easily observable, and subtle and hardly visible. Main nature values of the park are:

Forests. Wet black alder forests in river floodplains are still preserved in large areas here, while in the rest of Latvia and Europe they have been almost fully destroyed in order to use their fertile soils in agriculture.

Marshes. Areas of vast high moss marshes take up the central part of the National Park. It is an interesting world without roads and paths – a moss kingdom with small pine trees, long, serpentine lakes and a peculiar kingdom of birds and plants. During the spring and autumn migration thousands of migratory geese and cranes fly down to rest in moss marshes at nights.

Birds. Each spring bird songs can be heard from far and near – cooing, whistling and cries like the sounds of a wild ox. Ķemeri National Park is a shelter for many common bird species and diverse natural rarities - black stork, lesser spotted eagle, white-tailed eagle, white-backed woodpecker, little crane. Altogether more than 250 bird species, 67 of them protected, have been observed in the territory of ĶNP.

Lakes. There are three types of lakes in the national park – shallow coastal lakes, very deep lake, which is located on the scenic place - in hollows between hills and bog lakes with brown, humic-rich water.

In the national park also cultural heritage places are well preserved. The some of the significant historical and cultural values are:

Hotel “Kēmeri”. The most impressive and popular building from the first period of the independence of Latvia is the Hotel “Kēmeri” or “White Ship”. Its unique forms were designed by distinguished Latvian architect Eižens Laube. This comfortable hotel with more than 100 rooms, hall furnished in the style of Ludwig IV, rose room and library rich in bibliographical rarities was opened to guests in 1936.

Kēmeri Park. Recuperation and rest are unimaginable without the invigorating sensations of walks in the fresh air. This awareness resulted in the establishment of the landscape park with its network of paths which has been an integral landmark in Kēmeri since 1838. Several bridges including the “Musical Bridge” with notes in the parapets, the “Bridge of Sighs”, the “Brigde of Caprices” were built over the small River Vēršupīte wending its way through the park to Lake Slokas. Several sulphur springs fall into the river, dying the dark water of the river pale and filling the air with peculiar sulphurous odour.

Kaņieris Castle mound. The true history of Kaņieris Castle mound is still a mystery. Legends say that it was a settlement of sea pirates long ago. The pirates used the mound for setting up false lighthouses to allure ships, make them run ground and plunder them afterwards. Both, the type and location of Kaņieris Castle mound are unique and unusual. This is the only castle mound located so close to the sea, in a swampy and uninhabited place.

Robežakmens (Border Stone). Border Stone is a valuable nature and history object still out of wider public access. In the 18th century the stone marked the border of two countries – Russian Empire and Duchy of Courland. In 19th century it still remained the border between provinces of Vidzeme and Kurzeme.

The analysis of resources will provide you with all tangible and intangible resources needed for educational work. This will be the core of all your educational activities and will help you to create the understanding and appreciation of site’s significance in a regional context.

### 3.4. Activities

Educational activities at the centres are non-formal and thus correspond with nature interpretation principles. As Freeman Tilden, the first author who defined interpretation wrote “nature interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply communicate factual information”.

The National Parks Service’s Interpretive Development Program (USA) has developed well-known “Interpretive equation” that presents foundational elements of interpretation:

$$(KR + KA) \times AT = IO \text{ where}$$

- IO – interpretive opportunity. This is an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections to the meaning and significance of the resource. The educators create the opportunity, the audience makes the connections.
- KR – knowledge of the resources. Based on resources analysis you have factual information about the area, you know the past and present uses of natural resources, current conditions, potential threats, meanings associated with the resource, stories, multiple perspectives and values.
- KA – knowledge of the audience. The in-depth analysis of all target-groups you are going to work with has provided with sensitivity to their needs, you are familiar with their backgrounds, you know what associations the resource may create, what it means to them. Remember there is no such thing as “average person” or “average audience”.
- AT – appropriate technique. You need to select best techniques to deliver your message. Involve your audience in the activities as much as possible, create hands-on and minds-on experiences. Make sure your activities are accessible (physically and mentally). Choose activities that facilitate opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings.

You have assessed your target-groups, resources and are clear about your mission and goals, it is time to think about how to reach those goals and objectives. What kind of interpretive activities/strategies your centre will have. Educational activities provided by nature centre should rather be recreational than educational, create better understanding of one’s place in the universe and inspire to positive action or to explore more of the natural history. Below is the list with some of the interpretive strategies you centre may consider to work with:

- Nature trails
- Sensory trails
- Outdoor classes
- Outdoor exhibits
- Wayside exhibitions
- Indoor exhibitions
- Discovery boxes
- Documentary films, slide shows, multi-media events
- Puppet shows
- Concerts, films
- Workshops, trainings, study visits
- School programs

Special thematic events

Biodiversity days

Bird watching days

Cultural heritage days

Campaigns

Camps etc.

