

May 2018: *Melanie Costello*



Background: I would like to introduce Melanie Costello. She has been the Campus Director/ Outdoor Education Coordinator for Northern Illinois University Lorado Taft Field Campus where she oversees many of the services involved with outdoor education programs. Please help me welcome her - Kirsten

TPNC: Can you tell us a little about what you do?

Costello: As the director, I oversee all aspects of the campus – OE and conference programs, facilities, grounds, and food service. This includes supervising the department heads, overseeing the budget, and making decisions about the programs and campus facilities. At the outdoor education coordinator, I supervise 2

assistant coordinators and the nurse; recruit and contract with schools to take part in the program; support the assistant coordinators in hiring, supervising, and training the seasonal staff; and oversee the maintenance and improvement of teaching areas and equipment.

TPNC: What influenced you to choose this career?

Costello: I graduated from college with a B.S. in biology, hoping to someday work in wildlife management. I was lucky to get an AmeriCorps position with the Minnesota Conservation Corps, working with a crew in a wildlife office of the MNDNR. While working for MCC, my crew volunteered at the DNR booth at a local county fair. Behind the building where our booth was located, there was a concrete pond that was stocked with fish from the nearby Minnesota River. My crew decided that we should do some interpretation of the resource for the visitors - we brought waders to the fair and I would get into the pond and talk to the visitors about the fish species. I loved it! I was hooked on natural resource interpretation and education and decided to pursue that career.



TPNC: What do you like most about your career?

Costello: I work with some amazing, enthusiastic, supportive people. I get to help train and mentor our seasonal educators, many of whom are fairly fresh out of college and eager to make a difference. We laugh A LOT! Even though my job is mostly administrative and supervisory now, I still sometimes get to do some frontline education and interpretation, which still brings me joy.

TPNC: What do you find challenging about your career or environmental in general?

Costello: Probably the most challenging thing about my career is working through some of the bureaucracy that comes with being a part of a large university. One of the things that I find challenging about EE, or maybe “frustrating” is a better way to describe it, is that I see anecdotally how much of an impact what we do has on youth. And the research that supports the anecdotal evidence is growing, but it still seems an uphill battle, at times, getting the powers-that-be to support it.

TPNC: Can you describe a favorite environmental education moment?

May 2018: *Melanie Costello*

Costello: I have to pick just one!?! I can still remember being in that pond at the county fair and holding up a fish for the audience to touch, some of who had never done so before – even in Minnesota! I also remember a night hike in the winter with a group of kids from Chicago. The trail went through the woods and ended at an open field. The awe that they exhibited when we got to the opening and the sky full of stars was indescribable!

TPNC: Why do you feel environmental education is important?

Costello: The importance of our connection to nature is becoming more apparent as research that links our being in nature to positive outcomes is ever increasing – physically healthier, less-stressed, more mentally alert, better focused, etc. Environmental education, both school-based and non-formal, has an important role to play in making sure that youth develop a strong connection to their environment and a comfort level in being outdoors. In addition, as a society, we need creative thinking adults who are able to devise research-based solutions to ensure that we are able to derive the resources we need from our environment in the present (safe food, clean air and water, energy, etc.), while not destroying those resources for the future. The means that our population has to care, and we know that in order to have adults that care, we need children who have had regular, positive experiences in the outdoors.

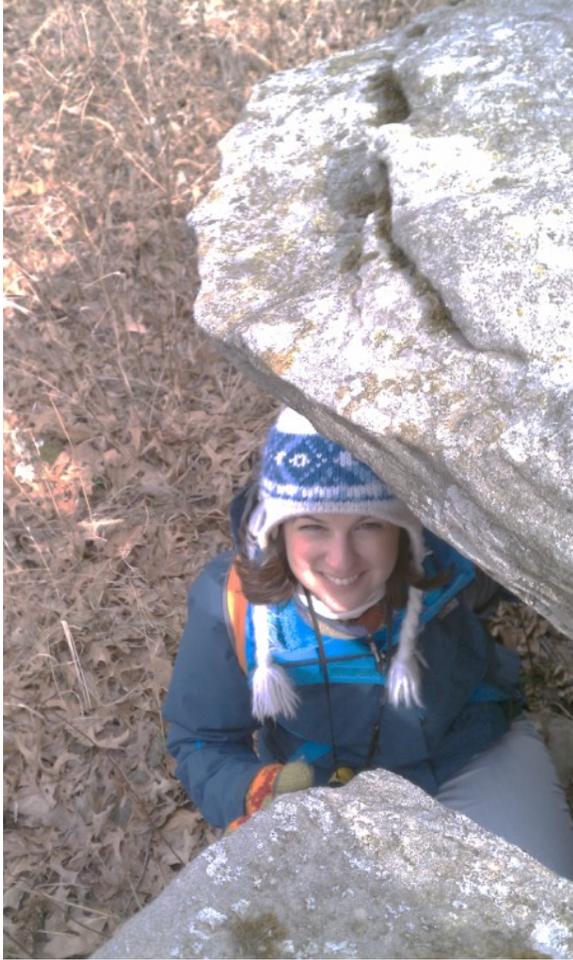


TPNC: Who is your environmental hero and why?

Costello: Aldo Leopold. Reading [A Sand County Almanac](#) was one of the drivers of my interest in wildlife management in the first place. I also had a great instructor in community college, Jan Grainger, who was instrumental in sparking my love of ecology. Unfortunately, I did not have good experiences with science teachers in high

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school and wasn't at all interested in a science career when I started college. Her class reignited my curiosity in the natural world, and I decided to major in biology as a result.



TPNC: What is your favorite aspect of nature and why?

Costello: My favorite thing about nature is its ability to inspire “goodness” (for lack of a better word) in people. Great thinkers, visual artists, writers, photographers, scientists, engineers – there are so many examples of great things that humans have done or created that were inspired by something in nature. I look to nature for inspiration frequently, or at least for a sense of peace and clarity when stressed or when I need to think creatively about a problem. And despite the fact that I've worked at the same site for 16+ years, I still find wonder and awe in our forests and river. Things are always changing; it never gets old!