



The Agassiz Observer

A Newsletter of the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

Spring 2022

In this Issue:

2022 marks a special year for the Agassiz ELC—the 30 year anniversary of providing programs and recreation services to the public and school groups from the Fertile area and beyond.

A brief history of the origins of the Agassiz ELC is included in this newsletter. Also a fun reprisal of the original name of the Agassiz ELC newsletter, *The Agassiz Observer*—at least for this issue. A special Summerfest is being planned for early June to delve into far more details of the extensive history of the Agassiz ELC over the past 30 years.

Suffice to say it has been a busy 30 years with lots of Board and staff changes. Also many site management activities to preserve and protect the unique Fertile Sand Hills site while also making it more accessible for education and recreation programs to increase the awareness and appreciation of this special place.

Page 2...Agassiz Observer newsletter

Page 3...AELC Origins

Pages 4...School Programs

Page 5...Community Programs

Page 6...Site Management

Page 7...Giving Hearts Day ~ Membership

Page 8...The Back Page-More FUN Stuff!

Comments or story suggestions
welcome, please contact:

Wayne Goeken, AELC Newsletter Editor

wegoekenmn@gmail.com

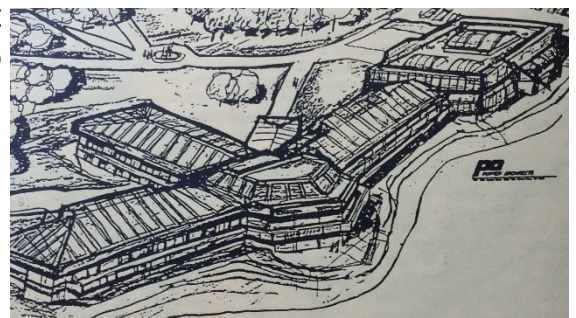
218-280-0516

Agassiz ELC Origins

It is hard to believe that the Agassiz ELC is turning 30 years old this year. While the Agassiz ELC was incorporated in October of 1991, it received its ruling as a 501 (c)3 non-profit in May of 1992, which then allowed donations to be treated as tax-deductible. This coincided with the first membership drive in 1992 which yielded a strong show of support by 74 members that first year providing over \$4,600 to support initial programs and site development.

Plans to develop the Agassiz ELC first took shape from a 1989 study funded by the Northwest Minnesota Foundation to explore operations of existing residential environmental learning centers (RELCs) and environmental education needs of northwest Minnesota. It was found that although there was heavy use of the four existing RELCs, very few schools from northwest Minnesota attend RELCs due to lack of knowledge of such centers and distance to these centers which were all in northcentral and northeast MN.

Thus, the Agassiz ELC was first proposed to be a residential center complete with dorms to host school groups for overnight stays with programs featuring prairie, oak savanna and sand dune



Proposed Residential Facility Plan

ecosystems found at the Fertile Sand Hills. State bonding funds had historically been used for construction of these centers but funds were frozen while legislators studied the options for expanding existing RELCs or creating new ones.

In the meantime, the City of Fertile was working on the West Mill Recreation Area, building on its purchase of the 640 acre Fertile Sand Hills Wilderness Sanctuary by attempting to re-establish the mill pond and developing a campground, trails and related amenities. However, dams on rivers were no longer

AELC Origins...continued on page 3

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

AELC Board of Directors

Craig Engelstad, Fertile *Chair
Stacy Erickson, Beltrami *Vice-Chair
Daniel Wilkens, Fertile *Treasurer
Laura Gullickson, Fertile *Secretary
Laura Bell, East Grand Forks
Kirsten Fagerlund, Crookston
Wendell Johnson, Crookston

Staff/Support

Wayne Goeken, Executive Director
Lisa Liden, Administrative Support

The mission of the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center is to foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.

The Agassiz ELC provides quality hands-on learning opportunities in the unique Fertile Sand Hills to promote stewardship of natural resources for present and future generations.

The Agassiz ELC shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations.

Contact

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center
PO Box 388, Fertile, MN 56540
Email: agassizelcfertile@gmail.com
Web: <https://aelcfertile.org/>
Phone: 218-945-3136

Student quote from recent Agassiz ELC site visit:

Dear Mr. Goeken, I really enjoyed the skiing, That was my first time going skiing and I loved it so much. I would love to go back agen some day. I was kind of tired at the end of the day. I also loved making marshmallow and hot dogs too. It was so much fun! Your friend, Adeline

Agassiz ELC Origins 30 Years of Service

As the Agassiz ELC celebrates its 30 year anniversary this year, following are excerpts of an initial article in the first AELC newsletter that was published in December of 1992. I was the editor then as I am now. Reprinted here with some editing as it is very appropriate to this day...

