



# NATURE & WILDLIFE DISCOVERY CENTER

## Strategic Plan 2024 - 2029



# Land Acknowledgment

The Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center (NWDC) acknowledges that Pueblo County, Colorado, sits on the traditional lands of the Nuu-agma-tuvu-pu (Ute), Tsésthó'é (Cheyenne), Hinono'eino' Biito'owu' (Arapaho), Ndé Kónitsąąíí Gokíyaa (Lipan Apache), and Jicarilla Apache peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of these Indigenous nations and honor their stewardship of this land throughout generations. As we continue to care for NWDC's two campuses, we aspire to uphold Indigenous knowledge, respect their cultural heritage, and foster meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities.

## Mission

To promote environmental stewardship and community health through nature education, wildlife rehabilitation, and outdoor recreation.

## Vision

We envision thriving urban, rural, and natural ecosystems in Southern Colorado that foster a resilient connection between people and planet.

## Core Values

- Equitable Access to Nature Experiences
- Connect with Community
- Preserve and Restore Nature
- Collaborate with Partners
- Inspire Future Generations
- Encourage Learning

Our Mountain Campus is a hidden gem nestled in Beulah Valley, approximately 30 miles west of the city of Pueblo. It is the perfect location for peaceful retreats into nature, as well as self-guided hiking, mountain biking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and horse-back riding.

"We hiked through bright green, abundant scrub oak, aromatic ponderosas, and blossoming wildflowers to reach the highest point in the park: The Fire Tower, a double-tier lookout built for recreationists in the 1930s, from which you can see Beulah Valley, 14,115-foot Pikes Peak [[Tava-Kaavi](#) or "Sun Mountain" in Ute], and Pueblo Reservoir."

- [Morgan Tilton, Adventure Journalist](#)

# WELCOME

## »»» Dear Friends and Supporters of NWDC,

We are thrilled to share an exciting milestone in the Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center journey: unveiling our first five-year strategic plan since the Nature and Raptor Center and the Mountain Park Environmental Center merged in 2018.

As the Executive Director and Board Chair, we have witnessed firsthand the dedication of our staff, volunteers, supporters, and community partners toward promoting environmental stewardship and community health through nature education, wildlife rehabilitation, and outdoor recreation. This strategic plan reflects our collective commitment to this mission and our vision of fostering resilient connections between people and the planet in thriving urban, rural, and natural ecosystems in southern Colorado.

Throughout the planning process, we partnered with Sheffy Minnick and Morgan Schmehl of The Civic Canopy, who facilitated meetings and co-led the process. Civic Canopy aims to elevate often unheard and underrepresented voices, foster understanding and trust, and mobilize towards systemic change. Their work with NWDC was funded by the Colorado Health Foundation, to whom we are deeply grateful.

During this strategic planning process, NWDC engaged in reflection, analysis, and dialogue to identify key priorities and strategies for greater impact and sustainability. We listened to our community and stakeholders and incorporated their input into our strategic framework.

Our strategic plan articulates clear goals and objectives in conservation, education, community engagement, campus management, communications, and organizational development. It outlines initiatives to enhance our programming, expand our reach, strengthen partnerships, improve campus management, streamline communications, and ensure NWDC's long-term viability.

With this strategic plan as our roadmap, we are eager to embark on a journey of growth, innovation, and positive change. Together, we can enhance our local environment's health, strengthen community bonds, and ensure a sustainable future for southern Colorado.

We extend our gratitude to all who contributed to developing this strategic plan and invite you to join us in turning our vision into reality. Together, we can make a meaningful impact on our region's ecosystems and residents' well-being. Thank you for your continued support and partnership.

Warmly,

**Lisa Wachtel, Board Chair**  
**Taylor Driver, Executive Director**



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LODGE & RETREAT  
CENTER**

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Originally built in the 1930s by Work Progress Administration crews, the Horseshoe Lodge and Retreat Center, located within the NWDC Mountain Campus in Beulah, Colorado, is on the National Register of Historic Places. In recent years, it has been lovingly and tastefully renovated into a four-season eco-lodge, surrounded by hundred-year-old ponderosa pines and 8 miles of trails. The Horseshoe Lodge is the perfect place for groups, families, couples, and individuals to retreat into the beauty and simplicity of nature.