The detailed description of how to develop these activities you can read in the Joint Manual developed by the project “People with nature”.

To connect the activities to your centre make sure they all have something common – thread that links it to your centre. As Gross and Zimmerman wrote “Themes and messages are the significant concepts that are to be communicated through all aspects of the interpretive facility. They are based on the significance of the resources, the mission and goals and the interests of the visitors.” This ‘thread’ will help you to develop the uniqueness of your centre and can become a recognition mark.

## **4. Facilities of the centre**

As mentioned earlier, nature education centres come in different sizes and shapes. Some are small, placed in one room, others are located in old buildings that are adjusted to the centre's needs, still others occupy new buildings that are built with the purpose to serve a centre. The extend of development of a nature education centre is influenced by visitor numbers, available land and of course, available funds.

It doesn't matter whether you build a new building or adjust existing one, there are some principles to follow:

### **❖ Choose the site wise**

If you are free to choose where the building will be, assess all natural and cultural resources in the area. You don't want to destroy the values; you want them to be there for educational purposes. Find out who is the owner of land and/or buildings, who owns the adjacent land. If that is private land you may need to sign agreement with the owner that you will use his/her land for educational purposes, or inform the person that there will be certain amount of people passing through his/her land. If the building belongs to private person or other agency you will have to arrange rental agreement. When choosing the site for centre consider the distance your visitors will have to drive/walk to reach you. Assess also the distance to the places where outdoor activities will be conducted. You don't want them to be too far away. At best they have to be in walking distance. Look at the road condition – are they appropriate for vehicles and school buses? Are the roads maintained during the wintertime? If the centre will be located too far from the main roads, city or the roads leading to the centre will be in bad condition you will have to work harder to promote your centre, to get visitors to come to you.

### **❖ Be in harmony with the site**

When constructing a new building discuss with architects the idea of nature education centre, its mission and goals. Introduce them with natural and cultural values of the area/region. The new building has to be compatible with the landscape of the area and represent the cultural traditions. If possible use materials, colours, architectural forms that are characteristic for the region.

**The Tartu Environmental Education Centre** (in Estonia) operates in a new building opened in 2013. The Nature House was built with the support of European Regional Development Fund and Tartu City Council and it meets the latest energy efficiency standards. Main materials that are used in building and interior design are natural – timber, concrete, glass, natural felt and carpet from goat wool. Recycling paper is used as insulation and chairs in the hall are made of recycled plastic. The centre collects rainwater from the roof and uses it in the greenhouse. The building has 8 solar panels (2 400 Wp) on the roof. The number of panels can increase in future.

If you have to choose among several existing buildings, choose the one that will help people to develop sense of place. Traditionally nature education centres are placed in manor houses, old barns, schools, forestry buildings, cabins etc. Determinant factors of course are technical condition of the building, available funds and the location of the building.



**The Nature Education Centre “Vecupītes”** (Latvia) is located in a former forestry building that was built in 1890. The living area of the building is circa 350 m<sup>2</sup>. So far the centre uses only one third of the area, the rest needs to be renovated.

The buildings architecture is traditional to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The materials used in the building process are local – wood and boulders. While restoring the inside of the building owners have preserved as much as possible – the original wooden floors and

other wooden constructions. The new built furniture is also mainly from wood or any other nature friendly materials.

### ❖ **Develop the centre for visitors**

Most countries have accepted law that all public buildings have to be accessible to all people regardless of their physical limitations. However developing and/or arranging centre for visitors is something more than just removing barriers, broaden doorway or removing doorsteps. Visitors must feel welcome at your centre.

When planning a centre put yourself in the visitor’s shoes – what would make you feel welcome? Try to remember why in some buildings you feel comfortable but in some don’t, what is the difference? When you visit museum, national park’s visitor centre with your family, what are the things you notice or are looking for right away? Ask the same questions to your friends and colleagues. While summarizing the answers you will discover that there are some things all people have mentioned and soon you will have features of a visitor friendly building.

Usually visitor friendly buildings take into account human needs, defined by Abraham Maslow back in 1943<sup>1</sup>. He suggested that all humans have an ascending order of needs and used a hierarchal pyramid to prioritize them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.learning-theories.com>



At the bottom of the pyramid he placed the lower-order needs – physiological and safety needs that are satisfied externally. As these needs are met, progressively higher needs present themselves all topped by self-actualization, a term Maslow used to describe the ultimate human need to learn, grow, and reach one's full potential. He also pointed out that you cannot satisfy the higher needs as long as the lower-order needs are not met. Let's look closer to each level of human needs and how we can satisfy them in nature education centres.