“Welcome to the first edition of the Agassiz Observer, the newsletter of the Agassiz ELC. This regular newsletter will be received quarterly by members of the AELC and a broader audience to spread the word about what the Agassiz ELC is and what it can offer.

The Agassiz Observer serves several functions. First, it will inform members and interested parties of on-going activities and operations of the Agassiz ELC such as upcoming programs and development of the Agassiz ELC programs and facilities.

Secondly, it will provide timely and useful information on environmental issues that impact each of us in our daily lives with a special emphasis on issues affecting the Red River Valley and neighboring regions.

The Agassiz Observer helps advance the purpose of the Agassiz ELC which is to “foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.” Awareness fosters understanding and understanding fosters appreciation. From appreciation a commitment to become better stewards of our natural world emerges.

Awareness of a multitude of interrelationships in nature is heightened by direct contact with the outdoors. Using all our senses to observe the natural world further heightens this awareness. I hope that information provided in this newsletter will help arouse your curiosity of the natural world. Take time throughout the year to get out and enjoy the outdoors and observe the wonderful world of nature.”

Well, couldn't have said it better myself—then or now!

—Wayne Goeken, Editor

Explore ~ Enjoy ~ Connect!

being permitted, thus instead the existing Nature Center was built in 1993 along with adjacent campsites.

Concurrently, the Agassiz moved ahead in obtaining its non-profit status and began delivering community programs on bluebirds, bats, winter birds, and more. Tours of the Sandhills were provided and school groups began on-site visits. Nearly one thousand people toured the site or participated in programs provided by the Agassiz ELC in 1992.

To fulfill its commitments to provide recreation and programming, the City of Fertile entered into



Bison skull and other artifacts found near Fertile displayed at a Prairie Day event held at the Fertile Sand Hills

an operation contract with the Agassiz ELC to deliver programs and promote recreation utilizing the Fertile Sand Hills. The City of Fertile and Agassiz ELC continue to

work together on trail needs, signage, and site management.

Since those early years, cooperative projects have included installation of the footbridge across the Sand Hill River, shoreline stabilization and installation of the river deck just north of the Visitors Center, botanical garden development, placement of benches along the hiking trails, campground development, and ongoing trail maintenance and signage.

Volunteers have played a key role in all of these projects with considerable donation of time and talent plus donated use of equipment and tools. Volunteers not only donated time to complete projects, but also time as hosts to keep the Nature Center open to the public. The RSVP—Retired Senior Volunteer Program, was especially instrumental serving as Nature Center hosts.



RSVP Volunteer hosts that helped keep the Nature Center open

Many other activities have occurred over this 30 year period of AELC's existence which will be featured in upcoming newsletters, displays and at the special Summerfest Celebration in early June. In so many ways, the "best is yet to come!"

Agassiz ELC Trivia: (answers below)

Who was on the first AELC Board of Directors?

Who was the first AELC Chairman of the Board?

Who was the first AELC Executive Director?

Who was the first AELC Education Director?

AELC Trivia answers:

First AELC Board of Directors: Joan Flaatt, Roland Gullekson, Wendell Johnson, Duane Knutson, Karen Lehman, Mike Moore, and Steve Taylor

First AELC Board Chairman: Mike Moore

First AELC Executive Director: Wayne Goeken

First AELC Education Director: Joe Gartner

Special 30 Year Anniversary AELC Summerfest ~ June 3th—5th

Mark your calendars to come out the first weekend in June for a special Summerfest celebration. Details are still being worked on regarding timing and activities so watch for updates!

- ◇ Friday, June 3rd ~ Appreciation Dinner for AELC Volunteers
- ◇ Saturday, June 4th ~ Donor Appreciation and UofM Raptor Center program featuring 3 raptors plus a bald eagle. Hands-on activities, prize drawings, raffle, and refreshments.
- ◇ Sunday, June 5th ~ Guided site tours—hiking, biking, and kayaking

School Programs at Agassiz ELC

Connecting kids to nature can be achieved in many ways. In March, students from Win-E-Mac, Climax-Shelly and Fertile-Beltrami enjoyed winter survival and outdoor recreation activities at the Agassiz ELC. Each connects students to the outdoors in different but valuable ways.