Declan, a student explorer in the Outdoor Explorations Program (OEP), looks through his binoculars for mallards. OEP meets regularly at our River Campus on the banks of the mighty Arkansas River. Indigenous, French, English, Spanish, and Italian cultures all have a rich history in this area.

# History

The Nature and Wildlife Discovery Center (NWDC) was formed in 2018 through the merger of the Mountain Park Environmental Center and the Nature Center and Raptor Center. This merger united over 66 years of combined experience in environmental education and outdoor recreation. Together, these organizations brought innovative programming and diverse natural environments to our community, creating a rich foundation for outdoor experiences at our Mountain and River Campuses.

The Mountain Campus, located in the City of Pueblo's 611-acre Pueblo Mountain Park, provides access to thousands of acres in the San Isabel National Forest. The Pueblo Mountain Park lies 24 miles west of the city and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; it played a significant role in the development of landscape architecture in national forests during the 1920s. Then in the 1930s, recreation engineer Arthur H. Carhart's vision of a national mountain playground came to life with the help of the Civilian Conservation Corps, who built a road system, lodge, stone pavilion building, and miles of trails.

The River Campus, situated along the Arkansas River, was originally established by the Arkansas Valley Audubon Society in 1979 as the Audubon River Trails Nature Center and has since undergone several name changes. Tucked below Cretaceous Age cliffs and short grass prairie land, this location includes a mile of riparian habitat along the river. It is home to Southern Colorado's only raptor rehabilitation center and features abundant waterfowl, such as Canada Geese, Great Blue Herons, and Osprey. The Arkansas River Trail, a paved path for pedestrians and cyclists, runs through the campus and offers beautiful views of the diverse surrounding ecosystem and wildlife.

Our Mountain and River Campuses serve as NWDC's outdoor classrooms, hosting thousands of students of all ages through various programs, events, and camps. NWDC is committed to protecting, maintaining, and enhancing these spaces to provide both guided and self-guided nature experiences. The visionary work and tireless efforts of those before us have laid a strong foundation that we are honored to build upon. Today, NWDC stands poised to expand our reach, deepen our impact, and continue fostering a community-wide environmental ethic and unparalleled outdoor recreation opportunities.



The NWDC Raptor Center was founded in 1981 and is located within our River Campus in Pueblo, Colorado. Here, we have been saving magnificent birds of prey like Theo the Peregrine Falcon for over forty years. More than 300 injured, ill, and orphaned birds of prey are admitted every year. Our compassionate staff provide these birds with the best care possible in hopes that they can soon be returned to the wild.

## Community Engagement

Engaging in open and honest conversations with our members, friends, donors, and community is essential for NWDC's new strategic plan. During our planning process, we sought to understand what excites them about NWDC, their hopes for growth, and areas needing improvement. Our diverse community includes students, park visitors, volunteers, hikers, cyclists, river users, lodge visitors, and full-moon hikers. Civic Canopy's Sheffy Minnick and Morgan Schmehl guided us through this comprehensive feedback process.

### Channels

- 321 Online survey responses
- 5 Community listening sessions
- 35 Interviews with donors, partners, and friends

### Top Areas Identified for Improvement

- Raptor Center (50% of respondents)
- Trail conditions, connectivity, and signage
- Solutions to River Campus flooding
- More adult programming
- Enhanced communication

# Key Suggestions

- **Programming:**
  - Increased volunteer opportunities
  - More adult programming and better outreach
  - Enhanced educational ties to the Raptor Center
  - Climate change education
  - Diversity and racial equity in programming
  - Spanish language opportunities
- **Facilities & Resources:**
  - Flood control improvements at River Campus
  - Safety enhancements for children's play areas
  - Raptor Center renovation
  - Maintaining quiet spots along the river trail
  - Potential revenue strategies
  - Bilingual interpretive signage
- **Additional Insights:**
  - Leveraging knowledge from similar organizations
  - Emphasizing community collaborations
  - Managing Nature Center traffic effectively
  - Creating family camps for new generations of nature lovers
  - Developing virtual and paper-guided hikes
  - Enhancing trail information for seniors
  - Increasing adult events for out-of-town visitors
  - Listing infrastructure needs and donation options on the website
  - Additional staff and improved security



## Strategic Planning Partner

The strategic planning process was greatly enhanced by our collaboration with The Civic Canopy. Their skilled facilitation of community engagement ensured diverse voices were heard and valued, fostering trust and understanding.

