

# Rocky Mountain Conservancy Education Plan

## Summary of Rocky Mountain Conservancy

Founded in 1931, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy (RMC) is a nonprofit organization supporting Rocky Mountain National Park. The conservancy was established and works to promote stewardship of Rocky Mountain National Park and similar lands through education and philanthropy. With support from a robust membership, the Conservancy runs the Conservation Corps, offering over 50 youth a chance to explore conservation careers; it develops interpretive publications that offer natural and cultural history, and operates interpretive retail sales.

Rocky Mountain Conservancy works in tandem with Rocky Mountain National Park to serve the millions of people who visit the park each year. Rocky Mountain National Park is the 4th most visited National Park in the country, with the number of visitors reaching 4,434,848 in the year 2021, 3,305,199 in 2020, and 4,670,053 in 2019. Most visitors arrive through the eastern entrances to the park through the Beaver Meadows and Fall River entrances, with others entering Lumpy Ridge, Longs Peak, and Wild Basin areas. The remaining visitors enter through the western side near Grand Lake and Kawuneeche Visitor Center. Given the long-range trends in visitation, we expect continued increases in the number of visitors to RMNP each year. The timed-entry permit system, which has been implemented during peak visitation from May to October for the past few years, has spread visitation across more of the calendar year, bringing guests earlier each spring and especially later each fall. This is seen significantly on the east side of the park in the Estes Park community, given the easy access from the Front Range and greater Denver metro region. Many of these visitors are day trippers.

Rocky Mountain Conservancy is headquartered in Estes Park, on the east side of the Continental Divide, and enjoys a close working relationship with the National Park staff. RMC's main office is located at the RMNP headquarters and currently provides space for the Education team offices.

RMC provides hands-on learning experiences for individuals and groups eager to access public lands. Many programs are offered through the education department and funded by the Next Generation Fund. Many programs funded by the Next Generation Fund are created to intentionally increase access to public lands and Rocky Mountain National Park for youth, focusing on diverse and underrepresented populations. The Field Institute is run as a segment of our educational offerings and includes half day to multiday high level learning experiences led by experts in their field. These seminar courses are organized and currently overseen by the Field Institute Coordinator. The Field Institute began in 1962 offering seminar courses. These seminar courses were originally organized by Beatrice "Bettie" Willard. Beginning in 2001, many programs were offered through the Field Institute building located on Fall River Road. This building was closed in March 2020 because of COVID-19 and the Field Institute has not been relocated. The years prior to the closing of the building and programming hiatus, the Field Institute offered over 200 programs throughout each year.

The last Business Plan created for the Field Institute was written for 2007-2010 and is referred to in the Education Committee Report 2021, for which the mission of the Field Institute was *to support the mission of RMC (formerly Rocky Mountain Nature Association) by providing educational opportunities for people to increase their understanding of the environment, develop an appreciation of RMC, and acquire an awareness of the stewardship of natural and cultural resources.*

## Introduction to Education Committee and the Education Plan

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As noted by the Education Committee of the Rocky Mountain Conservancy's Board of Directors, "the delivery of relevant, high-quality education and interpretive programs and activities is central to the mission of the Rocky Mountain Conservancy." The Conservancy, and the Rocky Mountain Nature Association before it, have been providing educational experiences in various forms since 1962, and the Education Department spent the fall of 2022 evaluating and updating educational programming to better meet Rocky Mountain Conservancy's Outreach and Education Goals, as outlined in RMC's Strategic Plan (2018).

Along with the Strategic Plan, the Report from the Ad hoc Education Committee to the Board of Directors provides a range of initiatives for the Education Department and Field Institute that supports larger organization goals. The Education Committee Report was created in 2021 and was written during an extended closure of educational programming due to COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, the Field Institute building located on Fall River Road, near the RMNP Fall River entrance was closed and sold. This extended hiatus, which continued until May 2022, allowed the Board and the Committee to look critically at past educational programming and begin to develop goals and objectives for the future. The focus of the Education Committee Report was to make recommendations and highlight opportunities for growth and expansion of educational programming.

