

## **Wetlands Institute Charts Course for the Future**

By Lenore P. Tedesco, PhD, Executive Director of the Wetlands Institute

There is new leadership at the Wetlands Institute and with a new executive director and new board chair, change is in the air. I arrived in Stone Harbor in October and began a process of review and evaluation. I quickly found that the Wetlands Institute is an amazing place – but also found a diamond-in-the-rough that was ready for some fresh approaches and new ideas. My background in research and community outreach allows me to bring a new skill set to the Institute and chart a dramatic new course for the Wetlands Institute. Many of the programs that you have come to know and love about the “tute” will remain. Others will grow and expand. And many exciting new changes are on the horizon. In this article, I am proud and excited to share some of the details of our *Plan for the Future* for the Wetlands Institute.

The *Plan for the Future* is focused on the three legs of the stool supporting the institute – Research, Conservation and Education. A strong Wetlands Institute needs to diversify the number and type of funding sources it draws upon and we have started to do this. Our key focus areas are increasing research contract and grant income, increasing giving from major philanthropic organizations, increasing opportunities for corporate partnerships and sponsorships, and expanding community engagement over longer time periods (beyond children in summer camps) and to deeper and more enriching experiences. Achieving these goals will be through the development of new programs and opportunities in research, conservation and education, as well as a new approach to fund-raising and special events. We have already increased contract and grant income from less than 1% of our budget to more than 7% of the budget. Giving from philanthropic organizations is also up from 10% to 20% of the budget. This diversification of the funding base of the Institute is critical to continuing to strengthen the organization and also brings economic benefit to the local economy through both direct expenditures and multiplier effects.

My goal is to establish the Wetlands Institute as a center of excellence in coastal and wetlands research and conservation. Applied research will be a key strategy to position WI as a problem-solver of complex societal issues. We plan to diversify research expertise to include ornithology, fisheries, water resources, climate change, and wetland ecosystems. WI is well positioned to be a vibrant and dynamic conservation organization taking an active role in accessible and impactful conservation initiatives that promote awareness and behavior-change among the community and our constituency. Several areas where you can expect to see changes will be in the expansion and diversity of conservation efforts. I am a strong believer in the power and importance of community engagement in the promotion of stewardship of natural resources. Making science accessible to the public has been at the core of my work throughout my career. I plan to develop a series of conservation programs that will be designed to work with corporate and community volunteers for implementation. Common-sense conservation that is collaborative, welcomes partnerships, is science-based, and sustainable will be a focus of our conservation programs.

Education programs will be elevated to establish the Wetlands Institute as a recognized leader in environmental education. Programs will be refocused to use more inquiry-based, experiential approaches. There will be an expansion of program topic areas and opportunities for engagement for a broader age spectrum and more in-depth engagements. Look for new things too as we move into adding water resources and water quality programming to the mix, sustainable fisheries, and marine debris programs. We are adding technology and science experimenting to school and camp programs,

adding more programs and special events for teens and adults, and looking to expand educational programming into new markets.

We are in the process of launching new exhibits and displays. We just completed installation of a new solar array and are creating displays and programs on renewable energy. A new marine debris education program is paired with a conservation effort focused on increasing the availability of monofilament recycling stations for recreational fisherman.

In the next week, we will be launching a new conservation and education program focused on restoring horseshoe crabs in southern New Jersey. The Horseshoe Crab Enhancement Initiative is a collaborative partnership launched by Rutgers University Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences and the Aquaculture Innovation Center, WI, The Nature Conservancy, Nature Center of Cape May, NJ Audubon, and others. We will be applying modern aquaculture techniques to restore populations of an ancient animal. Our plan is to collect horseshoe crab eggs from marginal spawning habitat, rear the eggs in our aquarium building on public display, raise the hatchlings through the first several molts when mortality is extremely high – and then release them later in the summer.

Research shows that for every 3,000 fertilized horseshoe crab eggs – only about 3 individuals will make it to the third molt stag when they start to look like mini horseshoe crabs and start to eat. Horseshoe crabs reach reproductive maturity after about 7 years! The strategy is to increase that survival rate dramatically through aquaculture – and instead of 3 making it, we hope that we can release closer to 2,700 of the original 3,000 eggs.

Displays are being designed and installed at the Wetlands Institute right now providing us with an exciting and new conservation and education program that can make a difference!

An overarching goal is to bring a focus of research, conservation and education to the community through engaging programs. Programs that invite participation on a host of levels – from enjoying a lecture, to rolling up your sleeves and getting involved - are at the core of the new Wetlands Institute. The energy and excitement of the community is a key component of this effort to grow the Institute.

Volunteers remain one of our greatest assets and resources and we are launching new volunteer training programs and engaging volunteers in more and new ways. If you've always thought about volunteering at the Institute – now is the time.

The relaunch is underway! Exciting new exhibits are about to open, new partnerships are being formed, Wings and Water is renewed, refreshed and remarkable. The doors are open! We are making no small plans. Be a part of it. Come on by and see what all the excitement is about.