Adjusting and Advancing
IN THE SUMMER OF 2020

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SUMMER IS TRADITIONALLY A TIME TO ESCAPE but this year is unlike any other. Even if you managed to visit a national park or favorite beach, there was no avoiding our fragile economy, the global pandemic, and ongoing injustices to people of color. Of course, to make headway on these difficult issues, we should not seek to evade them but confront them—and SCA has been active in each of these areas.

On the economic front, as many SCA summer programs were postponed or cancelled due to the coronavirus, we forcefully advocated for progressive federal legislation such as the Great American Outdoors Act and The CORPS Act. These bills contain significant investments in protecting public lands and provide jobs and career training for young people nationwide. These Acts will also open doors to marginalized populations and help address the inequities at the core of so many recent protests. As I wrote in an op-ed column for *The Hill*, “A modernized CCC would replace age-old barriers with bridges to opportunity, unite young people behind a common cause, and equalize the playing field for a new and diverse generation of rising leaders.”

Active outreach by our 90,000-plus alumni helped convince Congress to pass the Great American Outdoors Act, and we remain hopeful that other outdoor stimulus funding also will be approved.

As for COVID-19, SCA volunteers have demonstrated extraordinary resilience over the past several months. As you’ll read in the pages ahead, they’ve adjusted their schedules, embraced new safety protocols, and shifted to teleservice when necessary, all to fulfill a deeply-rooted commitment to our natural and cultural legacy. Their perspectives on dealing with the many challenges of this particular point in time are truly inspiring.

As an organization long committed to diversity and inclusion, SCA began to explore how it could better practice and promote these values long before the most recent examples of systemic abuse against Blacks and other minority communities. Yet these events underscore the structural inequities and ever-present risks of being a person of color, LGBTQ+, a follower of a different religion, or one of any other group perceived by some as different or threatening. And this is why SCA remains determined to offer a safe and welcoming community for our members, staff, and partners.

In the words of the late Rep. John Lewis, “Freedom is not a state; it is an act…Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.”

I am grateful for your support as we work toward these ideals, together.
SCA FOUNDER 
BUOYS GULFCORPS

SCA’s GulfCorps encountered a few ups and downs this year as they restored Alabama coastal areas still suffering ten years after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. A definite downer was a weeks-long suspension of field activities due to the coronavirus but a huge up was a guest appearance by SCA Founder Liz Putnam on a program-closing Zoom call in June.

As corps members shared highlights and Liz offered words of encouragement and appreciation, some of the best moments occurred when participants shared real-time reactions in the Chat feature. “What an honor. You are such an inspiration!” wrote one. “This is a dream come true—I’m in literal tears!” added another. “The hair on my arm is standing up. Major goosebumps!” And as the session wound down, a final thought appeared: “Something we all needed with everything going on.”

ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT WEEK IS COMING!

Mark your calendar for SCA’s annual Alumni Engagement Week, September 21–26, which promises a series of special events designed to help alums make useful connections, acquire industry knowledge, discover career opportunities, and have fun! Activities kick-off with an Online Happy Hour on Monday, SCA Giving Day on Tuesday, the return of the UnConference on Thursday, and a Virtual Town Hall with CEO Stephanie Meeks on Friday, before festivities conclude on Saturday: National Public Lands Day. Look for further details at thesca.org/alumniweek and social feeds as events draw closer, or reach out to Senior Alumni Engagement Director Trisha Malizia at pmalizia@thesca.org.

BOARD MOVES

At the June meeting of the SCA board of directors, Chairman (and 1979 alumnus) Bob Unsworth concluded his term and was succeeded by Kathy Bonavist, below, left, who returned to the board after serving as interim SCA president and CEO, a term that ended with the recent appointment of Stephanie Meeks. Former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official Mamie Parker was subsequently voted vice chair of the board and is slated to become chairwoman in 2021.
The crew members may not always agree but they universally respect one another. They value different perspectives and believe their diversity makes them strong. Yet although they’re all on different paths, Kelly notes they’ve arrived at the same place. “We all ended up in SCA,” she says. “From the start it felt like we were all friends and all knew each other because we had the same things motivating us.”

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“During incredible uncertainty, to have this piece of consistent normality is empowering because we’re still out here, still getting work done, and doing it with some amazing people.”

Diana’s crew is comprised entirely of women, all from the Chicago area and all between the ages of 18 and 26. Since 2013, SCA has run all-female crews here to provide a refuge from gender stereotypes and biases. “We trust each other,” Diana says, “and being able to come together with everything else that’s going on makes this a really special experience.”

This is a “commuting crew” sponsored by BP America. Members report to work each morning at 6:30, undergo a precautionary health check, and work at least six feet apart. The sky above Hegewisch Marsh is clear and the air is crisp as the team removes hundreds of invasive plants, careful not to share tools under new safety protocols. At the end of the day, they return home, intent on avoiding any off-time activities that might put themselves or the team at risk.

“It’s kind of like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” states Kelly Escarcega, another team leader. “When we know we’re following the same rules, it’s easier to work together in a safe way on team goals and personal growth.”