In terms of physiological needs at the centres we think about parking, toilets, room with the changing table for babies, drinking water. Most likely your visitors will come to you by car or even school buses, some will come by bicycles and some of course will come on foot. Thus the parking place is the first thing most of them will look for. Make sure it is well marked and people can easily find it. If you don't have your own parking place, make sure visitors are informed about it and provide them with information where the closest parking places are located. In case your centre has an unpaved area part of which can be designated for parking area don't rush it to pave. You can simply put the signs and mark the parking area with big rocks or logs. Parking areas for cars and buses do not have to be directly next to the centre's building. It is acceptable if visitors have to walk a short distance to get to the centre. Since more and more visitors, especially in cities, are using bicycles make sure they will have a place where to park them. Bicycle owners in our countries usually are concerned about thieves; therefore consider making bicycle parking area closer to the buildings. If you plan that there will be many visitors coming with babies carriages, make sure the parents have a place where to leave them, preferably under the roof.

When the cars/buses/bicycles/baby carriages are parked the next need appears – toilet. Sooner or later all visitors will need to use restrooms – to wash hands, answer the nature's call or change the baby diapers. Make sure you have enough toilets (each country has a standard that determine how many toilets have to be per certain amount of visitors), they are clean, there is toilet paper always available, sink, soap and towel/hand dryer. Arrange a changing table for babies if possible. It doesn't have to be placed directly in the same room where the toilet is if you have only one or two toilets. Maybe you can free space for it somewhere else, in a small room with sink and water but with no toilet in it. If you don't have possibilities to arrange the changing area don't worry, make sure your visitors know that if during their visit such need will appear you will provide them with a place where it can be done.

In our countries it is not common to arrange special places where visitors can get drinking water free of charge. It is not essential that you provide the drinking water, but in the warm season of the year this can become an issue. In many places tap water quality meets standards set for drinking water. Check the water quality at your centre and if it corresponds to the drinking water standards make sure you visitors are informed about it. They will feel safe to refill their water bottles at any faucet. Modern nature education centres will install drinking water fountains/faucets in lobbies and activity rooms.

Physiological needs are closely related to safety needs. The visitors want to feel safe in your facilities. When constructing a new building or adjusting existing one to the needs of nature education centre invite the safety experts. They have knowledge about how to make working places, learning areas and other rooms safe. If your budget doesn't allow hiring an expert use your team's common sense.

To feel safe visitors, first of all, have to know where everything is located – where are toilets, classrooms, library, trails, out-door/indoor exhibitions, outdoor classes, greenhouse, emergency exits etc. The orientation signs, maps will help a lot. Make sure they are simple (but not too simple), show only the most important features and are easy to understand. Pre-test them on your friends, colleagues before you go to the printing house; they will let you know if there is something they can't understand. Put direction signs at all decision points. You can have a permanent direction signs and mobile signs to direct visitors to places where pop-up events happen – temporary exhibition, workshop that happens somewhere else than in classroom etc. When preparing signs remember, signage creates your public image. It is worthwhile to invest in good quality, aesthetical signs produced by professionals.

The floor cover has to be appropriated to all kind of visitors. First of all it should not be slippery. Children, elderly people, people with walking aids will not feel safe if the floor under their feet will not be firm. Slippery floors may cause accidents. If your building has stairs make sure they are children friendly – they can't climb over or crawl through the railings easily.

Sometimes nature education centres have their own trails. In this case do not forget to put the general map of the trail system at the entrance, put direction signs on all trails and mark the trails so that visitors can walk them on their own. Remember about the safety issues on the trails as well – make sure there are no fallen trees or branches hanging dangerously over the trails, check the trail constructions regularly and replace the rotted parts of it. Sometimes it is better to close the trail temporarily, visitors will understand and appreciate your concerns regarding their safety.

Every centre must have a first-aid kit and trained personnel. Visitors have to be confident that personnel are following the centre's safety policy, will provide help in case of emergency.

The higher level needs each centre can satisfy through its content – events, activities, policies toward visitors. The need to belong is planted in all human beings. We all want to belong and be loved, we form groups and we like to connect with like-minded people, we create

communities. Nature education centre with its staff can create this loving and welcoming attitude. Greet your visitors with smile and good word, ask them how you can help them, express pleasure in having them at your centre, make them feel they are important part of your centre. Provide visitors with information they need, share the knowledge you have and do not let them feel like fools even if they are asking questions you think every 1<sup>st</sup> grade student has to know the answer.

We can build self-esteem, confidence and achievement by ability to share our ideas. When working with visitors or creating programs/activities think of how you will empower people to perform more and/or better, how you will empower them to positively impact their local environments, inspire people towards sustainable practices. Does you centre, with all facilities it has (trails, exhibits, publications etc.), furthers the transformation of knowledge/experiences gained here into other everyday situations of your visitors? A design (design of buildings, information boards, activities, events etc.) that empowers people to do things not previously possible and to broaden their horizons is considered to be great.

