

Harboring hope: education, outreach sees success in Acadia

Maci Gambrell

Qds15@txstate.edu

BAR HARBOR, Maine — Post covid, more people are visiting the national parks with the intention of escaping everyday life. With higher attendance and more first-time parkgoers, staff at Acadia National Park and surrounding organizations have adapted to the new change in demographic through education and outreach.



"Kimberly," a 3-week-old seal pup, waits to be fed by Allied Whale staff in Bar Harbor on June 15. Photo by Maci Gambrell

"You sort of saw a different type of visitor come," said John Kelly, park manager assistant at Acadia National Park. "More urban, less outdoor-experienced and maybe not even aware that there is a national park here to begin with."

Now, park faculty and surrounding organizations are admiring the success of their educational programs launched just a few years ago.

Despite being one of the smallest parks, "National Geographic" ranked [Acadia as the seventh most-visited national park in the country](#). According to Kelly, in 2021, Acadia saw a 500,000 visitor increase, heightening the chances for people to degrade the natural environment.

Organizations like Friends of Acadia (FOA) recognize the impact lack of knowledge has on the ecology and sustainability of the park and are using social media to educate people on behaviors that can help preserve the park for future generations.

"Last year, my summer intern did a reel talking about the different principles of Leave No Trace," said Eliza Worrick, digital marketing manager of FOA. "That was one big push we did... [to] help model behavior so when people see that, they kind of know what to do."

Leave No Trace is a seven-principal education initiative that outlines how humans can protect the trails, vegetation and wildlife when visiting national parks. It encourages visitors to come enjoy the park, but to behave in ways that ensure the safety of themselves and the environment.

Park rangers at Acadia implement the Leave No Trace principles into their formal education and outreach programs through the “Fourth Grade Pass” program.

“It's also really critical to capture folks when you're young,” said Kelly. “The other thing is the park entrance pass, there's a free pass for fourth graders and their families... The idea that, why a fourth grader, we determined that that is really a critical age of discovery.”

By learning at a young age, experts said children develop a love for the outdoors and a knowledge of how to protect it so they can become the next generation of responsible park visitors or teachers themselves.

Education leads to rehabilitation

Similarly, institutions like College of the Atlantic's (COA) Allied Whale program believe limiting the number of guests is not the answer. Teaching is the solution. Educated visitors can become valuable eyes and ears for organizations aimed at preserving Maine's wildlife.

“So, education's important,” said Rosemary Seton, Allied Whale's stranding coordinator. “But engaging them... It's like, do this, you know. Do phone us. Do take a photo from a respectful distance. The dos are more positive. And get people really engaged.”

Recently, a local woman helped the COA's rescue efforts by reporting an injured and stranded seal pup. Heeding the advice of biologists and following Leave No Trace principles, the woman did not interact with the seal but instead contacted the Allied Whale stranding hotline.

The Allied Whale program specializes in educating students and the public on how to behave around wildlife. Its impact has helped change the culture of visitors, in contrast to non-advisable behavior like taking stranded seals home. Seton said similar actions were common 10 years ago.



'Kimberly' readies for transport to MME rehabilitation facility on June 15. Photo by Maci Gambrell.

“So you get some [people] that are a bit odd like that, I'd say 99% are fantastic,” said Seton. “I think gone are most of the days where they take [seals] home to put in a bathtub. I think there must be messages getting out there OK.”

As a result of the recent citizen report, rescuers at the COA, led by Seton, were able to capture and transport the stranded seal pup to triage. Now, she is at Marine Mammals of Maine's (MMoME) rehabilitation center, where she is recovering to be released into the wild.

As a June 17 Facebook post reports, “After starting initial supportive care, we slowly added in needed nutrition, and today she got her first ever fish! It's still early in recovery, but we can already see her snappy, independent attitude developing with every day she feels better.”

To learn about COA's education mission visit <https://www.coa.edu/> and to help support the recent rescue, donate to [Marine Mammals of Maine Registry | Walmart.com](#).