

# Lehigh Gap Nature Center



2022 - 2026  
Strategic Framework

Entering Our Third Decade:  
*A Bold Story of Hope for the Future*

# **Lehigh Gap Nature Center**



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January 2022



*For years, for some a lifetime, many have dreamed of a day when the Kittatinny Ridge opposite Palmerton, degraded by decades of industrial pollution from zinc smelting, would again be covered in lush green vegetation...We envision working with nature, which is already reclaiming the land on its own, to accelerate the return of native, natural vegetation in the Gap.*

Bob Hoopes, "A Dream Come True." *Wildlife Activist*, Fall 2002



## **Acknowledgements:**

The past twenty years of building, growth, and success of Lehigh Gap Nature Center would not have been possible without the vision and hard work of countless individuals and valuable contributions from agencies, foundations, businesses, members, other friends of the Center, and the invaluable volunteers that dedicate their time and ideas to help keep LGNC and its various programs running – even through a global pandemic.

The forward-looking plan in this document is the result of the hard work and ideas of the 2022-26 Strategic Planning Task Force members, LGNC Board members current and past, LGNC staff, the wisdom and advice of LGNC Advisory Board members, and LGNC members and others who participated in surveys and focus groups over the past 17 months.



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# LGNC Strategic Planning Task Force

## **Board members:**

Diane White Husic, President

Anita Collins, Immediate-past Board President, Vice President

Dan Kunkle, Treasurer and LGNC Director Emeritus

Jennifer Lansing, Secretary

## **Staff members:**

Chad Schwartz, Director of Science and Education

Brian Birchak, Director of Communications

Lauren Foltz, Office Administrator

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## Current Board members

Diane White Husic, President

Anita Collins, Immediate-past Board President, Vice President

Dan Kunkle, Treasurer and LGNC Director Emeritus

Jennifer Lansing, Secretary

George Beam

Terry Master

Alec Bodzin

Janet Maurer

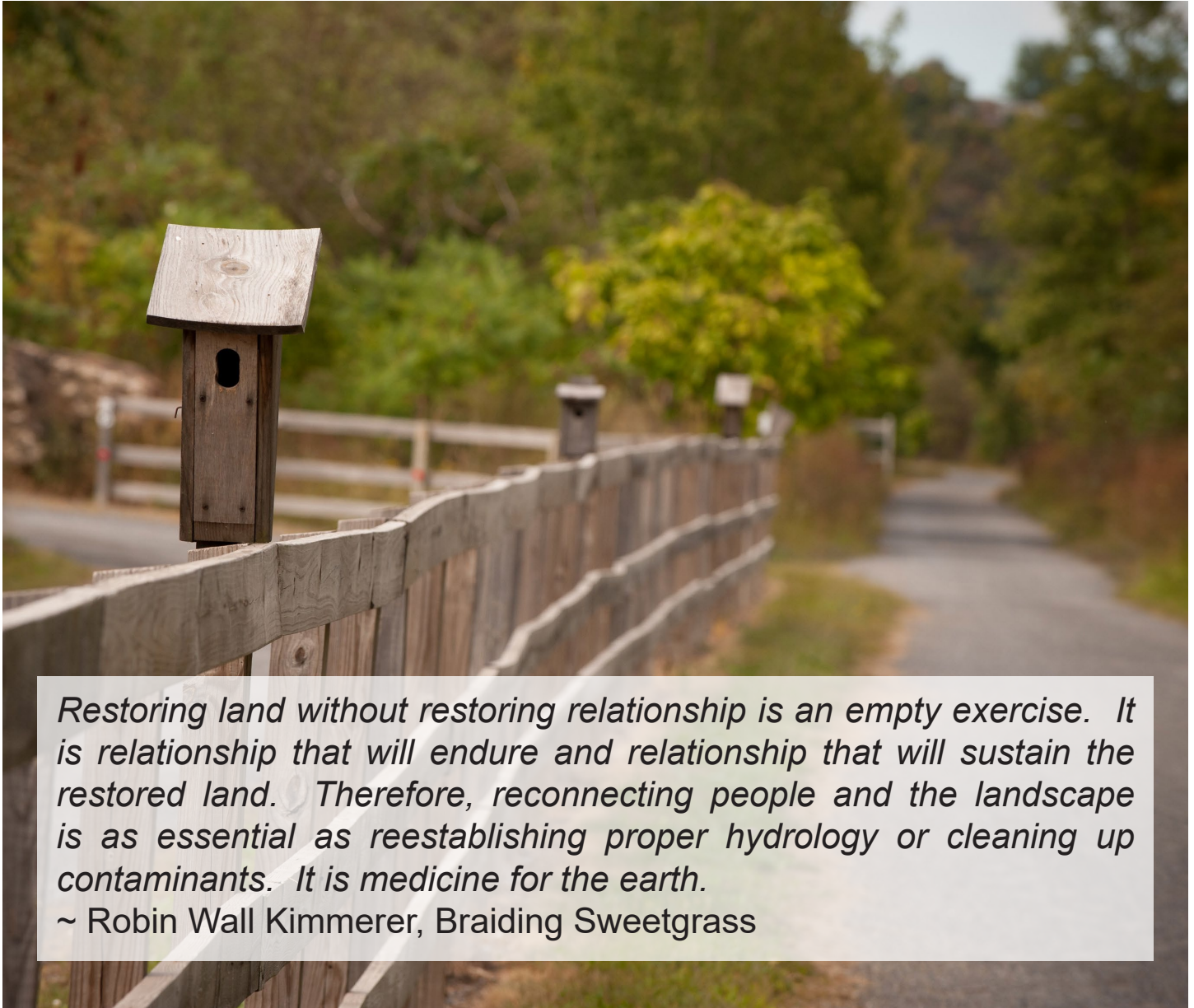
Barb Egerton

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Brandon Everett

Melissa Starkey

Marilyn Jordan



*Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as reestablishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants. It is medicine for the earth.*

~ Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