Self-actualization can be achieved through problem solving. Allow visitors to ask questions, show visitors practical applications of concepts and ideas (more about this in section “Be an example”). Offer seminars with experts, workshops about sophisticated topics. Allow visitors explore and create things on their own. You may be surprised about results – some of the visitors may apply to your centre as volunteers, some may decide to create their own nature centre or improve their household practices.

**List of buildings, rooms and other facilities one centre may have:**

Administrative offices	Classrooms/activity rooms
Computer terminals	Discovery rooms
Storage rooms	Laboratories
Toilets	Indoor/outdoor exhibits
Parking places	Outdoor classes

While designing everything for visitors do not forget about people who will work at the centre. They also have the same levels of needs. Provide staff with private workspaces or at least semi-private. Bright and well ventilated rooms with lots of light that can be adjusted to everyone’s needs, library, and good quality office equipment will make your staff happy. If possible, arrange eating area with tables, microwave, comfortable seating. Consider a room for storage – then longer your centre will operate then more storage you will need.

**❖ Be economical**

Funding a nature education centre is the greatest challenge among other challenges. Everyone wants to decrease the expenditure despite the fact that costs are still increasing. Thus

consider the location and scale of your centre carefully. Before rushing with new buildings and facilities look at your mission and goals and ask yourself what do you really need to accomplish that? Consider not only costs associated with construction but also operational costs. What do you need more – invest the money in the buildings or invest it in programs, staff and equipment. This is not an easy decision to be made and there isn't one correct solution. Dream big, start small would be the best advice.

When developing budget keep in mind your mission and goals. First make your dream budget, include there everything you wish to have; the figure you get might be unbelievably high. Based on your mission, goals and all kind of assessments (target audience, resources, location, and costs) set priorities and split the budget in smaller lumps. Start with the ultimate “must” – staff of the centre, office for staff, programs, basic equipment for activities etc. This will help you during the fundraising; you will always have your dream in front of you and will not spend the money on something nice but not necessarily needed at the moment.

If you are lucky and have received grant for building/adjusting existing building make “planning for people” a high priority. Create functional building that serves people and helps you achieve your goals. Plan your facilities to be as flexible as possible, make space multifunctional – the same room can be used for several purposes, it can be a classroom, exhibition room or be a cinema during documentary film event. Try to invest in transformable furniture, mobile screens and a good storage room. Think about the future development. Invest in products that can last for long time and are adjustable to new needs.

The architects and civil engineers are of a great help when thinking about economical design of buildings. Do not be afraid of asking advice. If you do not have the funds to hire experts use consultancies at the local building authority, do not hesitate to ask for help university representatives. Many universities are looking for real-life exercises to use in learning process. This will cost you only your time.

### **❖ Take into account sustainability and be an example**

The concept of sustainability is well known and accepted by everyone. Sustainability encourages us to think about the future in more positive light and it bridges the past with the future. When arranging the nature education centre consider the energy efficiency issues and consider wise use of all kind of recourses. Visitors will consider you as an example and thus you should lead by example.

When building your centre try to use non-toxic, locally available, recycled or recyclable materials. Aim at energy efficient and self-sufficient building. Incorporate the latest technologies in the building – natural ventilation, wastewater treatment systems, reuse of rainwater, solar panels for hot water, earth energy for heating systems, energy efficient lighting systems, waste sorting etc. The latest technologies will cost more but they will pay off quite quickly and will reduce ecological footprint of your centre.

Don't forget about sustainability in everyday work. Remember you are an example for visitors. If your philosophy and all activities will contradict your behaviour no one will believe you. Your building may be old, but you can still be nature and environment friendly institution. The following are just some examples you can do to improve your centres sustainability.

1. Replace old light bulbs with energy efficient. You will be surprised how much energy can be saved by replacing light bulbs.
2. Switch off all lights when leaving room or office. Remember that even stand-by regime uses energy.
3. When leaving office for weekend or holidays turn the heating system down by few degrees. It will save not only the resources but also finances.
4. Open windows as much as possible to let fresh air in or cool the rooms down.
5. If possible use ecological detergents. If they are not available or too hard to find, select ones that contain less phosphates and other chemicals. After all you can create your own detergents using sodium carbonate, vinegar, borax, lemon juice and olive oil. See the internet resources for more detailed recipes.
6. If your city/town/village has a waste sorting system provide your visitor with possibility to sort the waste. Make sure the system is clear and understandable for everyone starting from small to old. Do not make sorting facilities if there is no proper waste management system in place, people soon will find out that it is fake.
7. Plant the indoor plants and place them in all rooms. The green colour is very refreshing and plants will produce the oxygen.
8. If you have a small surrounding plant there native plants – they will require less water during summer time and will be much easier to winter. Thus you will educate your visitors about local flora and how it can be used in greenery.
9. Plant trees on the south side of the building. Eventually they will provide a nice shade in hot summers.
10. Avoid using disposable tableware. Encourage staff members to use mugs not a plastic cups. You can always rent solid tableware for big events. If this is not possible use the tableware from recyclable materials.
11. When serving a lunch or coffee breaks at your events use locally produced products as much as possible. Avoid unnecessary packaging, for example instead of serving coffee milk in tiny plastic containers, by ordinary milk and serve it in a nice milk jug, instead of providing sugar in packages place the sugar bowl on the table.
12. Be creative! Before throwing something out consider reusing it for other purposes.