The findings and recommendations from the Committee's 2021 report are briefly summarized below:

1. Target audiences for RMC's educational programming should be expanded to include children, families, and traditionally underrepresented groups. A tandem effort to design and implement educational experiences that generate income is also recommended.
2. Future RMC educational offerings should be:
  - a. World-class subject matter courses led by recognized experts,
  - b. Unique to RMC,
  - c. And offered to specific, diverse stakeholder groups and organizations.
3. The number and variety of program and course offerings should be tailored to meet the characteristics outlined above, with a focus on quality over quantity.
4. Educational programming for K-12 students is largely provided by staff of Rocky Mountain National Park, who are doing an excellent job. RMC is committed to continuing to support and expand this work, and to doing a better job of informing members and supporters of this programming.
5. As a nonprofit organization, the Committee believes that RMC's educational programming should avoid direct competition and duplication with other local concessioners working in RMNP.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us all the value and potential in distance-learning opportunities. Working in tandem with RMNP's existing distance learning initiatives, the Committee would like to explore and pilot a proprietary distance learning catalog.
7. The Committee recommends a new title for educational programming and suggests "RMC Field Institute and Learning Center."
8. The Committee recognizes the need for dedicated and accessible educational facilities, particularly if educational programs are to be offered year-round and are to include current technologies. The specifics of a future space will be determined after the size and scope of future offerings are determined by the incoming educational leadership team.

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9. The Committee believes that attention to marketing educational programming, including more effective use of the RMC website, should be a priority going forward. Competitive and successful programming depends on increasing RMC brand recognition in the Estes Park and Front Range markets.
10. The Board of Directors should establish financial ground-rules for the operation of RMC's educational programming, recognizing that a financial loss is seen as a necessary and normal part of operations for similar cooperating associations.
11. Development and implementation of a meaningful and usable system of course and instructor evaluation is a priority for future educational programming, along with the establishment of defined metrics of success and ongoing reporting to the Executive Director.
12. The Committee recommends fostering a synergistic relationship between the Education Team and the retail, philanthropy, and other RMC staff moving forward.
13. The Committee recommends recruiting and hiring a new Education Director to be an active participant in planning future educational programming.
14. The Committee recommends a review of RMC's educational publications, their role, and their cost-effectiveness in future educational outreach.
15. Finally, the Committee recommends a consistent and regular review of educational programming given its centrality and importance in fulfilling the central mission of Rocky Mountain Conservancy.

Many of these points have evolved into our ongoing objectives that will be outlined later in the plan.

Along with the Education Committee Report, the RMC Strategic Plan (2018) and discussions with the Education Committee provides a range of initiatives for the Education Department and Field Institute that supports larger organization goals. Future RMC education programs and courses should be designed to achieve the following:

- a. Encourage and foster an appreciation and understanding of Rocky Mountain National Park and other public lands in ways that make us better public stewards
- b. Increase subject matter knowledge in those areas and subjects that promote such appreciation and understanding
- c. Develop the requisite skills necessary to achieve both of the above
- d. Through educational engagement, increase public understanding of the mission of Rocky Mountain Conservancy, attract new members, and strengthen philanthropic outreach.

This Education Plan was created by the Education Director, the Field Institute Coordinator, and Executive Director with support from the Education Committee over a series of meetings in a 3-month period in early 2023. This document offers a plan that encompasses this vision and creates a concrete reality. It draws on ideas collected from the Education Committee Report of 2021, the RMC Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (2018), and the organization's mission to *promote stewardship of Rocky Mountain National Park and similar lands through education and philanthropy.*

### Challenges and Opportunities of the Education Department

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Millions of people visit Rocky Mountain National Park and the surrounding areas each year, and those visitors arrive with a wide range of interests and desires for educational programming. Visitors range from the very young to senior citizens, and while some prefer to discover the park on their own, others are looking for in-depth educational experiences, and of course everything in between. Rocky Mountain Conservancy (and the Rocky Mountain Nature Association) have offered a range of educational programming over the past several decades, ranging from support of brief “pop-up” ranger programs and guided ecological bus tours to multi-day Field Institute Courses for adults and week-long “Kids’ Camps” for elementary school students. In addition, RMC has supported RMNP’s work to provide school groups along the Front Range and beyond with high quality field trips and distance learning experiences.