In addition to the coronavirus, the Chicago team is also mindful of the ongoing racial turbulence. Most crew members are women of color, creating what crew member Andrea Mendoza calls an “intersectionality” of historical inequities. “Injustice isn’t something we are unfamiliar with,” she says. “But seeing familiar faces and knowing they are empathetic, we give through understanding. We’ve lived it. We know.”

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COVERT CONSERVATION?

“What do you get when you combine Sherlock Holmes with the great outdoors?” the WKBW-TV anchor asked before introducing a segment on SCA education intern Conrad Baker, a/k/a the Nature Detective.

“I wanted to get away from the typical naturalist habit of simply identifying something right away. This is more of an inquiry-based approach,” says Conrad, who works out of Letchworth State Park in western New York.
In Houston, Anh “Cindy” Nguyen was well into her internship with the Cities Connecting Children to Nature-Houston (CCCN-H) program when the virus hit. She started her position a year ago, representing Mayor Sylvester Turner’s Office of Education. A coalition of community organizations and individual champions, CCCN-H is devoted to ensuring equitable access to nature for young people of all backgrounds.

“I came in knowing this was a great chance to be exposed to a lot of great people in government, nonprofits, and corporations,” says Cindy, who this fall will attend the University of Washington’s IslandWood Graduate Program in Education for Environment and Community. “I wanted to understand how environmental education works here in Houston.”

Among her many responsibilities, Cindy determined CCCN-H program goals, monitored progress, prepared reports, and coordinated stakeholder meetings. She notes most coalition members “have their own respective day jobs, so my role was to make the process easier for them.” Yet that didn’t come easy for her.

“It was definitely hard,” Cindy says. “I was usually the youngest person in the room and also one of the few people of color, so it was easy to feel overwhelmed. I’m more of a listener anyway but I eventually began to speak up and it was exciting to contribute.”

In his Nature Detectives videos, Conrad tackles outdoor mysteries ranging from ‘what leaf is that?’ to ‘who dropped that scat?’ He launched the series in the early days of the pandemic as parks and schools closed down, tapping into his prior media experience and a genuine passion for environmental education.

“A child is able to devote 100% of their senses and abilities to observing a butterfly or a flower,” he states. “Kids are perfectly adapted for putting clues together and figuring things out because when you’re eight-years-old, everything is new!”

Conrad, who has drawn comparisons to Bill Nye the Science Guy and Mr. Rogers, notes children are fascinated by animals and plants, and he decided to focus on species they could find right in their own backyards “since during COVID, that’s the only place they could go.”

His first video was on skunk cabbage “and the attention was incredible. It caught the eyes of teachers and parents, the views started piling up, and we started getting comments and messages.”

As regional restrictions were relaxed in mid-summer and the park reopened, Conrad discovered he wasn’t the only sleuth in Letchworth State Park. “We went out to Inspiration Point to shoot a virtual field trip, and we met a mom and a couple of kids, looking very excited,” he recalls. “One of the kids finally came over and said ‘Hey, you’re the Nature Detective guy!’ It made my day!”

You can see Conrad’s videos on the Letchworth Facebook page or on YouTube. He’ll be at the park providing live presentations and producing more videos through the rest of the year, after which he hopes to “remain in the environmental field for a long and fruitful career.”
The education office’s motto is “Collaboration, Communication, Coordination” and, in time, Cindy says she “made some really great partner connections and I know I can reach out to them.”

She successfully pushed a number of sustainability initiatives including the expansion of green infrastructures to address urban heat and flooding. Then came, back to back, COVID-19 and the slaying of native son George Floyd. That’s when she realized how closely her work was related to “uplifting Black communities…it was disappointing when the virus put a pause on a lot of activities we’d planned for summer.”

As Cindy looks forward to resuming her education, she is also glancing over her shoulder. “What I’ll miss most,” she says, “is the great thought leaders who always brought us back to our goals. I’ll miss their passion and wisdom. I learned a lot.”

This has been a daunting year to date with many challenges yet to come. SCA is grateful to the young people who stepped up to serve our lands and waters, despite the tumult, with fidelity to safety and respect for others. We also thank our partners, from park rangers to civic leaders, who mentor SCA members and whose influence will help guide the journeys ahead. And, of course, we very much appreciate our financial supporters who make these transformative conservation experiences possible.

Although SCA anticipates an active fall due to many rescheduled summer projects, it is impossible to know what the future holds. Amid much uncertainty, SCA remains firmly committed to protecting our natural world and co-powering conservation leaders. We hope you are well, we hope you are safe, and hope you are able to enjoy the restorative powers of the great outdoors. 🌍

SUPPORTER SPOTLIGHT: Bernice Seiden

SCA usually employs this section of The GreenWay to highlight active donors determined to see that future generations experience some of the outdoor adventures that they were privileged to enjoy. This profile, however, is posthumous.

Bernice Sperling Silver Seiden of Baltimore passed in 2017 at the age of 95. She led an accomplished, multi-faceted life guided by these constants: family, service to others, an irrepressible spirit of adventure, and educational and professional achievement, the latter including building, with her first husband, Dan, the largest employment agency in Maryland.