## **5. Team of the centre**

To make nature education centre work, besides premises, programs, equipment you need a staff – you need passionate team members. The people working at the centre will make the difference – your team will greet the visitors, run activities, plan the future and do more than that. How well your team will perform is largely up to you – the leader of the centre.

At the early stage of the centre your team may be very small consisting of two or three people that share all tasks starting with leading activities ending with cleaning up. Your centre will grow and so will amount of team members. Some of them will be employed by nature education centre, some will be volunteers, external experts, interns and so on.

When starting the centre you basically need an educator, director and accountant. If your centre is part of larger agency then instead of director you will have an executive. It doesn't matter how you call the position, but person of that position is going to be responsible for hiring additional staff members, fundraising, public relations, everyday management of the centre and many other things.

Different centres have organised their teams in different ways, it all depends on financial and human resources. Below is the list of some positions you may find useful in running a nature education centre. You do not have to hire all the people, you may consider using volunteers to fulfil some of the positions, or outsourcing some of the services.

Educator/trainer/teacher – these are just a few terms how we may call a person that actually is working with our visitors face-to-face on every day base. They meet the visitors, listen to their opinions, encourage them to do more than they used to, share the knowledge they have with community members etc. How many educators you need to have? It is up to you and the size of your centre. You may have 2 paid educators at the beginning and increase the amount as you develop more and more programs.

Program director/manager/coordinator – this position usually appears when the centre has operated for a while and there are more than just three programs, each in a different field. For example beside school programs you have developed programs for teachers and other nature educators, you have programs for university/college/vocational school's students. Those would be three different directions your centre is working into. Program directors are responsible for coordinating the program's activities, contacting target audience, clarifying its needs. Program directors are looking for the new potential customers of the centre that would benefit from the program, supervise the educators working with program, acts as an educator if necessary.

Accountant/bookkeeper – this position doesn't require a long explanation. Your centre will have incomes and expenditure. You have to be able to track where your finances come from and where they are used. At the beginning you may need a part-time accountant but when the centre will grow you'll need a full-time bookkeeper. This is one of the services you can outsource.

Project coordinator/project development manager/fundraiser – even if you have a basic budget provided by the leading agency, local government or other institution, in most cases it is not enough. Therefore nature education centres are developing project proposals and looking for additional funds. This position provides service to the whole centre, so use it wise. You know your mission, goals, needs and priorities. Develop projects that support your goals and satisfy your needs.

Project manager – if your centre is running all kind of programs, have hundreds of visitors coming in, and all (or one) project proposals are approved you will need a project manager. Despite the fact that the project serves the centre and contributes to achieving your goals, project management requires a lot of attention and additional work, your educators/program directors/director may not be able to fit in their everyday work. The good thing is, you can foreseen salary for the project manager in the project and hire it only for the project time.

Communication and/or marketing coordinator – this person/persons work to promote and support the programs, courses, and other operations of the centre. Usually this position is underestimated; people think everyone know we are here and we are doing a great job. But it is not trough, you live in your own world, which is great, but you do need to let the outer-world know you are here. The only way of doing it is communication. Nowadays when people are using all kind of media to get the information communication coordinator can be a very helpful position. Usually these people know how to communicate and how to use mass or social media (printed, online). This is position you may have at your centre as a paid staff or you can outsource the service. If your centre is part of another agency use the agency's recourses.

Receptionist – if you have an information desk you will need a receptionist. This is the person all visitors meet when entering your centre. This is the person who helps with orientation, answers the questions. Since the visitors are not coming continuously, but the receptionist has to be in place, you can delegate some other tasks to this person. He/she can be assistant to office manager or communication and marketing coordinator. This is the full time position

Director – there has to be one person who oversees the work of the centre and the team. As described earlier, director is responsible for hiring staff, fundraising, public relations, everyday management of the centre and many other things.

Some other positions include information technology personnel, office manager, technical staff (office-cleaner, carpenter, street sweeper), gardener and so on.

When looking for personnel be clear what kind of qualification, skills and qualities the person should have. Consider how the person will get on with existing team.

**The Tartu Environmental Education Centre's Nature school** has 22 staff members: director, activities coordinator and 20 teachers. Most of the teachers work part-time.

