Ask Aaron Stoler, a University of Pittsburgh PhD candidate in biological sciences, to channel memories from his first summer at Pitt’s Pymatuning Laboratory of Ecology (PLE), a University-owned and operated laboratory nestled deep within the 21,000-acre Pymatuning State Park, and this is what he remembers: the smell of Indian food, a consistent humming of box fans, and sweat. Lots of sweat.

“Those weren’t a lot of amenities at the facility back then, the common cooking area always smelled like the leftovers from an Indian restaurant, and it was a humid summer,” he said. “Trust me. We spent a lot of hours sitting in front of that fan.”

Despite the suffocating heat of his first summer, Stoler willingly returned—for the next five summers—to take refuge at Pymatuning. “I was in Northeastern Pennsylvania, where, while braging to his friends about playing in dirt for a living,” he delved deep into the marshes and swamps to study how plants and animals live in various conditions. Before long, his woes about hot dormitories and shared-kitchen catastrophes dissipated as the PLE Facilities staff tackled one renovation after another on the 320-acre site, providing students with a well-appointed new modern summer classroom.

Over the course of the last decade, many enhancements have been made to Pymatuning—male and female facilities staff together committing $500,000 and 3,500 hours to renovate the PLE in place to do that. We owe a great deal of our expectation, and we have everything we need in place to do that. We owe a great deal of thanks to the University’s Department of Biological Sciences—has space for researchers working in molecular and microbial biology. Construction should be completed by April 2014.

“This is a tremendous opportunity for our instructional research and outreach activities at Pymatuning Laboratory of Ecology,” said W. Richard Howe, associate dean of administration and planning in Pitt’s Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. “As important as it is for the future of PLE, it also provides an opportunity to reflect on the recent history of PLE that is responsible for this recognition from the National Science Foundation.”

From Rustic Summer Camp to Modern Research Facility


These are just several of the renovation projects that have breathed new life into PLE over the past five years under the direction of Relyea.

“The quality of the living environment is just as important as the curriculum and research,” said Relyea. “So we began construction projects even when our enrollment numbers were low. Since then, PLE has seen the numbers of students, teachers, and researchers taking advantage of our facilities grow at an unprecedented rate, and a big part of that increase is because of the renovations.”

Under the leadership of Nick Mihailoff, PLE facilities manager, dedicated PLE staff members worked not only to enhance the facility’s visual appeal, but to make it functional and modern, as well. The first step was replacing the furniture—all beds, desks, chairs, and for the dormitories and cabins that sleep 120 people. They added air-conditioning and built new bathrooms. They completely overhauled the kitchen and dining hall. Knocking down eight old, unused buildings, they constructed multiple state-of-the-art research facilities. They secured new computers, wiring the labs with them in a renovated computer laboratory. Additionally, they equipped the entire facility with wireless Internet, so students could be as “connected” as they wanted during an outdoor summer.

“Both the administration [at the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences] and I agree that we should share this space—the dominant center of ecological research in the region—with students and researchers from around the region and the world,” said Relyea.

The director noted that continued support from University deans—including Howe and N. John Cooper, Bettye J. and John E. Bailey Dean, Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences—has been integral to the successful inclusion of numerous partnering institutions at PLE.

A Wilderness (Re)treant

PLE prides itself on conducting outreach across Pennsylvania and offers the NSF’s Research Experience for Teachers, a program inviting K-12 school teachers to spend the summer conducting cutting-edge research that is ultimately published in the world’s leading journals.

PLE also conducts workshops that aid teachers in their curriculum and instruction. One of the recent workshops in ecotoxicology—the study of the effects of toxic chemicals on biological organisms—had space for 12 teachers, and nearly 80 teachers applied. Relyea notes that, with the construction of the new laboratory building, PLE’s outreach will be an even larger effort, targeting, in particular, low-income schools in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Opening its doors to academics looking for a retreat, PLE also serves as a conference location. Whether it’s a workshop for 12 or a retreat for 150, PLE accommodates a wide range of groups, including Pitt’s Departments of Biological Sciences, Human Genetics, and Optometry; Pitt’s School of Law; and the University Honors College. Likewise, classes from Pitt, the Human University of West Virginia, Clarion and Youngstown State universities, and Buffalo State University have visited for weekend trips. The facilities have also been enjoyed by such local groups as area troops of the Boy Scouts of America. With affordable rates, comfortable lodging, and high-quality meals, conference participants say they leave feeling not only academically nourished, but also restored, said Relyea.

“I’m amazed at what we have accomplished in five years, and we’re not done yet. We’re going to continue to grow all of our missions, and research will flourish. We hope to add more courses, hold more conferences and retreats, and conduct outreach to K-12 schools. That’s our expectation, and we have everything in place to do that. We owe a great deal of thanks to the University’s Department of Biological Sciences and the deans who allow us to operate this way.”

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