

## Guidelines for Nature Centers

Developed by the Iowa Association of Naturalists, 1990

### Definition

For the purposes of the Iowa Association of Naturalists, a nature center consists of:

- I. A natural resource where both passive and active interpretation focuses on natural history themes and,
- II. Physical facilities which may include, but are not limited to, buildings, trails and indoor and outdoor displays and,
- III. An environmental education program to promote understanding of the natural and altered environment and,
- IV. A Professional interpretive staff and trained volunteers and,
- V. A funding base to support staff, programming, maintenance and other needs.

### Guidelines

These guidelines are not mandatory standards. They give direction to organizations developing new nature centers and help existing nature centers evaluate and improve their programs and facilities.

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#### I. Natural Resource Base

##### A. Overall Considerations

1. The site's features and size are appropriate to the nature center's mission statement.
2. The site is representative of locally native ecosystems, whether natural, altered or restored.
3. There are well-maintained roads leading to the area.
4. The site includes areas accessible to handicapped people.
5. There is sufficient money and staff to carry out the maintenance schedule and resource management plan.

##### B. Site Maintenance

1. The site is maintained according to a written schedule.
2. Measures are taken to ensure public safety in the area.
3. The resource is protected from potential damage by the visiting public.

##### C. Resource Management

1. There is a written management plan covering the natural, cultural, and historical resources.
2. Trained professionals are involved in development of the resource management plan.
3. The resource management plan reflects the nature center's mission statement.
4. The resource management plan includes the following:

- a. identification and management of ecological communities present at the site
  - b. identification of ecologically sensitive areas and any special provisions needed to protect them
  - c. identification of rare, threatened or endangered species present and any special provisions needed to protect them
  - d. identification of acceptable activities at the site (activities to be considered may include: off-trail hiking, bicycling, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, hunting, trapping, fishing, boating and mushroom, berry and nut gathering)
  - e. for preserves and refuges, plans for handling overpopulation of wildlife, if they become a threat to the resource
5. The resource management plan preserves the integrity of the resource.
  6. All development at the site is conducted according to the resource management plan.
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## II. Physical Facilities

### A. Overall Design Considerations

1. The facilities are designed to fulfill the stated goals and objectives of the nature center. The following are examples of physical facilities which may be found in a nature center. If included, these must meet the goals and objectives of the program. Nature centers are not limited to the following facilities; nor is this list meant to be all encompassing.
  - a. Exhibit area
  - b. Teaching collection
  - c. Auditorium
  - d. Classroom
  - e. Library
  - f. Small meeting room
  - g. Restrooms
  - h. Bookstore and gift shop
  - i. Trail system and grounds
  - j. Parking lot
  - k. Office space
  - l. Storage and work space
2. The structure is functional and efficient.
  - a. The structure is designed to reflect its mission statement and interpretive message.
  - b. The building serves as a model of energy conservation.
  - c. The facility is flexible enough to allow for future expansion.
3. Visitors are encouraged to move about the buildings, grounds and trails in an efficient manner.
4. The signage is adequate to direct visitors to the interpretive center and to other key locations.

5. The building is handicapped-accessible.
  6. There is a written maintenance schedule and it is followed.
  7. The building is designed for ease of maintenance and visitor comfort and convenience. For example, the building contains:
    - a. mud or wet room
    - b. utility closet
    - c. live animal work space
    - d. sufficient storage and work space
    - e. restrooms
  8. Public safety is ensured.
    - a. All buildings meet safety and fire code regulations.
    - b. Steps and railings meet regulations.
  9. All pertinent visitor information such as hours, rules, trail maps and a schedule of events is properly posted and available both during and after normal office hours. An easily accessible indoor reception and information area is available during normal office hours.
  10. Landscaping should be done with native species in preference to nonnative species wherever possible.
  11. Sound attenuation (carpeting and acoustics) is taken into consideration where appropriate.
  12. All buildings should be well-lit and ventilated.
  13. Fifty percent of the building should be reserved for non-public space (offices, storage, utilities and work space).
  14. The buildings and trails are designed for and accessible to people from a variety of age groups and varying abilities in accordance with the goals and objectives of the program.
  15. Running water is provided both inside and outside the building.
- B. Visitor Needs
1. Exhibit area
    - a. The exhibit area appears roomy and uncluttered.
    - b. The exhibits are protected from environmental hazards and the visiting public where necessary.
    - c. There are interactive and participatory displays.
    - d. Both permanent and temporary exhibits exist.
    - e. The exhibits convey interpretive themes to the visitor.
  2. Teaching collection
    - a. The collection fulfills the stated goals and objectives of the nature center.
    - b. There is a written collection policy for both animate and inanimate objects.
    - c. Accurate collection records are kept.
      1. All necessary federal, state and local permits are current and applicable.
      2. All specimens are properly identified.
      3. Procedures are in place for accessioning and deaccessioning.
      4. If loaned, there are written procedures to ensure proper handling of the specimens.