Winter survival gets students thinking about the realities of how winter can be a serious challenge, what they can do to survive, and then practice these survival skills in the field.



The winter survival challenge is an activity for teams of up to six students to work together to build a shelter with a tarp and string and then start a fire with a limited number of matches.

Fire starting was the biggest challenge, especially finding **lots** of small dry kindling to get the fire started. And once a fire was going, students learned that it took a **lot** more wood than they imagined to keep it going.

Another survival task was to melt snow in a coffee can over their fire for water to stay hydrated for survival. They didn't actually drink their melted water, but demonstrated if need be they could provide water.



Students worked on their winter survival skills in the morning and enjoyed skiing and snowshoeing in the afternoon. Just as building a fire in the morning was the first time most students had ever done it, the same held true for skiing and snowshoeing. It was the first time ever skiing or snowshoeing for the vast majority of the students.

Getting a chance to ski and snowshoe provides

students exposure to lifelong skills as they learn how they can access the outdoors in a fun manner—whether for exercise or nature exploration, or both!

Most students found the snowshoeing fairly easy to do, but skiing was a challenge for many. Yes, tears were shed and sprained ankles were feigned, but when all was said and done, skiing clearly came out on top as their favorite activity of the day!



Connecting kids to the outdoors is a combination of education and recreation provided in a safe, inclusive, fun manner that encourages kids to want to be outdoors.

It can be rather chaotic getting 30 or so kids fitted with skis and snowshoes, but very rewarding to see the fun they have as they want to just keep on skiing and being outdoors...and to hear a student loudly exclaim, "This is the BEST DAY of my LIFE!"



And yes, at the end of an exhausting day, one can take comfort and satisfaction that indeed we did make a difference in the lives of lots of kids—providing them first-time exposure to life skills and memories that will last a lifetime! Yup, not a bad day, not bad at all.



Win-E-Mac 3rd grade class enjoyed a fun AELC site visit

Programs & Activities



Fri, April 8, 7-9:30 p.m.
Star Party at Fertile Nature Center with lots of hands-on activities leading up to star viewing with binoculars after sunset. Dr. Jeff Bell,

Astronomy Professor at Northland Community and Technical College will share tips on star gazing and help everyone find constellations in the night sky.

Wed. April 20. 5 -7p.m. Natural Resources Night at the Fertile Nature Center. UofMinn-Crookston Natural Resource students will share displays and short presentations on a variety of natural resource topics related to the Fertile Sand Hills.

Sat. April 23. 10:30 a.m. Pasque Flower Hike to

Death Valley with Wayne Goeken to enjoy the annual spring blooms of hundreds of pasque flowers. Meet at parking area and trailhead at top of hill 1/4 mile west of the Nature Center. Approx. 1.4 mile hike—moderate hills, back by noon.



Sat-Sun. April 23-24. 3-D Archery Shoot sponsored by the Fertile Community Conservation Club. A 30 target course laid out over trails and hilly terrain provides a challenging course. Register at Fertile Nature Center—approx. 8 a.m. start each day.

Sat. May 14. 10 a.m. World Migratory Bird Day program led by Jeff and Laura Bell. Learn which birds have returned from migration to nest in our area and which ones are still moving north. Meet at fire ring area near the Nature Center for program with birding walk along river trail to follow. Mist net and bird capture/release if weather allows.



Pilates—Wellness thru Movement ~ Wednesdays in June/July at 6:30 p.m. (except for Wed. July 6).

Instructor Amanda Lien will guide participants through movements to help improve flexibility and strength. Open to all skill levels. To be held outside, near the Fertile Nature Center.



Optional bonus hike with each session. Eight one-hour sessions @ \$5/session or all 8 for \$35 in advance. Register and pay for sessions at the Fertile City office.

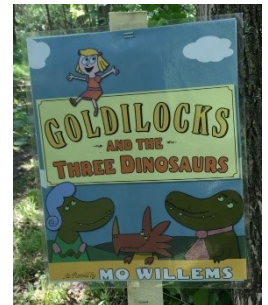
Fri-Sun. May 13-15. Boy Scout Regional Camporee

being hosted at Fertile Sand Hills. Scout troops from the Canadian border down to central MN will be camping in the restored prairie area south of the Nature Center. All trails and the Nature Center bathrooms will remain open to the public.