Because of the diverse nature of the people visiting and wanting to learn more about Rocky Mountain National Park, RMC’s educational audiences and target demographics have been similarly varied. Traditional Field Institute Courses attracted primarily older adults with a specific interest in the ecology, natural history, or cultural history of RMNP. These individuals often reside within a couple hours’ drive of RMNP, and often attended multiple courses in a single year or over several years. Educational bus tours and ranger programs target visitors to RMNP who are looking for a general education experience. These are typically older children/teens and adults. Programming specifically for elementary school age children has been offered as single or half-day courses during the summer and at times as week-long camps during other school breaks.

To carry out this work, the RMC Education Department and Field Institute will function through their annual budget and utilize funding from the Next Generation Fund, a “working” fund that provides more than \$500,000 annually for programming support. This fund supports programming series such as: Families on the Trail, Outdoor Exploration Club, and Kids’ Courses.

Because of its value to members and donors, the traditional Field Institute Courses will remain a part of RMC’s educational programming in the coming years. We recognize that the length, cost, and nature of many Seminar courses puts them out of reach of many of those who want to learn more about RMNP. Consequently, the RMC Education Team is working on developing a broader range of programs, targeted at a more diverse group of individuals. In the fall of 2022, the team piloted several of these initiatives in addition to reviving Field Institute Courses and scenic ecology bus tours. Based on what we saw in the fall and the information we received from the Education Committee Report, we found that we have an audience we’d like to reach with our higher costing seminar courses and desire to expand our audience by providing additional programs and courses at a more affordable price point.

### Fall Take-Aways

Throughout the Fall of 2022, as educational programming and Field Institute courses were reignited, the RMC education department staff and Education Committee identified many challenges and opportunities for the future of education and the Field Institute.

- Cultural relevancy
- Technology and virtual education
- Diversify our audience
- Marketing and Communication strategies
- Financial

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- Competition
- Facility/Building space

Collaboration throughout local towns and communities has been identified to build programs. Current relationships exist on the eastern side of RMNP, but not as many have been identified on the western side. These collaborative organizational relationships that exist today are:

- Town of Estes Park
- Town of Grand Lake
- Town of Winter Park
- YMCA of the Rockies
- Estes Park School District
- Estes Valley Library
- KMAC
- Headwaters Center (West Side)
- Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (statewide)

An identified challenge to overcome is expanding our programming and outreach to the western slope. There's an entire audience that exists and includes donors, members, and advocates in Grand County. Community outreach could be expanded by building relationships with organizations in Grand County by utilizing existing relationships through RMC board members, RMNP staff, RMC staff, and existing relationships. We have isolated ourselves and our programming to the eastern slope.

From the findings of our experimental fall 2022, we look at 2023 with a desire to offer the highest caliber of Field Institute courses available. We are prioritizing the reputation our Field Institute seminar courses hold and going above and beyond in high level of customer service, exceptional experience to build upon a strong foundation. By minimizing our course offerings, increasing participant fees, and increasing instructor pay, we are acting out quality over quantity. The years after our first 2023 season will demonstrate our desire to grow our audience and expand our seminar course offerings. A more detailed outline of our plans for the next three years is illustrated in the "Objectives" part of this plan.

### **2023 Vision & Future**

As we evolve and grow into the future, we will offer a catalog of unique and relevant educational classes to youth, long-standing friends of Rocky Mountain National Park, and the widest audiences possible. We will build an enduring, broad based network of advocates which will be inspired to actively protect, defend, and restore Rocky Mountain National Park, its surrounding environments, and similar ecosystems well into the next century. We will dedicate ourselves to building a diverse educational program that is nationally recognized for its excellence, effectiveness, reach, and impact.