- d. The collection is properly housed and displayed.
- e. The live collection is humanely treated.
  - 1. Routine attention is given to animals and plants on display (feeding, cleaning and medical).
  - 2. Veterinarian, horticulturist and other services are used.
  - 3. Adequate treatment records are kept.
  - 4. Staff is trained to handle and present live animals to the public.
  - 5. Adequate exhibit and storage space is provided.
  - 6. Proper food, temperature and other requirements are provided.
  - 7. Stress on animals is minimized as much as possible.
- 3. Auditorium
  - a. This is of sufficient size to meet the goals of the program.
  - b. The room is equipped with the necessities for lectures and audiovisual presentations.
  - c. If so designed, the room could double as a classroom.
- 4. Library
  - a. This room is shielded from traffic flow and noise.
  - b. This room could double for other purposes if properly designed with flexibility in mind.
- 5. Small meeting room
  - a. This room is shielded from traffic flow and noise.
  - b. This room could be used for other purposes.
- 6. Restrooms
  - a. The restrooms are designed to accommodate peak visitor traffic.
  - b. There is access to restrooms after normal office hours.
- 7. Bookstore and gift shop
  - a. The store is readily accessible to visitors.
  - b. The location of this room fits the internal traffic flow.
  - c. Items for sale meet the goals and objectives of the nature center.
- 8. Parking lot
  - a. The lot is of adequate size to meet the goals of the program.
  - b. There is a logical traffic flow pattern.
  - c. There is proper signage.
  - d. There is easy access to the facilities.
  - e. Designated handicapped accessible parking stalls are included in the design of the parking lot.
- 9. Trail system and grounds
  - a. The trails are easily accessible from the visitor center and parking lot.
  - b. The trails are maintained according to a written schedule.
  - c. The trails are designed to minimize impact and preserve sensitive areas.
  - d. The trails are diverse and meet the needs of the intended visitors.
  - e. The site includes areas accessible to handicapped people.
  - f. The trail system enhances the interpretive message using available interpretive techniques.
  - g. The area meets the needs of all segments of the population.

- h. Trails are properly marked and signed for the ease and convenience of trail users.
  - C. Staff Needs
    - 1. Office space
      - a. Permanent staff have individual offices which afford them a reasonable degree of privacy.
      - b. There is adequate space for work and storage.
    - 2. Storage, utilities and work space
      - a. There is sufficient work space available for designing and building exhibits and displays. This would include storage units and work tables.
      - b. This area is shielded from the public.
      - c. The area is easily accessible to the staff.
      - d. Outside storage (garage, shop, etc.) is available.
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### III. Environmental Education Program

- A. Overall Considerations
  - 1. Programs have specific goals and objectives.
  - 2. Different learning styles and developmental stages are recognized and are part of the planning process.
  - 3. Some programs are specifically designed to meet the needs of special populations.
  - 4. Programs offer a progression of experiences to effect a gradual attitude change, from awareness to knowledge to understanding of issues and values to citizen action. (See reference "Goals for Curriculum Development in Environmental Education.")
  - 5. Programs are scheduled at a variety of times and days of the week to allow all segments of the population opportunities to attend programs.
  - 6. A variety of interpretive techniques are used (i.e., passive and active exhibits and activities, audiovisual and interpretive trails).
  - 7. The interpretive program is not limited to the staff of the center, but involves networking with other individuals and organizations.
  - 8. The center capitalizes on community desire, to be part of their program, by use of volunteers, summer jobs and internships.
- B. Program Content
  - 1. Program content reflects the mission statement of the organization.
  - 2. Programs are based on the needs of the community and are responsive to change.
  - 3. A variety of programs are offered to attract different segments of the population.
  - 4. Programs reflect the natural, cultural and historical features of the site.
  - 5. The program's diversity increases as it matures.
  - 6. Recreational activities integrate knowledge of the resource with the activity.
- C. Evaluation
  - 1. Programs should be evaluated at regular and prescribed intervals.

2. Self, peer, and participant evaluations should be part of the process.
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#### IV. Professional Interpretive Staff and Trained Volunteers

##### A. Professional Interpretive Staff

1. Staff, excluding volunteers, interns and non-paid employees, meets the minimum "Professional Standards for an Interpretive Naturalist" as set by the IAN in 1988.
2. Staff responsibilities include participation in continuing education and professional organizations. Staff are given time and monetary support for such activities.
3. Staff should have access to the governing board and be involved in decision-making.
4. Evaluation of staff should be at regular, prescribed times. Self, peer, and participant evaluations should be part of the process.

##### B. Trained Volunteers

1. The nature center has a volunteer coordinator.
  2. Written volunteer task descriptions should name the supervisor and should include duties and responsibilities both to the nature center and to the general public.
  3. Volunteers are given appropriate tasks.
  4. A volunteer contract is signed by both volunteer and supervisor.
  5. A task-specific volunteer training program is established.
  6. Regularly scheduled evaluations are conducted for each volunteer by their supervisor.
  7. Volunteer records should be kept (i.e., hours worked, duties, etc.).
  8. Volunteers receive recognition.
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#### V. Funding and Administration

##### A. Funding

1. The nature center has its own budget within any parent organization.
2. There are adequate funds available for both interpretive and support staff.
3. There is monetary support for continuing education and professional memberships.

##### B. Administration

1. There is a mission statement which includes goals, objectives and the legal responsibilities to the general public. The mission statement is evaluated regularly.
2. Staff size is adequate to handle all nature center responsibilities and visitor demands.
3. There is an organizational chart, listing all paid, non-paid, and volunteer staff.

4. There is an employee policy including hours worked, holidays, vacation, sick leave, other compensations, safety procedures, expectations, evaluation procedures and grievance policy.
5. There is a risk management plan that covers employees, volunteers, participants and facilities.

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## References

Any organization that has, or is starting, a nature center should be familiar with the following:

1. TIS Report #4, Accreditation, Self-study and On-site Evaluation Questionnaire. American Association of Museums, 1225 I Street NW, Washington D.C. 20005, (202) 289-1818.
2. Camp Standards with Interpretations for the Accreditation of Organized Camps. American Camping Association, Bradford Woods, Martinsville, Indiana, 46151 1978 ISBN 0-87603-044-4.
3. Goals for Curriculum Development in Environmental Education. Harold Hungerford, R. Ben Payton and Richard J. Wilke. The Journal of Environmental Education, Vol. 11, No. 3 Spring 1980
4. State and local laws concerning health, safety and building codes.