May graduations. The Nature Center will be used on weekends in May for several graduation receptions. Even though the Nature Center is rented by private parties, the bathrooms and all trails remain open to the public at all times.

Story Strolls! Back by popular demand in 2022.

Fertile-Beltrami Early Childhood Initiative will be assisting with Story Stroll activities, including placement of the signs with the book pages along selected trails. The Fertile Public Library helps select and prepare the books. Up to five Story Strolls are planned for the summer with the first one going up on May 20th.



Fri-Sun. June 3-5. Agassiz ELC 30 Year Summerfest Celebration.

Watch for details of Volunteer recognition dinner on Friday eve, June 3; Donor recognition, Raptor program and other activities on Sat, June 4; and guided hiking, biking, and kayaking outings on Sun, June 5.

For more Information about these programs contact Wayne Goeken (218-280-0516) or Stacy or Lisa at the Fertile City offices (218-945-3136).

Site Management

Buckthorn is a non-native noxious weed

that has become a major problem in many woodlands throughout Minnesota, the Fertile Sand Hills being no exception. Buckthorn hinders plant diversity of woodlands. It



has virtually no wildlife value and its seeds have a laxative effect on birds, aiding in seed dispersal. It is also a problem for agriculture as it is the overwinter host for the soybean aphid.

A \$4,636 grant has been received from the MN Dept of Ag to purchase equipment and supplies to help control the further spread of buckthorn in the Fertile Sand Hills. This will be a multi-year ongoing management effort including:

- Inventory and prioritize critical control areas
- Implement a plan of cutting larger plants and chemical treatment of the stumps
- Pulling and/or targeted mowing/spraying of smaller plants

The AELC will coordinate buckthorn removal demonstration and work days, inviting public involvement in buckthorn control at the Fertile Sand Hills as well as learning how to control it on their own private lands. These work days will primarily be in the fall which is the easiest time to identify buckthorn as its leaves stay green and viable longer than other vegetation.

A prescribed burn of MnDNR and Fertile Sand Hills property is a high priority for this spring. The area to be burned is a DNR parcel south of the City treatment ponds and adjacent City of Fertile property that is part of the oak savanna/prairie mix of the Fertile Sand Hills. Fires are an important tool in site management to help control the spread of aspen and maintain a healthy oak savanna and prairie ecosystem.



Trail Signage Project... A better trail marking and signage system will be put in place to help guide people through the network of trails winding through the Fertile Sand Hills. Carsonite markers that are used in many State Park trails will be color-coded and named for major trail loops with accompanying maps. Trail use stickers will be placed on the markers to differentiate designated use for each trail. A Northwest Minnesota Foundation grant is making this possible.



Pollinator Garden plans for 2022 include a final spraying of weeds, scraping off the top layer of soil, working peat into the garden, and applying a heavy mulch layer before selected prairie and pollinator plants are planted. Using strips of sod from nearby prairie areas is also being considered. Volunteers to help with these tasks and ongoing watering and weeding are needed.

Bluebird House Monitoring

Cleaning out the ten bluebird houses at the AELC and monitoring their use during 2022 provides for a nice hike and fun research of tracking what uses these houses. Last year the first bluebird was sighted in early April with eggs found in nests by late May.



Volunteers Welcome:

The above site management activities and more are well suited to volunteer involvement. Other volunteer opportunities include:

- Hosting open hours at the Nature Center
- River clean up
- Mountain bike trail trimming and marking
- Site monitoring for invasive species
- General photo documentation of conditions, phenology, and visitor use.

To volunteer or for more information contact Wayne Goeken (218-280-0516) or Stacy Erickson (218-945-3136).



Giving Hearts Day

Help someone.

Giving Hearts Day Success

Agassiz ELC's 2022 first time involvement in Giving Hearts Day was a great success, with over \$22,000 raised to help provide more opportunities to get youth outdoors and connected to nature.

Donations were received from 28 different



communities in six states and one Canadian province—demonstrating the reach and recognition of Agassiz ELC activities.

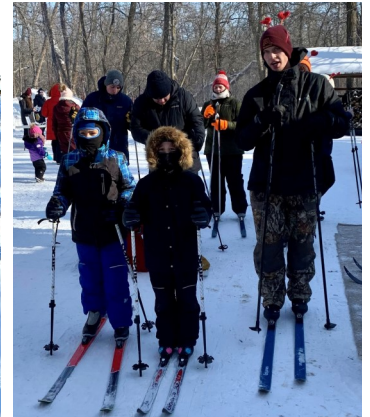
Since Giving Hearts Day, over 100 students from three schools and 5 grade levels have come out for hands-on outdoor programs. Donor support made this possible. Thank You!

