

Water

Combining Art, Science and Community at Easton's Nurture Nature Center



Flooding and GSI make a big part of the programs.

Everyone loves the Sphere.



in a stunning array of environmentally-themed art, and tends to be the most talked-about parts of the center's exhibits.

It's more than just another display piece. Officially known as Science On a Sphere, it's a sophisticated educational tool sponsored by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

The sphere itself is really a three-dimensional screen suspended from the ceiling, on which a room-sized projection system can display different global maps showing things such as weather patterns, animal migrations, nighttime views, population maps, average temperatures, or ocean currents. It's one of only 160 such systems around the world.

"We have the ability to showcase global impacts on the Sphere," said Rachel Hogan Carr, Executive Director of the NNC, "and we use it to link these global trends to the local environment." An important part of the center's mission, she said, is finding ways to communicate important concepts in ways that non-scientists can understand.

That need to communicate is why art is such an important part of the center's outreach. "Art provides a good platform for discussing complicated issues," said Hogan Carr. "If you get a kid and they aren't trained in how to process data, they won't get anything out of it," she said, but using arts to help visualize things and build connections can make things understandable and relevant.

Art-related programs that are developed in the Easton community are shared with other institutions throughout the country, for example, the center is currently working on a project funded National Science Foundation titled "Building Insights through Observation: Researching Arts-Based Methods for Teaching and Learning with Data."

Born Out of a Flood





"Live Local" mural by artist in resident Tom Maxfield

A significant part of the research work the Nurture Nature Center does involves flooding along the Delaware River Basin, and in fact, flooding is the reason the center was established. The center is an offshoot of the New York-based Nurture Nature Foundation, which was founded by famed labor negotiator Theodore W. Kheel in 1992.

The foundation had taken on the project of restoring a historic hotel in Easton, to help encourage the sustainable revival of the city's downtown core, but the Delaware River flooded "essentially the day we put the first units up for sale," said Hogan Carr, "we were caught by surprise."

The foundation created the center in 2007 to explore ways to better understand flood risks and communicate those to the public. With funding and assistance from NOAA, it created the "Focus on Floods" website in 2009, which at first addressed flooding in the



The center currently works with the National Weather Service to help it improve its warning systems for floods and natural disasters. While the NWS has improved its ability to forecast likely floods and send out messages, “we realized people didn’t understand them,” said Hogan Carr, “you can tell them all day what’s going to happen, but if they don’t understand it, it doesn’t help.” The center conducted social science studies to help make emergency communications clearer and more understandable to the public.

Community Outreach



A collaborative mural made from smaller paintings by community members

While the national research is important, said Hogan Carr, “half our work is community programming.” In addition to art workshops, there are educational programs, community discussion forums, and, in the alley behind the center, “Pennsylvania’s first Little Free



for anyone in the neighborhood who wants it, and as an urban gardening demonstration to “show how you can grow food even if you don’t have any land.” It includes several raised beds, rain barrels, and examples of how to use permeable paving and vegetated swales to manage stormwater.

Other community education programs include things like the Watershed-Friendly Properties program, a partnership with Penn State Master Watershed Stewards. To be certified, homeowners have to adopt best practices for managing stormwater, reducing pollution, and protecting wildlife on their property.

At the municipal level, the Nurture Nature Center helped the City of Easton develop its climate action plan, and has consulted with city leadership on other occasions, including hosting community meetings to foster better communication between citizens and local government. It has also consulted with Bethlehem on its own climate action plan.

Expansion Plans







Since it first opened in 2007, the Nurture Nature Center has been housed in a historic building on Northampton Street. The structure was built in 1915 by the International Order of Odd Fellows. The building originally had a movie theater called The Strand on the first floor and meeting spaces above. The former theater has been used by NNC for everything from art exhibits to an indoor farmers market, and one of the meeting rooms upstairs, now dubbed The Delaware Room, can hold up to 100 guests for community meeting and private functions.

However, with more groups wanting to visit, the center is starting to look for more space. It has been difficult to host school groups because there is limited room and no place for a school bus to park.

To that end, the center has been looking to expand and has recently been working with the city to possibly take over what was formerly a scrapyards owned by Easton Iron & Metal on Bushkill Drive.

According to Easton Mayor Sal Panto, the city has been hoping to see a science center or similar educational institution move onto that site for years and had for a time tried to work on plans with the Davinci Science Center, which ended up settling in nearby Allentown. The spot would be ideal, as it's adjacent to the popular Karl Stirner Arts Trail



school bus parking.

Panto has been working to get federal funding to help with the project and said that, although it's still only in the idea stage, there has been overwhelming support from the community and from educators around the region. He said a recent breakfast meeting hosted by the center brought out 20 school superintendents from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, who all supported the idea, as well as support from Lafayette College.

Nurture Nature Center “has brought a lot to the city that I don't think people are aware of,” he said. Because the center has been instrumental in creating educational material used across the country, it's “respected nationally, but doesn't have a presence locally,” he said. A bigger facility would help the center serve more visitors, and as Easton's downtown grows, he thinks it would benefit the community to have an educational family attraction to complement the Crayola Experience located in the city's Centre Square.

Hogan Carr said that there is still a good deal of uncertainty to the idea of expanding, and even if it goes forward, it's going to be a long and complicated process. For now, though, the center is still working hard to serve its main roles, “science, art and community dialogue.”

The Nurture Nature Center is located at 518 Northampton St. in Easton. It is currently open to visitors on Wednesdays and Saturdays 12-4 p.m.

The next art installation, a collaborative project titled “All We Can Save” will open in April of 2022.

For more information go to nuturenaturecenter.org or call 610-253-4432

Cover photo: Executive Director of Nurture Nature Center, Rachel Hogan Carr. Photo by Matt DeBlass