## Introduction to the LGNC 2022-2026 Strategic Framework

In the book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, author Richard Louv provides a strong argument for the importance of time in nature for children as they develop both physically and neurologically.<sup>1</sup> His subsequent book, *The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder*, provides an equally compelling argument that time in nature is also critical for adults. Strong evidence indicates that time in nature leads to improved physical and mental well-being, reduction of stress, and increased creativity and productivity. In other words, there is a restorative power in the natural world.<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about the rise in mental health concerns and potential causes, a situation that has grown more serious since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.<sup>3</sup> There is a growing body of scientific research linking human wellbeing with nature and biodiversity that corroborates some ancient philosophies and practices such as Shinrin-Yoku or forest bathing.<sup>4</sup> In fact, “nature experience” is now recognized as a determinant of mental health, and this association is sometimes described in terms of an ecosystem service.<sup>5</sup>



Ironically, this growing acceptance of the importance of nature and human well-being comes at a time of rapid loss of natural areas and biodiversity, polluted oceans, and an altered atmosphere, as well as increasing impacts of a changing climate. In 2017, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) described eco-anxiety as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.” Although eco-anxiety is not (yet) listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, and thus, doctors do not officially consider it a diagnosable condition, mental health professionals do use the term within the field of ecopsychology, a “branch that deals with people’s psychological relationships with the rest of nature and how this impacts their identity, well-being, and health.”<sup>6</sup> Books and scientific articles are being written about climate grief – the growing emotional toll of climate change.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that it is critical to engage more people in nature in meaningful ways for at least three main reasons: 1) for personal wellbeing; 2) for the public to better understand the value of nature and the services it provides; and 3) to expand the cadre of environmental stewards and protectors so desperately needed in this world. We also need stories of hope, optimism, and recovery – not just of people, but of landscapes and ecosystems. These are essential to counter the growing eco-anxiety or sense of hopelessness that afflicts too many individuals. Those of us associated with Lehigh Gap Nature Center (LGNC) believe the astonishing story of restoration at the Lehigh Gap provides one such story of hope. Furthermore, the educational, research, volunteer, and recreational activities offered through LGNC provide opportunities for people and, indeed, entire communities, with the “therapy” needed to help rejuvenate the human spirit.

