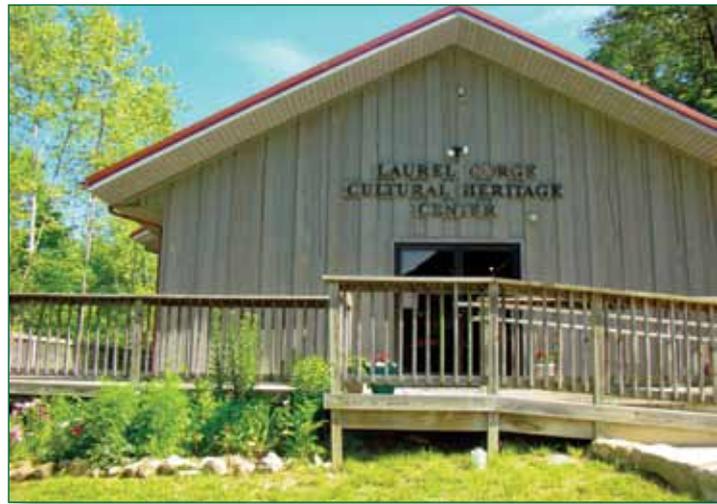


Connecting With Nature At Laurel Gorge

By Nancy S. Grant



Old ideas are coming to new life at the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center in Elliott County. Visitors from around the region are enjoying a variety of activities at this unique gathering spot.

Snuggled into the hillside just above the spot where Laurel Creek meets the Little Sandy River, the main building features 28 interactive exhibits showcasing the natural world and the history of humans in this part of Kentucky. Souvenirs of bluegrass music share space with moonshine stills, tobacco sticks, and Native American arrowheads. Colorful photos, live frogs, carved wooden birds, plus a coyote and a bobcat (courtesy of a skilled taxidermist) mingle with coal mining tools, hand-woven baskets, and colorful quilts.

In the back half of the building, a generously sized meeting room serves many purposes. Various community groups (including a quilting club and a civic group dedicated to preventing drug use) regularly meet here. The area can also be used as a classroom for visiting school students. Bookshelves here are filled with field guides to plants and animals, texts about forest management,

maps, and equipment for science activities.

Outside the Visitor Center, three miles of hiking trails meander past sandstone cliffs and seasonal waterfalls, amid the unique mixture of plants and animals of the Appalachian foothills.

In consideration of the wide variety of people who come to visit, there is no set admission charge to tour the exhibits or use the trails. Visitors are kindly asked to contribute only what they feel they can afford to pay.

An Outdoor Recreation Area, opened earlier this year, offers a shelter house and other amenities that can be reserved for a modest fee for picnics and reunions.

History comes to life

Inside the visitor center, gazing at the artifacts of daily life of the Paleo-Indians (the native peoples of this area of North America about 10,000 years ago), it's easy to imagine those long-ago adults teaching their children about the bounty of the surrounding forest.

Step back in time and pretend: a mother shows her daughter flavorful

plants to add to squirrel soup. A father shows his son deer tracks in the soft damp soil. Each of them can imitate the hoot of a great horned owl. These people from long ago knew every detail of the natural beauty and bounty of this land.

Other exhibits show the tools and lifestyles brought to this area by settlers with European backgrounds. They,



Kay Harris, an employee at the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center, demonstrating the native bird exhibit.



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too, used the bounty of the land for food, the wood from the forest for their homes and furniture, and hunted the local animals. But they also chopped out clearings in the forest, planted crops, and built fences to confine the horses, cattle, and pigs they introduced to the area. For decades, instead of living with nature, they often battled against it.

And yet they, too, listened to and admired the songs of the birds. Amid the hard work, they, too, had time for beauty. It's easy to remember, not so long ago, a small glass jar filled with spring violets sitting on great-grandma's kitchen table. Remember listening for the first drumming taps of a woodpecker in the spring?

Learning from nature

An innovative agreement with local schools now means that area children can come to Laurel Gorge to explore these episodes from history—and see up close and personal the enduring beauty of the natural world. They're also learning about cutting-edge modern science and a host of other subjects in both indoor and outdoor classrooms.

Flora Whitley, an Elliott County Extension Service agent, says, "We now have a contract with the Elliott County School System to provide instruction that enhances what the students are doing in their traditional classrooms in school buildings. The hours students spend here are not counted against regular field trip time, so teachers can bring them here as often as they want to."

Whitley recently completed a special training program to become certified as a non-formal environmental educator.

Throughout the year, special activities such as wildflower walks (bring your camera!) and birding hikes help visitors discover and appreciate the natural surroundings here.

Whitley has also developed a series of monthly themed activities that blend what's happening in the natural world at Laurel Gorge with Kentucky's Academic Expectation and Core Content standards. A program in March helps students identify wild edible plants. In May, when ample spring rains have added new moisture to the Gorge, programs focus on the water cycle and stream ecosystems, while linking to geography



lessons. September and October programs use leaf identification and the changing colors of autumn as the basis for lessons about plant science—and art.

From the very beginning, almost 15 years ago, the idea behind the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center was simple. "We need to tell people who we are and what we have to offer" summed up the vision of civic leaders in Elliott County.

What this area has to offer is a fun and friendly lesson in how human activities blend with the natural world—and how human societies continually adapt to their surroundings. This latest chapter



Pamela and Jake Greene from Sandy Hook visiting the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center on a Lakeside Elementary school trip.

in the history of Laurel Gorge will help today's students and everyone in the community appreciate and understand the natural beauty and human culture right here.

Make plans this summer and autumn to enjoy the exhibits and trails at Laurel Gorge with your family and friends. Trails are open from dawn to dusk. The Visitor Center is open Monday thru Friday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Saturdays until 5:00 p.m., Sunday hours vary. Free parking. Call (606) 738-5543 for information about special activities and shelter area rentals. Enter "Laurel Gorge Kentucky" in your favorite search engine to see the Web site.