Besides School's working team centre has more personnel. 18 persons (most of them are engaged part time) are working in overall administrative body: executive director, financial director, the House manager, manager of the international cooperation, adult training manager, school program manager and environmental information manager, there are 3 persons taking care of house and park area cleaning and gardening. TEEC employ 1 environmental information specialist and a network of environmental educational specialists (5-6 persons) and 2-3 project managers and assistants according to the number of on-going international projects. The TEEC has also some volunteers and 10-20 trainees per year from universities and vocational schools.

The employees of the nature education centres are having the same needs as every visitor coming to your centre. It is not enough to provide them with a good working conditions and safe working environment, as any other person, they need to feel loved, appreciated, belonging, they need to grow and develop. It is your tasks as a team leader to make sure this is possible.

The good emotional climate and relationships among the team members are something you can always work on. Here are some examples of how to improve the internal communication and foster positive relationships and healthy emotional climate among your staff:

- Establish your own traditions – who said that there are only Christmas, New Year eve and some other events to celebrate. Celebrate every single accomplishment – the first press released published in the local newspaper, well run programs, approval of project proposal, the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the school programs etc.
- Do not forget to say “thank you” to your staff members. It is never too much. We tend to take things for granted but it's never the truth. Someone has worked hard to make things happen. Appreciate that and let the person know you have noticed it. Plus, it doesn't cost anything.
- Organise a team-building events outside your premises. Your staff members spend most of their time in the facilities of the centre, it is nice to go to other places. The simplest forms of team building are hikes, excursions, study visits. Take your team to national park, reserve or to the city outskirts (it may surprise your co-workers how beautiful the suburbs may be) or any other place that has a spirit, holds cultural history and inspires people. Educators need to “recharge the batteries” from time to time.
- Support your staff in professional development. All team members have obtained their education, they are well trained, have knowledge and skills needed for work. Some of your staff members have graduated universities lately, but some long time ago. To keep your staff updated, informed about latest tendencies in educational approaches, natural science, issues related to sustainability encourage them to attend training courses, university classes, conferences etc. You can support via several ways – provide information about the courses, classes, trainings, conference;

support financially – cover the travel costs or share the participation fee; but most important – spare the time in their working schedule. The new knowledge, experiences will inspire them to work harder and invent new things at your centre.

- Have a retreat event once in a year. They can be a daylong event or two or even more days long. During these events you can reflect upon the mission and goals of the centre, assess how and whether you are achieving them, revise them if needed. Assess the work, programs; plan the work for the upcoming year. Your team needs time to talk, share dreams and get inspired. These retreats can build a strong ownership of the centre among team members. During these retreats you can organise a workshops or trainings on certain issues, for example – first aid training, training on communication or work with mass media and so on.

## **6. Getting support for the centre**

To operate a nature education centre one has to possess all kind of resources – time, funds, human resources, knowledge, skills, facilities and so on. Not all of this needs to be financed from your own budget. Look around – create partnerships, cooperate with others! Don't worry if not all addressed will support you straight away. Your partners want to know “what's in it for me?” If someone says “no” to you, don't assume it is forever, take it as “not now”. You can't get support before there is partnership established and it takes time to build a partnership. Start with small steps and be ready that some partners will be willing to invest money, some – their time and work, others will invest their knowledge. Let's look closely at some of the potential cooperation partners.

### **Conservationists and environmentalists**

There are many state and nongovernmental organisations dealing with conservation and environmental issues. They all have great experts, knowledge, facts, publications, leaflets and other resources you can use. Not always they will be ready to come and present the topic in presence, but they will provide you with all information needed. They will be happy to help you, because they see what's in it for them. You are working with the new generation, that one day will become managers, farmers, business owners and so on, they will decide how to manage natural resources thus it is very important for these organisations to spread the knowledge as wide as possible. In addition to this many organisations have declared education of the society as one of their goals. Basically you are helping them to achieve their goals.

### **Local government**

To get support from local governments might be a little bit complicated in some cases. You have to be aware that there are many players on the community grounds that need support. This cooperation offers a variety of options. First of all prepare clear statement what your centre is about, what it will provide to city/town/village. Know exactly what you need and ask for it. If you want to place your centre in building that belongs to local government, you can discuss the possibility to reduce the rent. Maybe your local government has a special support for afterschool clubs. Suggest creating one afterschool club dedicated to the nature and teacher managing this club can get part of the salary from the local community. Local communities usually organise all kind of events and often are looking for someone to run workshops or activities for children and families. In most cases communities will not be able to pay you, but they can buy you all materials or even simple equipment you can still use afterwards. Do not hesitate to apply to these events, provide the visitors with a great experience, build your image and get recognised by local government.

Another way of cooperation with the local government is use their expertise. Almost all communities have the local newspapers, web pages, twitter accounts and so on. These are great places where you can publish something about your centre and its activities free of charge. If you will be lucky you might get advices on how to write form the local journalists.