A new strategic planning process for LGNC launched in August 2020. The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration – aimed at preventing, halting, and reversing the degradation of ecosystems worldwide – kicked off in 2021 and provides a new opportunity to tell our story of restoration.<sup>8</sup> Given that we live in times characterized by a global pandemic, economic and political uncertainty, and social upheaval, we recognized the need to have a flexible planning framework and a modest number of strategic pillars or areas of focus, rather than a detailed plan with a long list of action items. A task force that included LGNC board members and staff guided the process. This process included monthly meetings via Zoom or in person, a detailed survey broadly distributed to LGNC members and non-members, focus groups, discussions with advisory board members, Board of Directors meetings, and a summer retreat dedicated to strategic planning. Our strong belief in the resilience of nature and in the underlying good in humans – based on what we have witnessed first-hand since the opening of our wildlife refuge and education center almost 20 years ago – were constant sources of inspiration for us during this process.

Early on, several themes emerged that were largely inspired by the revegetation of the mountain and past work of LGNC:

- Growing from Our Roots
- Cultivating Inspiration in Conservation
- Propagating Stewardship
- Sustaining Our Mission

These themes are deeply rooted in the story of recovery and hope – like the deep roots of the warm season grasses used to first revegetate the barren landscape. We recognized the need to both inspire current and future generations of conservationists and stewards and to care for our important resources, including people, the Osprey House, the refuge property, the Kittatinny Ridge, and the Lehigh River Watershed. Such inspiration must be cultivated from an early age and continually nurtured through programming and experiences for all ages of visitors and members. We must provide support and professional development for our staff and a strong sense of appreciation for the volunteers that



LGNC relies upon. Sustaining what we have grown will require adept leadership now and long into the future – something we need to actively plan for. Importantly, in the process, we recommitted ourselves to the organization’s mission and vision.

Our past strategic plans were mission-focused, all-inclusive, and were packed with many detailed and specific goals for seven different topic areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we can be served better with broader “pillars” and fewer, more comprehensive goals with built-in flexibility. That past work has served us well and kept us focused on key mission-centered work. To remain viable and relevant, we need not only this continued focus on our mission, but also some strategic changes. New board members, a bold telling of our story to new audiences, and experimentation with technological advances for education, outreach and research will all be critical to continued success.

With this context and background, we present the Lehigh Gap Nature Center 2022-2026 Strategic Framework with four main strategic pillars or areas of focus:

1) Conservation/Stewardship; 2) Education; 3) Sustainability; and 4) Leadership.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup>Louv, Richard. 2005. Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

<sup>2</sup>Louv, Richard. 2011. The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

<sup>3</sup>Mental Health Association of America. 2022. The State of Mental Health in America. <<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>> Accessed 1 January 2022.

<sup>4</sup>Hansen, Margaret M., Jones, Reo, and Tocchini, Kirsten. 2017. Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy: A State-of-the-Art Review. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 14(8): 851doi: 10.3390/ijerph14080851 < <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5580555/> > Accessed 1 January 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Sandifer, Paul A., Sutton-Grier, Ariana E. and Ward, Bethney P. 2015. Exploring connections among nature, biodiversity, ecosystem services, and human health and well-being: Opportunities to enhance health and biodiversity conservation. Ecosystem Services 12: 1 – 15. Clark, Natalie E. et al. 2014. Biodiversity, cultural pathways, and human health: a framework. Trends in Ecology & Evolution, 29 (4): 196 – 204. Bratman, Gregory N. et al. 2019. Nature and Mental Health: An Ecosystem Service Perspective. Sci. Adv. 5: eaax0903 24 July 2019 < <https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/sciadv.aax0903> > Accessed 1 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup>Huizen, Jennifer. What to know about eco-anxiety. Medical News Today, December 19, 2019 < <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/327354>> Accessed 1 January 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Scher, Avichai. ‘Climate grief’: The growing emotional toll of climate change. NBC News. Dec. 24, 2018 <<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/mental-health/climate-grief-growing-emotional-toll-climate-change-n946751>> Accessed 1 January 2022.