Bernice’s love of and commitment to the outdoors was also a central part of her life. For example, she and Dan spent their honeymoon biking and camping, and later Bernice passed that passion for nature to her children. “We often all piled into the big old Buick with tents and tarps to visit national parks and natural areas around the country,” says daughter Elaine, who harbors memories of sleeping under the stars along Maine lakeshores and flooded tents in the Blue Ridge Mountains, among many other family excursions.

Later in life, Bernice was “Bubby” to her large extended family including those she and her second husband welcomed into their home. She gave herself the nickname “Biking Bubby” to underscore what was important to her and the joy she took in sharing her love of life and nature with others.

In 2003, Bernice made a most generous gift to SCA with a charitable gift annuity that will lead others on their own adventures that will invariably lead to a better planet.

To learn how you can support SCA through a gift in your estate, contact Wilke Nelson, SCA Director of Gift Planning, 703.842.4210 or at wnelson@thesca.org.
EYE ON ALUMNI:
Natalie Mebane

“I WORK WITH YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVISTS,” says alumna Natalie Mebane, “and tell them about my SCA experience. I say ‘I would not do that again.’”

Wait, what?

Some background: Natalie is the associate director of U.S. policy at 350.org, an international nonprofit focused on climate change, fossil fuels, and renewable energy. In 2007, she interned at Devils Postpile National Monument, a unique geologic formation in northern California. She actually had an extraordinary time.

“I still remember random facts I’d share while giving tours,” Natalie states. “‘Mammoth Mountain is a super volcano—if it erupts, it’ll end the world!'”

That summer, she was lured to nearby Yosemite for an SCA 50th anniversary event and recalls watching the sunrise on Half Dome days after her 22nd birthday. “I called my mother in tears. I said ‘I wish you were here, I want you to see this. I feel like I’m looking at the face of God and I cannot believe I went 22 years of my life without seeing this.’”

From there, the environmental science and policy major at the University of Maryland—“Everybody knew about SCA there,” she notes—attended a PowerShift conference and locked in on a career in advocacy, policy, and organization. “I decided this is my path: change laws, protect these places, with a focus on public lands,” Natalie says. Another turning point occurred a short time later when she was inspired by 350.org co-founder Bill McKibben at a climate rally. “One day, I’m going to work for him,” she thought. She joined the organization a year ago following four years with the Sierra Club.

Natalie is also the co-founder of the National Children’s Campaign which she says is determined “to make America’s 74-million children a national priority.” She also is director of advocacy and fundraising at Zero Hour and sits on the board of PowerShift.

“My SCA experience really shaped me as a young person, in my career, and who I am,” she says. But why wouldn’t she do her internship again?

“There’s no way I’d be living in the middle of a forest in California in fire season,” Natalie declares. “There’s one road in and one road out. I would never do that today, the climate has changed that much in 13 years.”

She does, she assures, recommend SCA to the young people as she continues to fight the forces altering our planet’s environment. “You can’t lose hope,” Natalie says, “because, if you do, what’s the point?

“We can each do everything we can, and it’s still not going to be enough unless everyone is involved. And I don’t mean ‘I’ll save this and recycle that.’ We have to change the system we have in place, otherwise we’re just counting down to our destruction.”

Your support for SCA conserves lands and transforms lives. Your gift to SCA will protect wildlife habitat, improve trails and park access, empower a new generation of conservation leaders for life, and so much more!

Make a gift today at thesca.org/tgw
“I have this vision of making things nicer,” says Hillary (Hill) Steffes. “I like how nature looks when it’s healthy.”

Hill is an SCA intern helping her native Pittsburgh area control invasive plants. She does not employ herbicides like 2,4-D, atrazine, or glyphosate. Instead, she uses agents known as Angel Face, Kama, and Wimpy.

They’re goats.

Hill serves at Allegheny GoatScape, a nonprofit that relies on grazing goats to rid public spaces of invasive plants such as knotweed and bittersweet, and unwanted vegetation like poison ivy. The animals are more eco-friendly than chemicals, can easily navigate Pittsburgh’s notoriously undulating terrain, and the only fuel they require is the plants they eat.

As a self-described “urban shepherd,” Hill oversees herds of eight to 12 goats, plus a donkey that provides a form of security. When contracted by city parks, local businesses, and other landowners, she and her supervisor will survey the site, remove potential hazards, erect a fence, and let the goats have at it.

“They can clear an acre every two weeks,” she says. “The intent is ecological but there’s certainly a social impact. We have a herd at the waterfront which is becoming a staple in the city. People always stop to talk.”

Hill says each goat has a personality of its own. “Wimpy’s one of my favorites,” she says. “He’s huge, bright white, and just sort of mythical-looking. He’ll bring his head up to you and it’s kind of ominous. But he’ll nibble and lick you the way a dog would.

“Kama is also totally neat but in a different way. This is me projecting, but he seems very philosophical. He always looks like he’s thinking about something.”

An advocate for social and environmental justice, Hill is considering a career in city planning. For now, though, she’s focused on normalizing goat landscaping. “It’s very functional and convenient,” she declares. “It brings the ecological equilibrium back.”