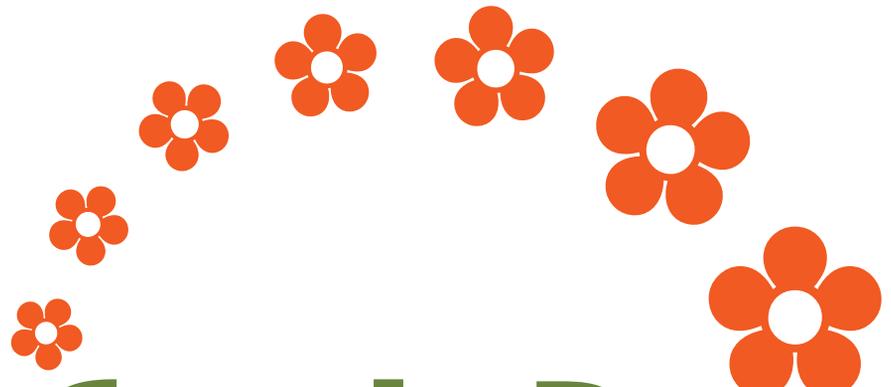




A young visitor views wildlife through a viewing blind overlooking Channels Marsh (circa 1970).



# Earth Day Every Day

40 years of environmental education

By Marsha Guzewich

As the day's final busload of bouncing children departs for their school, I look out over the fields and ponds at DEC's Rogers Environmental Education Center in Sherburne. The students—fifth-graders today, environmental stewards tomorrow—are a rare constant in the ever-changing discipline of environmental education. As I stand there watching, I start to think about how I ended up an educator at Rogers, and of the changes I've seen over the years.

It was the first Earth Day in April 1970 that was pivotal for me. Then a biology major at St. Lawrence University, I had always been interested in the environment. On that first Earth Day, I traveled by bus to Albany to take part in celebrations there. A few years later, with a Master's degree in hand and two years' teaching experience, I joined Rogers Center as a program coordinator,

meaning that I taught and oversaw lessons given to school groups, youth groups and attendees at weekend programs. Three years later, I became center director, which I remain to this day.

There have been many changes in the environmental movement since those first days so many years ago, and this, in turn, has affected the face of environmental education practiced at Rogers over the years.

Rogers Center is located on the grounds of the first state game farm. When the Conservation Department closed the game farm in the early 1960s, a Sherburne Rotarian asked National Audubon Society's Nature Centers' Division to determine if the property would be suitable for an education center. The game farm property was deemed suitable, and DEC was convinced to open its first education center.

## 1970s

Throughout the '70s, education programs dealt with environmental or conservation issues such as hunting, preparing wild game, or wildlife management. Simple titles like “pollution” or “hazardous waste” indicated our level of understanding of environmental issues at the time. People were just becoming aware of environmental problems like Love Canal in Niagara Falls. Typically the program was presented by some “expert” in the field, perhaps a professor from a local college or a DEC staff person working in the discipline. It was not unusual for a program to include a film. Looking back through printed promotional flyers, hors d'oeuvres were provided at many programs, some created from wild game. For the most part, Rogers' staff taught guided lessons for groups of school children or led general public nature walks on the trails.

Staff created a residential program; school groups came for stays of 2-4 nights and made their own meals using kitchen facilities available at the dormitory. Schools provided transportation, chaperones and evening entertainment. During the summer, the dorm was used for a teenage ecology workshop. A professor at SUNY Oneonta hosted weeklong programs for college students. Summer camp was administered by staff of the Mid-York Conservation Fund (now called Friends of Rogers).

An annual Winter Living Workshop began in the 1970s. While the workshop is still held today, its focus has changed a great deal over the years. In the beginning, people demonstrated crafts which were related to winter, made in the winter, or which used natural materials. Today's workshop involves more participatory activities for attendees—people out on snowshoes or cross country skis, taking a hike with a forester, feeding birds out of their hand, and riding a horse-drawn sleigh. If the weather is less than ideal, there are also plenty of indoor activities as well, including fly-tying, sing-alongs, and touching aquatic critters.

Between 1971 and 1972, the name changed from Rogers Conservation Education Center to Rogers Environmental Education Center; reflecting the larger organization's change from the Conservation Department to the Department of Environmental Conservation.

## 1980s

The use of films was phased out in this decade. Programs tended to integrate environmental messages into a program or trail walk. Rogers' staff began to conduct more of the weekend programs, concentrating on topics which would attract an audience. Guest presenters were still featured, but not nearly to the extent of earlier use. In 1988, Earth Day



Nick Dalmas

Visitors attend the opening of Rogers Conservation Education Center on June 10, 1968.



The author teaching a class about animals in winter (1980s).



Environmental Educator Laura Carey points out scat to participants on a "Tracks and Traces of Wildlife" walk (present day).

was celebrated for the first time at the center, and has been noted each year in some way since then. The practice of offering hors d'oeuvres (wild game or otherwise) was ended; however children still received a snack at programs specifically targeted to young audiences.

### 1990s

Emphasis began to shift from residential programming to day trips. Rather than working with students for several days, they came for a day. Lessons consisted of several topics, with about an hour spent on each topic. Teacher Workshops developed a strong following in teacher preparatory programs at colleges throughout upstate.