# Theory of Change

The Theory of Change model guides us in articulating and achieving our aspirations. It helps us understand how our activities lead to our goals by detailing the steps and connections that bridge our current state and our envisioned future. This strategic framework not only maps NWDC's path to success but also ensures each step is purposeful and aligned with our core values.

This document outlines the core elements of our strategic plan but does not capture every detail and tactic. The following sections will delve deeper into the specific actions for each goal, illustrating how we plan to achieve our vision. For a comprehensive view of our Theory of Change, please reach out to us.

## NWDC'S TOOLKIT



**LONGSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL  
EDUCATION PROGRAMS**



**SOUTHERN COLORADO'S ONLY  
RAPTOR REHABILITATION CENTER**



**TWO UNIQUE CAMPUSES**



**DIVERSE FUNDING PORTFOLIO**



**LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS**



**HISTORIC MOUNTAIN PARK**





# Strategic Goals



**Communications: Enhance connectivity and trust within and outside NWDC.**



**Land Management: Collaborate with the City of Pueblo to foster community pride and stewardship through earth-friendly land and facilities management.**



**Programming: Deliver impactful programs that strengthen the bond between communities and their environment.**



**Organizational Health: Build an equitable, thriving, and sustainable organizational ecosystem.**

# COMMUNICATION

## »»» Challenge

Effective communication is crucial for building connectivity and trust within NWDC's internal and external communities. Current communication systems need improvement to better engage staff, volunteers, partners, members, visitors, and program participants.



## »»» Goal

The internal and external NWDC communities are engaged through reliable and transparent methods that nurture connectivity and trust.



## »»» Outcomes

- Staff and board feel well-heard and included in organizational communications.
- Stakeholders feel valued, connected, and informed about NWDC's mission and programs, reducing perceived barriers to access.

# Communication Strategies

- **Internal Communications Enhancement:** Improve communication channels and systems for staff and the board through budget allocations, professional development, and security upgrades.
- **External Engagement:** Foster a sense of value and connection among stakeholders, including students, members, supporters, partners, and visitors, ensuring they feel heard and aligned with NWDC's mission.

## ➤➤➤ Over the next five years, we will:

- **Upgrade Internal Systems:** Invest in and implement advanced communication tools and training for staff and board to enhance internal connectivity.
- **Strengthen External Relations:** Develop and deploy strategies to better communicate our brand, listen to our community, and integrate commemorative opportunities across our campuses.
- **Increase Awareness and Access:** Enhance awareness of program opportunities and address barriers to access, ensuring our mission is clearly understood by all stakeholders.



# LAND & FACILITIES

## ➤➤➤ Challenge

Managing NWDC's natural resources and facilities to reflect ecologically sound practices, model conservation, and address critical issues like flooding at the River Campus is essential. The Raptor Center also requires renovation to continue serving as a flagship facility.

## ➤➤➤ Goal

In partnership with the City of Pueblo, NWDC campus locations are sources of great community pride and opportunities for community health and environmental stewardship.

## ➤➤➤ Outcomes

- NWDC lands and facilities exemplify conservation and sustainable resource management.
- Well-maintained facilities used for high-impact activities that support our mission.
- Visitors experience a strong connection and sense of belonging at NWDC sites.
- The Mountain Campus remains protected and preserved.



The Riverfront Room, NWDC River Campus



# Land & Facilities Strategies



- Conservation and Resource Protection: Ensure all lands and facilities model conservation ethics and sustainable practices.
- Facility Maintenance and Utilization: Maintain facilities to high standards and prioritize mission-driven uses.
- Visitor Engagement: Create a welcoming environment where visitors feel a sense of belonging and connection with NWDC's places.
- Mountain Campus Preservation: Protect the Mountain Campus in its historic natural state for perpetuity.