Sometimes local governments tend to announce local project tenders dedicated to different themes. Prepare the project proposal and apply for the money. These projects are much more easily to run than large scale international ones thus it can be done even by the beginners.

### **Other education centres, museums, libraries**

These institutions can serve as information centres where you can get all kind of information. They can also help you to advertise your centre and its activities. All libraries have information board where you can place the information about upcoming events, stories about your centre etc. You can create joint activities, educational programs, supplement each other's events.

### **Farmers**

These are great places to take your target-groups for all kind of activities. You can organise day camps at the farms, learn about different works at farm. More and more families are moving to cities and many children have no idea how different food-products are produced. In return you can provide farmers with knowledge about local flora and fauna, nature friendly land management practice.

### **Funds and international cooperation**

There are wide range of funds available today administrated via many programs and funding agencies. All EU countries have access to European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund, territorial cooperation programs' funding, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 etc. The projects are good to create materials, tools etc. You can use later on in your centre's everyday work. Sometimes you will need to have international partners to submit the proposal. Don't be afraid of this. Different cultures, experiences and traditions will only enrich your everyday life. If you don't have any international partners yet, use the partner search engines most funds provide on their web sites. You can also find the potential partner in internet and write directly to it. Development of partnership will take time and also does the development of common project proposals.

### **Local businesses**

Before you approach local company study all information about it. What they are doing/producing, what is their philosophy, have they ever supported any local activities etc. Business exists to make money, but it is run by people. Approaching a company you have to address the person not the entrepreneur. Inspire them; show how they can benefit from supporting you. Know exactly what and how much you need, be ready to compromises.

Remember – if you ask something for you have to be ready to give something in return. Otherwise people will feel used, but we all want to feel that we are serving.

## **7. Getting the message across**

There are numbers of ways you can let others know you are there and what you are doing: press releases, presentations, posters, newspaper stories, blogs and many others.

### **Mass media**

The best tool to communicate what you have done is the newspaper – local, regional or one produced by your centre.

When working with local or regional media be professional. Approach the media with respect and without a sense of familiarity. Prepare all information media representatives might need in advance, it is called “Press kit”. The press kit usually includes the following: press release announcing the event, its purpose and details about it including all essential facts, it also contains the information about who is organising it and who supports it. You can also add good quality pictures, the contact information and invitation to visit event. Be flexible with your time and understand that mass media people are hectic and most of the time they are business-like. When they come they want receive exactly what they have been promised. They do not like to wait. If you know, there might be such a need, prepare tea/coffee and some snacks, it will make things more relaxed. It is advisable to choose who from organisation will talk to the press. This person has to be quick in thinking, clear in expressing ideas, well informed not only about the event but also about the organisation and “underwater cliffs” to avoid from.

When writing a story for newspaper keep in mind the readers – they are local people who are not participating in your centre’s everyday activities. Make sure the stories have a message, are interesting, touches people’s minds and hearts. If want to create closer cooperation with the local newspaper you can try to arrange that there will be nature stories every second week prepared by staff of your centre. This is really a great way how to reach the local community members.

### **Social media**

More and more people are using alternative sources for getting information – Twitter, Facebook are the most known. Many countries have their own alternatives of Facebook. Before you join the social media club be aware – it is time consuming. Once you have created accounts and published something you can’t stop. These media requires regular information flow. If you will publish information once in a while you will lose the followers and the whole point of social media.

Most institutions have both – Twitter and Facebook. Facebook’s most common use is to keep people informed of what’s happening. It’s like a book/diary, where you publish all important moments of your centre’s life, short stories about events, pictures etc. Twitter is all about being brief and quick. In Twitter you are limited to 140 characters. Many institutions use Twitter to inform about events and happenings, and publish more information about them on Facebook.

In short on Facebook companies share:

- Longer, more thought-out posts that encourage a conversation
- Images that people will want to like and share
- Questions that require a response
- Blog posts, especially those with great images
- News about the company

Whereas on Twitter they publish quick updates, links that are interesting to you and your visitors, facts about your nature education centre and answer questions people are asking.

### **YouTube**

Relatively less popular for environmental education centres is YouTube. YouTube is an online public communications site where registered users can upload and have available for the public their videos for viewing. The videos are anything from beginner videos to more professional videos; also content-wise there is a great variety of videos.

Consider using YouTube to show people what and how you are doing, film some activities you are having, joint work activities and post them on the YouTube and add link to your webpage.

## **8. Evaluating the work**

When running the centre and having visitors every day it is hard to stop and reflect on what and how you are doing. But without reflection and evaluation it is hard to understand whether you are successful and activities you are running reach the objectives you've set. It is worth to include evaluation. Therefore you may consider including evaluation activities in your daily routine.