Winterfest 2022

Over 100 people came out to enjoy Winterfest on Feb. 6th as part of AELC's Giving Hearts Day promotion. Horse drawn wagon rides, skiing, snowshoeing, schmoosh ski races, snow snakes, wildlife displays, hot cocoa and snacks—something for everyone.



Great Winter FUN!



Agassiz ELC Annual Membership

- ___ \$20 Student/Senior/Military
- ___ \$30 Individual
- ___ \$40 Family
- ___ \$100 Centurion
- ___ \$250 Patron
- ___ \$ 500+ Benefactor
- ___ \$2,500 Lifetime
- ___ \$ _____ Other

After an initial contribution of \$100, future gifts count towards becoming a lifetime member.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip Code: _____

E-mail Address _____

Please remit this form and payment to Agassiz ELC at PO Box 388, Fertile, MN 56540

or join on-line at www.aelfertile.org.

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization.

Contributions are tax-deductible

Renew or become a new member online at aelfertile.org or mail the completed form to: Agassiz ELC, PO Box 388, Fertile, MN 56540, or drop off at the Fertile City Office. A receipt acknowledging your tax deductible donation will be sent with a heartfelt THANK YOU!!

Membership benefits include:

- Support youth education/outdoor recreation programs and site management to advance the mission of the Agassiz ELC
- Tax-deductible membership contribution
- Printed version of Agassiz ELC newsletter
- Free use of cross-country ski equipment and snowshoes—use of all trails
- Reduced fee for kayak rental (\$6/day)
- Free or reduced admission to Agassiz ELC programs
- Annual recognition in Agassiz ELC newsletter

Your contribution helps fulfill the mission of the Agassiz ELC,

To foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.

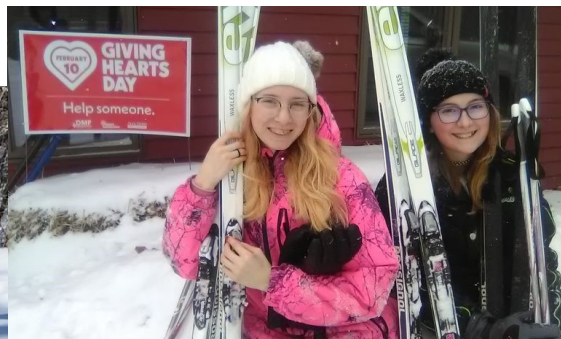
The Back Page...more "FUN stuff"...



Sandhills Snowcruisers enjoyed a Family Club Ride on the snowmobile trail at the Fertile Sand Hills and refreshments at the Nature Center on Sunday, March 6th.



Young snowshoer on the go and UofMn-Crox students demonstrating the fine "art" of Schmoosh Skiing



More Winterfest Winter FUN!



Kids quotes from their recent site visit to the Agassiz ELC:

Dear Agassiz Staff, I really liked the skiing and winter survival. When I was skiing I fell a lot but I think I did good. I had a fun day. One of the funnest days of my life. I did not want to leave. Your visitor, Jaxon

Dear Mr. Goeken, Thanks for letting us come to the Learning Center to discover all about winter survival. My favorite part was skiing. The snowshoes were fun too! I enjoyed the fresh air and beautiful landscape. Your friend, Hannah

Spring Kayaking—CAUTION Advised!



As snow melts and rivers rise, there is a strong urge to get on the water for that first kayak outing. Even if we get warm days, water temps are still cold. Falling into cold water provokes an immediate gasp reflex. If your head is under water,

you'll inhale water instead of air and it is unlikely you'll resurface if you're not wearing a life jacket.

Initial shock can cause panic, hyperventilation, and increased heart rate leading to a heart-attack. This stage lasts 3-5 minutes. At this point, concentrate on staying afloat with your head above water.

Also, there are likely new tree snags that have fallen in the Sand Hill River that haven't been cleaned out



yet, creating unsafe passage for paddlers of any skill level. Watch the AELC and Sand Hill River Kayaking Facebook pages for river status reports.

We are hoping for more timely rains this year and a return to normal river levels to allow AELC kayaks to be checked out to enjoy the fun paddling on the Sand Hill River. Introductory kayak programs will be offered as conditions allow.