The focus of programming remained on natural resources, but staff began leading trips off property to explore state forests, the Finger Lakes Trail, and other natural areas of interest (bogs, fire towers, particularly good spots for wildflowers, or woodcock). We used whatever vehicle or tool necessary to enhance the exploration, be it a canoe, snowshoes, or binoculars. These trips were limited in size by the logistics of transportation, but most often were filled to capacity. Despite not being "high adventure," these trips offered people a way to connect with local natural resources, and hopefully instilled in them an interest to continue with Rogers Center outings or forays on their own.

### 2000s

Equipment advanced during this decade, with "modern" snowshoes and kayaks as alternate choices for outings. It is not unusual to have only adults on these trips, still young and active, but no longer bringing their children along. We have developed an "Active Senior Series." Some programs are given on weekdays, as we have discovered there are people who are not interested in doing programs on weekends.

Most programs are held outdoors, and some require moderate activity. We now offer programs on hiking, snowshoeing, biking, canoeing/kayaking, wildflower and bird identification and mushrooms; we cover seasonal events including spring wildflowers, bird migration, woodcock watching, fireflies and snow tracking. We also give programs on energy use and composting, and we are always supporting "buying local." And since the beginning, we tie these topics to people's own lives and use of natural resources.

While we started integrating modern electronic technology into our programming, it's not the central focus of someone's visit to a nature center. Rather, the idea remains to get people outside and connected to nature.

More recently, global warming and carbon footprints have become topics of interest. Rather than hosting specific programs on these topics, we integrate them into other subject matter. During this time, money became available for some much-needed rehabilitation work on the 40-year-old visitor center. Although not radically changed, the center incorporated energy-saving ideas into the renovations.

Reflecting on my years at Rogers, I recognize that some things about environmental education have remained essentially unchanged. We are still learning about how the world works. We must think carefully about everything we do and determine if the ecological cost is worth the end result. And we still need to

share the joy and beauty of the world with those who are willing to listen.

As I think of the many years that have passed since that first Earth Day celebration, I feel fortunate to be an environmental educator. While some celebrate Earth Day once a year, I get to celebrate it every day with the visitors to Rogers.

When we share outdoor experiences with the public, we see a level of enthusiasm and sense of wonder again and again. Letters from participants, whether children or adults, echo the same sentiments, “I loved it when we saw the...,” “I had never before touched a...” These firsthand experiences are what people take away from Rogers.\*

But some things have changed. Perhaps the most significant message I’ve witnessed in environmental education is to stay away from what might be called the “doom and gloom” school of thought. Early on, some felt that to save the world, we needed to scare schoolchildren about the terrible things happening in the rainforest or some



Susan Slater

Exploring pond life with a young visitor.

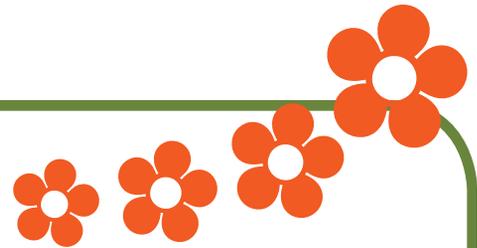
other faraway place, so they wouldn’t let that happen in their own backyard. DEC’s philosophy has never tended in this direction; rather DEC environmental educators have for years let local places serve as the basis for studying ecological concepts and understanding how the earth functions.

Tools of the trade have also changed. For example, we now use the internet to promote our programs—computers were an emerging technology at the beginning of my career. But hands-on, outdoor experiences are what people seek and are the core experience at the centers. While children of today may have watched more TV shows about a wider variety of wildlife, they are just as excited about what is happening in their own backyard. And it’s this interest and enthusiasm that keeps me energized and makes me eager to work with the next generation of conservationists!

**Marsha Guzewich** is Director of DEC’s Rogers Environmental Education Center in Sherburne.

\*For further reading, see page 27 of the February 2010 *Conservationist*.

## Ask the Educators



On reading Marsha’s article, *Conservationist* editorial staff canvassed a number of longtime DEC environmental educators, past and present, including Marsha. We asked them what changes they have seen over the course of their careers. Here’s what they had to say:

“I was student teaching on the first Earth Day. Since that time, the biggest change I have seen is that teachers no longer limit discussions of environmental issues to one day a year; instead, environmental messages are now incorporated into everyday learning.”—**Darwin Roosa, former DEC environmental educator**

“While green, eco-, ecology and environment have become universally accepted and understood concepts, we are no closer today than we were in 1970 to educating the public and children especially, about basic principles of ecology and understanding that we are a part of nature and subject to all of nature’s laws. Most people still think that nature happens at parks and has very little, if any, relevance to our daily lives.”—**Frank Knight, retired environmental educator**

“The biggest change I’ve seen is fear; fear of nature, and the outdoors. Today, people are terrified of the perceived dangers of being outdoors: rabies, avian flu, stranger danger, ticks, west Nile encephalitis, getting lost...For most kids, nature isn’t where you go for fun or solace anymore—it’s a strange and scary place. Our challenge as educators is to teach people that they can safely enjoy nature’s wonders.”—**Anita Sanchez, environmental educator at DEC’s Five Rivers Environmental Education Center**

“While a few education programs like nature walks were held outdoors, many of Rogers Center’s programs were indoor lectures and films or involved arts-and-crafts. Eventually, outdoor, hands-on programs became the focus, getting people outdoors to foster a personal connection with the natural world.”

—**Marsha Guzewich, director, Rogers Environmental Education Center**