The first evaluation is done during the planning process – you assess the needs of target-group, its wishes and motivations - why they won't participate in the activity, what they already know about the topic you plan to present them.

If you are preparing information panels, any kind of exhibits, leaflets, brochures etc. you may consider to assess the product before it is sent to publishing house or put on a public display. There are several ways of evaluating it. You can give the texts to your friends and ask what they understand and think about them. Thus you will get honest but very friendly feedback about your product. If you have more time and resources you can make mock-ups of all information panels/exhibition and place them outdoors. All you will have to do afterwards is listen to what people are saying/commenting about, whether they repeat any of its contents out loud. You can approach visitors and ask them to look at information panels and tell what they like/dislike, what would help them to understand the topic etc.

The school programs, families' (or any other group activities) activities will require other type of evaluation. The most popular evaluation methods are questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, peer reviews.

When developing questionnaires you have to consider who will fill them out and how much time it will take to fill it out. If you plan to give questionnaires to school children you may want to include there closed questions with prepared answers and students just have to choose one answer for each question. At the end of the questionnaire you can leave the place for open questions such as "What was your best experience today", "What did you like best in this activity" etc. Remember – students need more time to write answers than adults, not all of them feel comfortable in using pens/pencils and expressing their thoughts. If you plan to questionnaire adults you can include open-ended questions or leave place for comments after each closed question.

To examine what exactly students have learned during activities you can close the event with a simple question – ask every student to name one thing he/she has learned today/from the activities. This is quick and effective way how to understand whether you have reached the goals of the activities.

If you are working with very specific target-groups, for example farmers, home owners, teachers or any other group, you can use the focus groups as an evaluation tool. A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. In case you use focus groups as a tool you will need to record the

answers either with recorder or writing them by hand.

In order to get a professional opinion about your activities or your working style you need to invite a professional, your colleague either from another education centre or from your own, in any case it has to be a person whom you trust and who will be honest with you despite the fact that you know each other very well. The colleague/trustee can assess your working style or you can ask to act him/her as one of the group members and thus get the insight of the group opinion.

Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and combinations of methods usually give the best results.

## APPENDIX 1

### Equipment for nature education centre

There is a minimum of equipment one centre must have and that is paper and pencils.

The more specific activities you will have then more specific equipment you will need. Here is the list and picture of some of the equipment you may consider to purchase.

Pads for sitting on the ground	
Binoculars	
Magnifiers with handle	

<p>Magnifier jar for small natural objects. These are jars with lids that function as a magnifier. You can place in these jars not only examples of flora, but also small examples of fauna – insects, spiders, water animals etc.</p>	 Two clear plastic jars with blue lids are placed on a wooden table. The lids are designed to act as magnifying glasses, with a clear lens in the center and a blue rim. The jars are empty.
<p>Table loupes</p>	 Four small, clear plastic containers with black lids are arranged on a wooden table. Each lid has a clear lens in the center, making them function as table loupes. The containers are empty.
<p>Tweezers</p>	 A pair of tweezers is shown against a white background. The tweezers have long, thin handles and pointed tips.
<p>Insect intakes</p>	 Three insect intakes are shown on a wooden table. Each intake consists of a clear plastic funnel-shaped container with a long, thin, curved tube attached to the top. The tubes are arranged in a fan shape.

<p>Sample bags with inscriptions bands</p>	
<p>Water strainers for catching water insects</p>	
<p>Bowls where to put water animals and insects</p>	
<p>All kind of key-books for plants, animals, insects etc.</p>	

## APPENDIX 2

### References

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## **APPENDIX 3**

### **Useful links**

The Association of Nature Center Administrators [www.natctr.org](http://www.natctr.org)

The National Association for Interpretation [www.interpnet.com](http://www.interpnet.com)

Journal of Interpretation Research (back issues)

[http://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/Resources/Publications/Journal\\_of\\_Interpretation\\_Research/Archive](http://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/Resources/Publications/Journal_of_Interpretation_Research/Archive)

National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, Interpretive Development Program

<http://idp.eppley.org>

North American Association for Environmental Education <http://www.naaee.net>

International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education: Addressing, Issues, Policies, Practices, and Research That Matter <http://www.naaee.net/publications/ijecee/ijecee1>

Interpret Scotland

<http://www.interpretscotland.org.uk/website/interpretscotland.nsf/byunique/pastissues.html>

Association of Heritage Interpretation <http://www.ahi.org.uk>

Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation <http://www.slu.se/en>

Estonia – Latvia – Russia Cross Border Cooperation Programme within the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument 2007-2013 financially supports joint cross border development activities for the improvement of the region’s competitiveness by utilising its potential and beneficial location on the crossroads between the EU and Russian Federation. The Programme website is [www.estlatrus.eu](http://www.estlatrus.eu).



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