## ➤➤➤ Over the next five years, we will:

- Implement Conservation Practices: Expand interpretive and informational signage programs to educate visitors about conservation and resource protection.
- Address Flooding Issues: Conduct thorough studies and implement solutions to mitigate flooding at the River Campus, considering significant changes as necessary.
- Renovate the Raptor Center: Plan and execute renovations, potentially in conjunction with a new Visitor Center/Nature Center.
- Improve Access and Awareness: Identify and address barriers to entry, ensuring all visitors can easily access and enjoy NWDC's natural resources and facilities.

# PROGRAMS

## »»» Challenge

NWDC's programming aims to cultivate resilient connections between people and nature. However, there are ongoing challenges in ensuring equitable access, addressing cultural sensitivity, and integrating new program threads for various age groups.



NWDC offers a variety of summer camps for children grades kindergarten to 10.

## »»» Goal

NWDC programming changes lives for Southern Colorado communities and their visitors, cultivating resilient connections between people and their natural world.



## »»» Outcomes

- NWDC programs foster cultural awareness and ecological literacy among participants.
- NWDC is recognized as a statewide leader in environmental education.
- Strong, effective partnerships enhance program delivery and community impact.
- Regularly updated and evaluated programs meet evolving community needs.

# Programs Strategies

- Cultural Awareness and Ecological Literacy: Enhance programs to promote cultural sensitivity and ecological literacy.
- Model Environmental Learning: Position NWDC as a statewide model for environmental education and learning.
- Effective Partnerships: Strengthen existing partnerships and develop new, mutually beneficial collaborations.
- Program Development and Evaluation: Continuously develop and evaluate programs to meet community needs and integrate climate change education.



## »»» Over the next five years, we will:

- Promote Cultural Sensitivity: Integrate cultural sensitivity, language access, and special needs components into all programs.
- Expand Environmental Learning: Develop new program threads for teenagers and adults, making climate change education a key component.
- Strengthen Partnerships: Reaffirm and expand partnerships that align with our mission and enhance program delivery.
- Reinstate Community Events: Organize a large community-building event to bring people together around Pueblo's natural resources, cultivating a sense of community and engagement.

# ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

## »»» Challenge

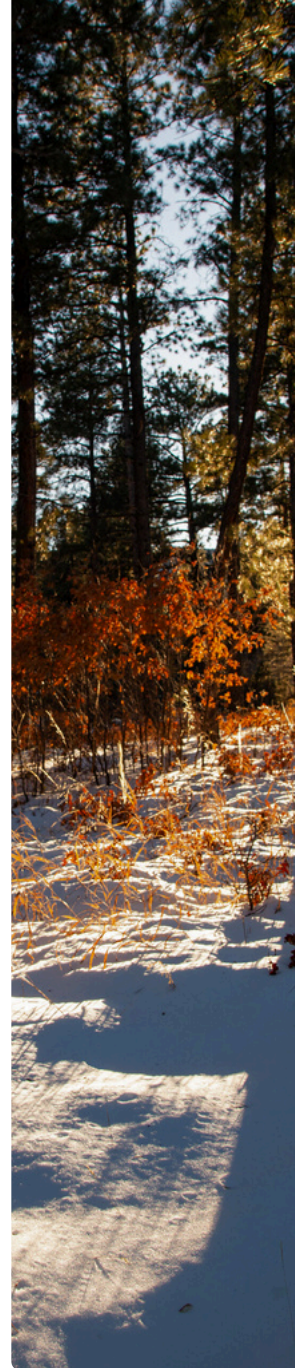
Ensuring NWDC's organizational ecosystem is healthy, equitable, thriving, and sustainable is crucial for our long-term success. This involves numerous dimensions, including an active and focused Board of Directors, sound fiscal management, and a well-supported staff. However, challenges such as ensuring equitable salaries, maintaining strong financial stability, and implementing a comprehensive volunteer program persist. Additionally, creating a diverse and inclusive environment across all levels of the organization requires ongoing effort and commitment.

## »»» Goal

NWDC's organizational ecosystem is characterized as healthy, equitable, thriving, and sustainable.

## »»» Outcomes

- A robust volunteer program engaging community members and providing diverse opportunities.
- An effective, diverse, and active Board of Directors driving strategic goals and building key relationships.
- Strong financial health with transparent management practices ensuring organizational stability.
- A high-functioning staff team with equitable compensation, clear roles, and growth opportunities, contributing to organizational success.
- A thriving DEI initiative that fosters an inclusive and supportive organizational culture.