<sup>8</sup>See <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>



## **Mission Statement:**

The mission of Lehigh Gap Nature Center is to improve the quality of life of present and future generations by protecting the wildlife and enhancing the habitats of our Refuge, the neighboring Kittatinny Ridge, and the Lehigh River Watershed through conservation, education, research, and outdoor recreation.

## **Vision Statement:**

We envision a future in which communities and individuals achieve, sustain, and support healthy and connected ecosystems at Lehigh Gap, on the Kittatinny Ridge, and throughout the Lehigh River Watershed. This vision remains one of hope: we inspire action by restoring ecological function and beauty where it has been damaged and protecting those places that remain healthy. We envision a growing, inclusive community which is deeply connected to nature and supports conservation in succeeding generations.

## **Statement of Inclusion:**

We believe that diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are critical to sustaining the conservation movement. We recognize that, in order to be equitable and sustainable, conservation must represent all people – especially those who, due to deeply rooted systemic barriers, have been excluded from the conservation conversation and disproportionately subjected to environmental injustice. We therefore commit to fostering inclusion by listening to the needs of our constituents to best understand community priorities, diversifying conservation leadership, and connecting people of all backgrounds with nature and the outdoors to broaden support for conservation.

## **Native Land Acknowledgement:**

We acknowledge with humility and respect that Lehigh Gap Nature Center is situated in Lenapehoking — the traditional homeland of the Lenape People. For thousands of years prior to European contact, the Lenape People and their ancestors hunted, gathered, farmed, and travelled on the area of the Kittatinny that today encompasses the Lehigh Gap Wildlife Refuge. The Lenape People remain the ongoing keepers of their ancestral lands.

## **Core Values:**

At Lehigh Gap Nature Center, we have built an empowered community of volunteers, members, and others who are intertwined with our identity and our work. As much as the land and facilities we operate, this community is the organization we call Lehigh Gap Nature Center.

## ***Conservation, Stewardship, and Research:***

- We believe that protecting the ecological integrity of the Lehigh Gap Wildlife Refuge, the Kittatinny Ridge, and the Lehigh River Watershed is important not only to supporting biodiversity, climate resilience, and ecosystem services, but also to maintaining quality of life for people within and beyond our region.



- We believe in the validity and importance of “community science” in monitoring the vital signs of nature and carrying out ecological research.
- We believe in utilizing science to inform all habitat management and natural resource issues on the Refuge, and we value our partners who help us collect and analyze that information.
- We believe it is possible to resolve difficult environmental challenges through observation of natural processes, scientific research collaboration, and adaptive management.
- We believe that our rehabilitation, reuse, and adaptive management of an ecologically devastated site are models for 21st century conservation.

### ***Education:***

- We believe in the power of environmental education to instill an appreciation for nature, inspire environmental stewardship, and build conservation leadership.
- We believe that the arts can convey knowledge and elicit emotions in ways science cannot and hold the potential to help us tell our story and reach new audiences to promote a conservation ethic.

### ***Philosophy:***

- We believe in the power of nature to inspire, nourish, educate, and heal, and that the health of the planet and the physical and spiritual health of humans are inextricably linked.
- We believe in inclusion; that every individual voice and connection with nature and the outdoors is critical for cultivating and sustaining conservation support and nurturing future conservation leaders.
- We believe it is imperative that all LGNC initiatives are planned and developed with – not simply for – the communities we are serving in order to account for community needs and priorities.
- We believe in the power of volunteers and communities to accomplish conservation goals, and that individual actions and local efforts for conservation truly matter.
- We believe in the value of collective impact; that collaborative partnerships with K-12 schools, colleges and universities, businesses, government agencies, other nonprofits, and communities are key to accomplishing our objectives.
- We believe in the importance of quality over quantity; that we better serve our constituents by providing the best experiences possible, not through a model of continual growth.
- We believe that it is our responsibility to provide an excellent return on the time and money invested in LGNC by individuals and organizations.
- We believe it is critical to share our conservation story – a story of renewal and collaboration – so that it may inspire others to take on similar challenges.