We recognize and intend that this evolution will be a marathon, not a sprint. In 2023, the RMC Education Team will continue to refine traditional programming while continuing to develop newer unique offerings. In each of our seminar courses offered through our Field Institute, there will be a strong focus on stewardship, the impacts of climate change, and actions individuals can take to support wild and public places that will be included in their course syllabus and the evaluation. We will also have a more robust system of evaluation for courses, instructors, and all programs. Course evaluation and rubric can be found in the appendix. All educational programs will utilize a more user-friendly online

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reservation system, which will allow us to streamline the registration and record-keeping processes and to reach new audiences using integrated marketing tools.

The participant experience is our number one priority for 2023. The following objectives will support our vision.

## Objectives

### **Objective 1 (Education Committee Recommendation 1)**

*To diversify and expand our audience and program participants to include children, families, and underrepresented populations in the outdoor community by creating courses specific to those who may not have access to public lands, and individuals who find there are barriers between themselves and educational experiences in the outdoors.*

This objective will be accomplished by:

- 1) Building on RMC current relationships with organizations like EVICS Mujeres, Nature Kids' Promotores, Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK), Volunteers of Colorado, and more to bring youth from urban areas and diverse backgrounds to connect with RMNP. RMC Field Institute collaborates in a number of ways with RNMP throughout the year to welcome different student groups by providing transportation, guiding, and educational services.
- 2) Creating specific programming for local communities, students and families from a lower economic status, and women.
  - **Women Bettie Courses:** Bettie Courses are courses created to invite women, and individuals who identify as women, to the outdoors. These experiences are fully immersive and include educational curriculum as well as a recreational component that increases confidence in the outdoors. Bettie Courses are funded by the Next Generation Fund. These courses are substantially more affordable than average courses in the area and scholarships are available to all participants based on need. Scholarships are funded by the Majestic Mountain Women Scholarship Fund. Courses are led by RMC Education staff and in partnership with local guiding companies as needed. In 2023, eight courses will be offered to reach at least 80 women with the intent to expand the audience year after year by 20%.
  - **Children and Students:** Build relationships with the Estes Park School District to establish trust and increase RMC's exposure to local families and children. The Estes Park Elementary School has a student population that is 30% Hispanic ethnicity and 40% are eligible free or reduced meals. Many of these children access RMNP through their multiple field trips funded by RMC, rather than with their families or friends recreationally.

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By continuing to build our relationship with students in our k-5 afterschool excursions, called Outdoor Explorers Club, students act as a bridge between families and our programs. These programs are free to children and are offered at Estes Park Elementary School.

- a. Outdoor Explorers Club is funded by the Next Generation Fund.
  - b. NOCO Community Grant was received for 2023 to support this program (\$5,000)
  - c. Courses are organized and implemented by Education Fellows.
  - d. In 2023, there will be one session per semester offered at the Elementary School to reach at least 50 youth. We will work in tandem with Estes Park Elementary School and RMNP to promote place-based learning initiatives.
  - e. In 2024, continue to formalize our relationship with Estes Park Elementary School to increase our presence in the schools. We will accomplish this by offering a shared AmeriCorps position in partnership with CAEE that offers in-classroom learning that expands on RMNP field trips and RMC after school programming.
- **Families:** Family programs were created to expand the Outdoor Explorers Club to reach the families of the children in club. Many participants are also families and youth across the Front Range. Family programs include Families on the Trail (hiking and snowshoeing), Families on the Crag (climbing), Families on the Water (fishing), and will be expanded to include other recreational opportunities. These programs are free for families.
    - a. Outdoor Explorers Club is funded by the Next Generation Fund.
    - b. NOCO Community Grant was received for 2023 to support this program (\$5,000)
    - c. Courses are organized and implemented by the Field Institute Coordinator and Education Fellows.
    - d. In 2023, we will offer at least 12 Family programs throughout the year, two of these programs will be specifically for Elementary School students and led by a bilingual instructor.
    - e. In 2024, family programs will expand to include at least one overnight camping trip. There's a strong desire to increase our presence in the high school by collaborating on Environmental Education initiatives, such as existing after school clubs, science and history teachers, Metre internships, and the CareerWise program. These collaborations are in sync with initiatives within the Conservation Corps and High School Leadership Corps.