# Organizational Health Strategies

- Reestablish a Comprehensive Volunteer Program: Develop diverse and enriching opportunities for community members to engage with NWDC's mission and activities.
- Board Effectiveness and Diversity: Strengthen the Board of Directors by ensuring it remains active, focused, and diverse, and capable of building relationships with key stakeholders and accomplishing annual goals.
- Financial and Contractual Strength: Maintain strong fiscal management practices to ensure transparency and stability, securing the organization's financial health.
- High-Functioning Staff Team: Support staff with equitable salaries, appropriate benefits, clear job responsibilities, necessary resources, and growth opportunities to foster a productive and motivated team.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative: Implement a comprehensive DEI initiative across all levels of the organization to promote an inclusive and supportive environment.

## »»» Over the next five years, we will:

- Expand the Volunteer Program: Grow and diversify the volunteer base, offering meaningful opportunities for community involvement.
- Enhance Board Effectiveness: Provide training and resources to the Board to enhance its effectiveness and diversity.
- Strengthen Financial Stability: Implement best practices in fiscal management and explore new funding opportunities to ensure financial health.
- Support Staff Development: Invest in staff development programs and resources to ensure a motivated and high-functioning team.
- Implement DEI Initiatives: Roll out comprehensive DEI initiatives and regularly assess their impact on the organization.

# Tactics, Evaluation, & End Results

## *Tactics*

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The Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center goes beyond planning by taking action. To achieve our goals, we need to implement practical steps known as tactics. These are the specific actions that bring our strategies to life. Our team, supported by the Board, has developed numerous tactics to ensure our strategies are effectively executed. These tactics will evolve as we learn and progress.

## *Evaluation*

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Our strategic plan is based on the belief that our strategies will lead to the desired outcomes. NWDC will regularly assess whether our actions produced the intended results and advanced our goals. We will analyze feedback and engagement metrics to improve our efforts and make decisions about facility usage based on evaluations of safety, efficiency, and highest uses.

Each year, our Annual Report will detail the progress of our strategic plan, reporting on actions taken, outcomes achieved, and progress toward our goals. We will also outline the Action Plan for the next year, including new strategies and tactics.

## *End Results*

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Our five-year strategic plan sets realistic timelines for our strategies based on priorities. With our Board's help, we categorized strategies by importance and urgency. This plan kicks off many initiatives that will continue beyond the five years, leading to ongoing improvements. Each cycle of tactics, strategies, and outputs will be evaluated and refined. All actions will be guided by our goals and vision for NWDC.

This plan marks a turning point for the Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center of Pueblo. It is the first comprehensive roadmap for the future of Pueblo's leader in environmental education and outdoor recreation. The plan elevates our organization, opening the door to statewide and national recognition. It's an exciting time for NWDC, and this strategic plan sets our direction for the future.

## *Our Commitment to the Community*

Our commitment to community engagement is at the heart of this plan. We invite you to join us on this journey. Your support is crucial — whether through volunteering your time, donating funds, or participating in our programs. Together, we can achieve our vision for a healthier and more connected community.

Be part of this transformative journey. Your involvement will create lasting, positive change for our spaces, community, and birds of prey. Together, we can make the Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center a beacon of environmental education and stewardship. Join us today and help shape a sustainable future for all.

*Heartfelt gratitude goes to the Board of Directors for their unwavering commitment to this process. Special thanks to the Strategic Planning Committee, led by Chair David Cockrell, and members Lisa Wachtel, Caren Ermel, and Corinne Brown, for their dedicated efforts in developing this plan.*

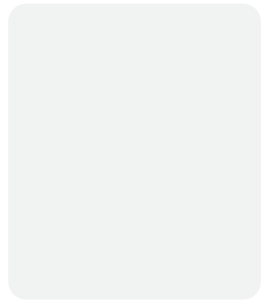


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# *Your Support Matters*

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**Together, we can inspire others to cherish nature for years to come. By donating or becoming a member, you are joining us in our mission to promote environmental stewardship and community health through nature education, wildlife rehabilitation, and outdoor recreation.**

**Donate Now**



**Become a Member**