# Strategic Framework



## Pillar I: Conservation/Stewardship

Conservation and stewardship are the bedrock principles, the foundation that underpins all we do at Lehigh Gap Nature Center. This conservation ethic comes from the hearts of those who founded, led and supported LGNC in the past and that ethic continues in the new leadership of the organization. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of reciprocity with the earth and its non-human people – of love and respect for all creatures and the environment, of gratitude for the gifts given to us by nature, and in the teachings of plants and other non-human species or kin from which we can learn so much. At LGNC, we never previously articulated it the way Kimmerer has, but we carried our work in our hearts in the same spirit that she describes, and we have learned so much from our teachers, especially the warm season grasses that rehabilitated a barren mountainside. Our conservation and stewardship work at our refuge and beyond are forms of reciprocity and gratitude to the earth for all it does for us.

### Goals:

1. *Advocate for the protection of the Refuge, the Kittatinny Ridge, and the Lehigh River Watershed.*
2. *Using lessons learned from restoration and about native plant-based habitats, develop demonstration sites at LGNC that can be used to engage the public in projects and show what could be done in their own communities.*
3. *Develop a proactive research agenda to continue essential research on site, to provide data to inform our conservation management; engage students and volunteers in this research, and continuously display and publish our research findings.*
4. *Through our educational programming, research initiatives, and story of hope, encourage people to spend more time interacting with nature and inspire others in conservation/stewardship.*



## Pillar II: Education

If conservation and stewardship are the foundational principles of our work, then education is the primary means for inspiring others to adopt conservation values. While we have made some remarkable progress in conservation, we recognize that we cannot succeed in conservation of the planet in the long term if these values are not adopted by many. Education is the key to spreading those values far and wide.

While most think immediately of our K-12 education programs, especially our field trips, school programs, clubs and camps, the programs are much more expansive. Our programs begin with pre-school and go all the way through serving graduate school classes. There are also formal and informal programs for life-long learners of all ages, and we continue to help train scientists for the future. We intentionally seek diversity in all its forms among the participants in our programs. The pandemic also forced us to consider virtual programming which expands our reach and opportunities.

### Goals:

1. *Evaluate educational offerings and consider new opportunities to innovate.*
2. *Continually educate staff, board members, and volunteers through professional development opportunities.*
3. *Better utilize existing resources and link science/research to educational programming.*
4. *Educate legislators and other key stakeholders and influencers.*



## Pillar III: Sustainability

Unless the organization is fundamentally sound in terms of staff, the Boards of Directors and Advisors, membership, and finances, we cannot guarantee that our work will carry on into the future. Since our first strategic planning more than two decades ago, we have been seeking a sustainable future for LGNC. We have made great progress in those 20 years in terms of increased membership and staff, procedures and policies that ensure strong accountability, good governance, and a growing endowment fund. While the organization is on excellent footing to continue as we are, there is always room for improvement. If we are to continue to be an effective and respected voice for conservation and environmental education, we must continue the progress we have made regarding organizational stability and conservation leadership in the region.

### Goals:

1. *Build capacity by hiring and training staff and further developing the Board capacity and expertise.*
2. *Develop our volunteer base; organize, train, and celebrate volunteers.*
3. *Grow our membership and consider enhancing membership benefits.*
4. *Continue to grow our endowment fund and expand sources of financial support.*



