

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM SMOKIES

Science and Education Center conceived 40 years ago

Frances Figart

Word from the Smokies

When Great Smoky Mountains National Park put together a general management plan 40 years ago in 1982, included was the skeleton concept of a new laboratory. This lab would meet the needs of a relatively small group of scientists and researchers who were then working out of historic buildings of the Voorheis Estate, located on Cherokee Orchard Road just off the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail southeast of downtown Gatlinburg.

The concept was fleshed out over the next decade, and with the inception of the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory in 1998 and the associated growth of community science and outside researcher efforts, it was determined that the lab needed to be more than just offices. It should include space for natural history collections, science education programs, and a variety of community science events.

“Planning and design of the Twin Creeks Science and Education Center followed a typical National Park Service process,” said Dianne Flaugh, one of several landscape architects who worked on the project. “It was a process that involved the input of a wide range of NPS staff, from management to those who would work in the building on a daily basis, to those who would support the ongoing maintenance and operation of the building.”

In addition to a value analysis and approval by its Design Advisory Board, the NPS requires newly constructed buildings to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, meaning the building had to meet a variety of sustainable design and construction goals. The actual design process was managed by architectural staff from the NPS Southeast Regional Office (SERO), which typically works with a number of different architectural and engineering firms that compete for projects. The firm ultimately chosen to design Twin Creeks was Lord Aeck Sargent (LAS).

“Once LAS was selected as the design firm, a team composed of staff from that firm, SERO, and the park met frequently to discuss and flesh out the needs of the various proposed building functions and relationships between those functions, as well as the anticipated staff needs,” said Flaugh, who was the park’s cultural resources program manager when she retired in 2018. “These needs also had to be accommodated within the funding available. Often in these meetings the lead architect would remind the team, ‘If you have money for a 10-pound bag of potatoes, you can only stuff 10 pounds into the bag.’”

The state-of-the-art Twin Creeks Science and Education Center was finally completed in 2007, its design reflecting how the teams prioritized the various desired functions and valued the site’s historic context. The central section of the building is an open



National Park Service employees like Entomologist Becky Nichols say they thrive at Twin Creeks because they are working to protect park resources with a broad network of like-minded staff, interns, volunteers, and cooperating researchers. PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

space for work, education, or events, with smaller offices and more specialized workspaces on either side. Echoing the gable roofs of the Voorheis Estate, the structure is crowned by a series of gable roof ends, and its stonework matches the foundations of the estate buildings and the site’s historic fieldstone walls.

Now a visionary laboratory for park scientists and researchers, Twin Creeks Science and Education Center houses the park’s natural history collections, provides workspace for NPS branches including Inventory and Monitoring, Vegetation Management, and Air Quality, and offers event space for community scientists, park partners, and many others. The NPS employees who share this unusual space say they thrive here because they are working to protect park resources with a broad network of like-minded people — including staff, interns, volunteers, and cooperating researchers.

“We all share the same goal: to better understand and protect what lives here,” said park Entomologist Becky Nichols.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Twin Creeks staff, along with most Smokies employees, were working from home — except for one air quality technician who was maintaining critical and essential air quality monitoring operations.

“The Inventory and Monitoring staff stayed in touch through frequent video calls, and like everyone in the country, we adapted to holding meetings remotely,” Nichols said. “As field season approached, it was initially undecided whether we could carry out our normal research with interns and seasonal em-



Echoing the gable roofs of the nearby Voorheis Estate, the structure is crowned by a series of gable roof ends. The central section of the building is an open space for work, education, or events, with smaller offices and more specialized workspaces on either side. PROVIDED BY VALERIE POLK

ployees. But, after taking numerous safety precautions and making changes in protocols, it was decided that the field season could go forward.”

Beginning in late May of 2020, summer crews arrived, and by late fall, all field units were able to complete their normal data collection without incident. During the winter months, staff worked from home or continued to work on site at Twin Creeks, especially if they needed access to laboratories, microscopes, and the natural history collection.

During 2021, safety remained of paramount concern, and a hybrid model was adopted in which some worked from home and others returned to the office.

“Despite the challenges, we have remained productive,” said Nichols, whose long-term monitoring program for aquatic entomology has measured insect diversity and stream quality in the park since the early 1990s. The detailed gathering of yearly data as part of

the Vital Signs Monitoring Program is necessary for understanding the health of the park’s resources.

“We record data every year, which feeds into the Vital Signs program, and we look at long-term trends,” said Nichols. “Are things stable? Are they improving or declining? That information shows us where to target our research efforts. Through research, we can better understand what might threaten our resources, and having baseline data allows us to better protect those resources.”

This story is an edited excerpt of a much longer article by Frances Figart, Aaron Searcy, and Elise Anderson that appeared in the spring 2021 issue of “Smokies Life” magazine. Frances Figart is the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

COVID-19

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Any rise in hospitalizations or deaths in the wake of the latest surge in cases isn’t likely to show up for about two weeks.

While omicron seems less severe than delta, especially among people who have been vaccinated, the WHO chief cautioned: “It does not mean it should be categorized as mild. Just like previous variants, omicron is hospital-

izing people, and it’s killing people.”

“In fact, the tsunamis of cases is so huge and quick that it is overwhelming health systems around the world,” the WHO chief told a regular news briefing.

The WHO said the rises in case counts over the last week varied, doubling in the Americas region, but rising only 7% in Africa.

The WHO emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan, said speculation that omicron might be the last variant of the outbreak was “wishful thinking” and cautioned: “There still is a lot of energy in this virus.”

Added Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO’s technical lead on COVID-19: “I think it’s very unlikely that omicron will be the last variant that you will hear us discussing.”

WHO officials called on the public to step up measures to fight the pandemic like getting vaccinated, ventilating rooms, maintaining proper physical distancing and wearing masks — but properly.

“I’m struck by how people actually are wearing masks” Van Kerkhove said.

“Wearing a mask below your chin is useless. And it gives you a false sense of

security that you have something on that is protecting you. It will not ... Basically, we are asking everyone to play a part in this.”

Separately, Ryan said the WHO’s work with the International Olympic Committee and China — which is set to host the 2022 Winter Games — led him to be “confident” that the measures that games organizers have put in place were “very strict and very strong.”

“We don’t at this point see any increased risk of disease transmission in that context,” Ryan said.

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