\*RMC Education has also identified an opportunity to expand our community involvement to include the western slope communities including Grand Lake and Granby.

- 3) Formal evaluation of all programs will include questions that inquire about our curriculum to ensure that content is relevant to the individual. We will also foster relationships with group leaders that allow for critical feedback to better our programs and collaborative opportunities each year.

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### **Objective 2 (Education Committee Recommendations 2, 3 and 11)**

*RMC will provide high caliber educational offerings that are world-class subject matter courses led by experts, unique to RMC, relevant to today's times, and support and expand the work of RMC and RMNP.*

This objective will be accomplished by:

- 1) Field Institute Instructors will have a deep knowledge of their field and a commitment to utilizing high quality instructional practices and must meet at least one criterion in each of the following areas.
  - Demonstrated educational experience:
    - Professional experience, such as outdoor education/guiding, classroom instruction, leading private workshops, etc.
    - Success in past Field Institute courses
    - Other demonstrated educational skills, such as public talks or presentations
  - Relevant credentials, work experience, or training:
    - Demonstrated skill or knowledge, through a portfolio, performance, published written work, or another catalog of work (particularly for artists, performers, or similar skilled individuals)
    - Professional training, certification, or work experience
    - College, graduate, or professional degree
- 2) Implement higher level of onboarding of FI Seminar course instructors. Beginning in 2023, all FI seminar course instructors must:
  - submit a course application,
  - develop a detailed syllabus,
  - meet with the Field Institute Coordinator,
  - be interviewed,
  - receive training that is comprised of virtual learning opportunities, and
  - have an in-person check-in prior to their course.

To fulfill our promise of providing the best educational experiences for RMNP visitors, we will increase the course pay to our instructors, as well as increase course fees for participants.

- 3) Conduct in-depth evaluations of instructors, beginning in the summer of 2023. Evaluation of instructors will occur in two ways: 1) through formal evaluation of each course- feedback will be provided directly from participants to instructors through an evaluation survey and, 2) all instructors will be shadowed for a duration of time by either the Field Institute Coordinator or Education Director- evaluation will be by a rubric that's shared with each instructor and provided after their course.

Online participant course survey evaluations will gather information regarding the following outcomes: Did participants increase their –

- awareness or understanding of the course topic
- connection to nature
- comfort in the outdoors



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- desire to participate in positive environmental actions
  - desire to access Rocky Mountain National Park in the future, and are
  - participants already a RMC member or donor or did participants become a RMC member or donor as a result of the course?
- 4) Provide incentives for course participants to become RMC members and future donors as well as reoccurring participants.
- Our courses all contribute to funneling participants to becoming members and future donors.
  - With the membership discount included for select FI courses, there is an incentive to become a member.
  - There will be more intention to follow donations from participants to quantify their history of giving to RMC.
  - We will foster relationships with organizations and groups to become reoccurring participants. On the western slope, corporate groups have been identified as an opportunity to expand programming.
- 5) Offer the highest-level experiences for all our courses through upgraded transportation, equipment, increased staff, a high-quality education facility, and increased accessibility.
- In 2023, our focus is to offer the highest-level experience for all our courses.
    - Upgrade transportation with a new van
    - Upgrade equipment
    - Offer amenities and SWAG throughout courses to increase brand awareness
    - Begin a campaign for an accessible vehicle
  - In 2024, we will continue to upgrade the experiences for all courses
    - Increase staff with the focus on the customer experience
      - Staff needs will be dependent upon facility, and needs based on what we learn after 2023 summer
    - Begin curating program materials for virtual learning
  - In 2025, we will hope to have a facility that will help direct our future growth abilities
    - Virtual Classroom is created
    - Program expansion with more accessible courses ( focus on physical ability, hearing impaired, sensory experiences, etc)

\*\*We will provide exceptional service and participant experience from the start to finish of each program, from the online sign up and registration, to how participants are greeted at the Visitor Center, to transportation, and snacks while on their trips.