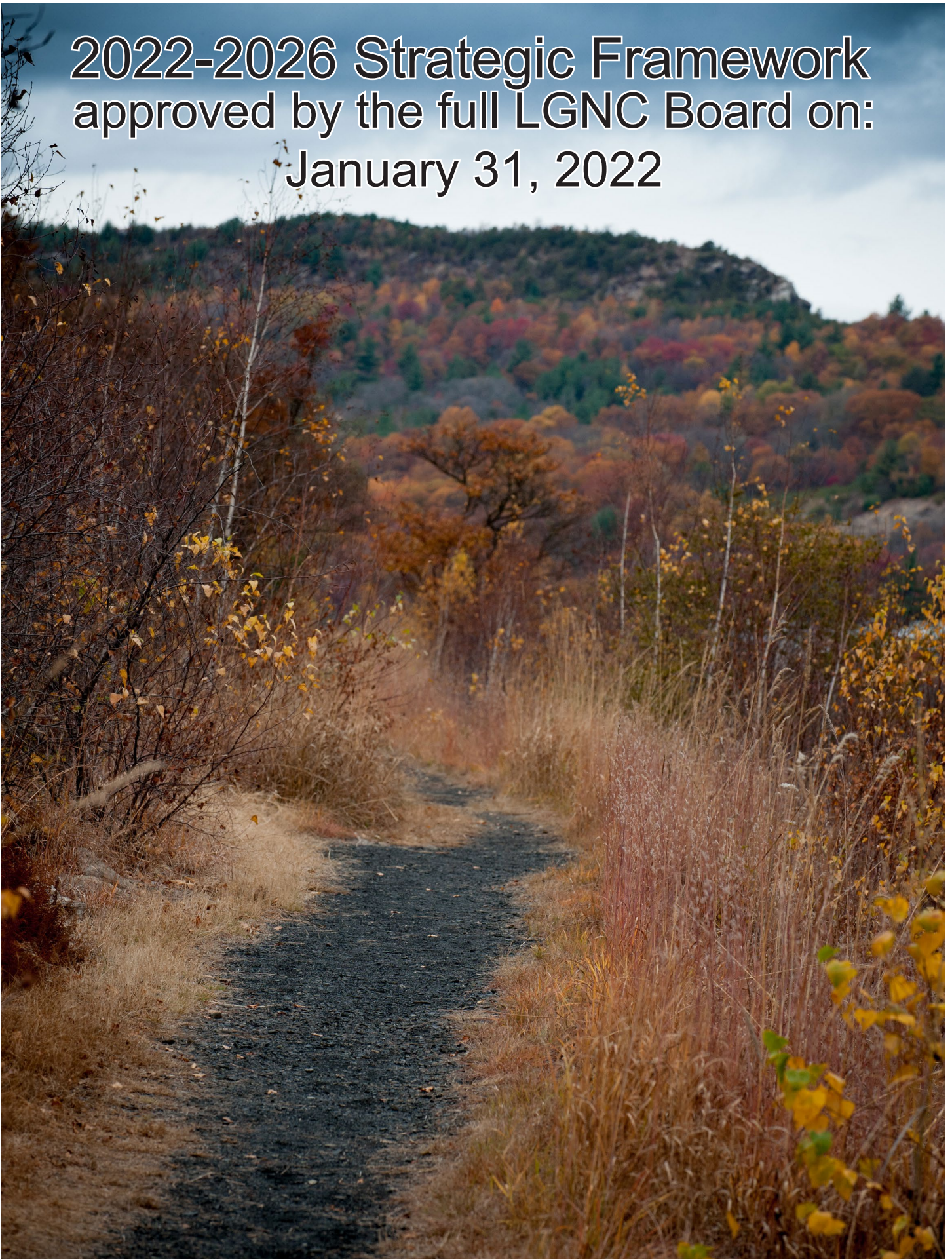
## Pillar IV: Leadership

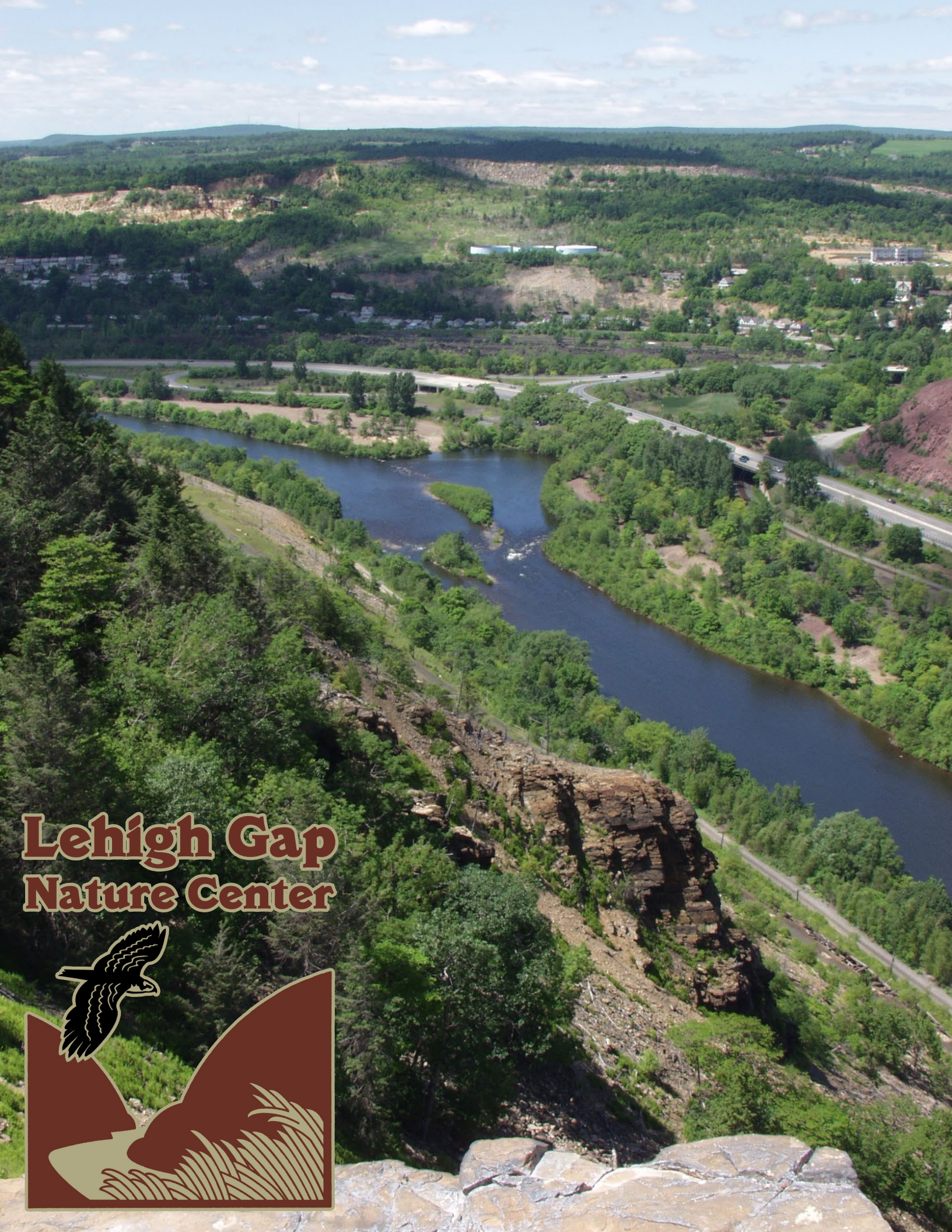
Lehigh Gap Nature Center has led by example for many years. We have always been modest and have not sought out the mantle of leadership among our peers and colleagues in conservation. However, in recent years, others have sought us out as leaders, such as the Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River, Lehigh Valley Greenways Conservation Landscape, and previously, the Kittatinny Coalition. With regards to restoration, ours is the first and only Superfund site in the nation that was transformed into an environmental education and community nature center and recognized by the U.S. EPA's first-ever Excellence in Site Reuse award in 2014. We have also demonstrated leadership in diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in the conservation community with our Color of Nature program and Conservation Leadership Academy (the latter in conjunction with Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center). We believe it is time to realize the importance of our conservation leadership role and the concept of training conservation leaders among our volunteers, program participants and associates. It is also critical to continue setting positive examples for others with sustainable practices at our own visitor and education center and in our programming.

### Goals:

1. *Take leadership roles where appropriate in conservation coalitions and among our colleagues.*
2. *Proudly share our leadership stories.*
3. *Foster conservation leadership among individuals of all ages and backgrounds.*
4. *Celebrate our members, accomplishments, and milestones.*

# 2022-2026 Strategic Framework approved by the full LGNC Board on: January 31, 2022





# Lehigh Gap Nature Center