### **Objective 3 (Education Committee Recommendation 6)**

*Working in tandem with RMNP's existing distance learning initiatives, RMC will explore and pilot a proprietary distance learning catalog, and create an online learning platform with pre-recorded lessons,*

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*learning modules, and courses that can make learning experiences about RMNP more accessible to people across the world.*

This objective will be accomplished by:

- In 2023, we will begin exploring a virtual classroom by identifying an online learning platform that meets the needs of RMC and supports the current programs provided by RMNP.
  - Online classrooms range from \$1,500 (Teachable) to \$8,000 (Learning Stream)
- By 2026, we will have an online classroom with learning modules available for adults
- In the meantime, we can increase the RMC Field Institute presence on YouTube and social media channels by offering virtual tours, videos, and engaging learning experiences.

**NOTE:** Creating a new learning platform for our audience will be a great undertaking for the Education Team. We believe beginning with a strong foundation of in-person Field Institute programming, as well as building our reputation and brand recognition will be incredibly important these first two years. Our first impressions as we begin offering programming are of utmost importance. With the minimal resources we have for 2023, we are focused on our current program offerings.

In 2024 and 2025, we will have identified the resources needed to expand into an online classroom. At that point we will need to hire more staff. We will also either utilize the Communication and Marketing team or seek out contracted work for course content and video creation to support curating curriculum.

### ***Objective 4 (Education Committee Recommendation 9, 12)***

*Build collaborative relationships by working closely with RMC Philanthropy, Publications, and Marketing/Communications departments to ensure that our current audience is appreciated and communicated with while also looking at potential audiences that are increasingly finding us through more technology driven avenues.*

This objective will be met by:

- 1) Online registration and course catalog: Starting in the winter of 2023, registration and course catalogs will be online platforms that allow for a more customer-friendly registration process and a more user-friendly experience for RMC staff. This program doesn't cost us anything as the fees and charges are per transaction and paid for by the participant.
- 2) When working with the RMC Communication Manager and RMNP to focus on new, creative, and relevant ways to reach a more robust audience, we will explore the following:
  - Have a more powerful and robust presence on social media platforms. Increased number of shares will increase our reach to new audiences while increasing brand recognition.
  - Curate a podcast series that provides introductory information to future and current visitors. Topics may include safety, resource management, guided tours of RMNP, relevant RMC information, and engaging interviews.
  - Provide year-round outreach and programs to niche community audiences, such as "Cocktails and Conversations", film series, or speaker panels.

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- Increase search engine optimization and have a presence on tourism/ecotourism websites.

NOTE: As stated, our target audience will expand from our current participants. Data shows that individuals under 35 are prioritizing sustainability and thinking about stewardship and conservation as they plan their vacations (Colorado Office of Eco Development), as well as people aged 35-44 are most likely to volunteer. RMC has a huge opportunity to step into offering experiences for these individuals. By being intentional about our messaging, we can meet these needs and offer a greater impact than what commercial guiding, REI, or other local guiding organizations can offer.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation is of utmost importance moving forward. Very minimal data was accumulated and curated from previous years so many choices moving forward are based on data and information we've sourced from interviews with previous instructors, RMC staff, and invested community members and board members. In future years, we will rely on data and evaluation of courses/instructors to make long term decisions. Therefore, while this plan is created with the best intentions, there are many factors that may change our scope and goals for education and the Field Institute based on these datasets. Things such as facility acquisition, RMNP management changes, budgeted revenues, and results from evaluations, may change the trajectory of different goals or priorities.

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