Annual Report 2025–2026

FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2026



PEGGY NOTEBAERT
NATURE MUSEUM
OF THE CHICAGO ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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A Message from the President and Chief Executive Officer

Dear Friends,

This past year was one of remarkable momentum for the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum. People are consistently turning to the Nature Museum, not only to experience the wonder of nature, but also as a trusted resource for science, conservation, education, and community. Throughout the year, we embraced new opportunities while remaining firmly committed to our mission of connecting people with nature.

By a Thread: Nature's Resilience, an ambitious temporary exhibition created entirely in-house, showcased the creativity and expertise of our staff while inspiring visitors of all ages to explore biodiversity and discover their role in protecting our natural world.

We also expanded our educational impact by launching new Day-Off Camps for working families, creating additional opportunities for youth engagement, and continuing to deliver high-quality science education to students and teachers across the region.

The Nature Museum has built a model where conservation isn't confined to labs or experts—it lives in neighborhoods, parks, and local habitats across Illinois. The result is not only better data to understand environmental change, but a deeply engaged public that sees itself as part of the solution. For example, this year our Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network (IBMN) hit a major milestone: one million butterflies surveyed. This milestone isn't just about anumber—it's proof that sustained community engagement can drive real scientific impact.

As we look ahead, we are energized by the momentum we've built together. Demand for our programs continues to grow, our research is expanding its impact beyond Illinois, and our community of members, volunteers, donors, and partners continues to strengthen.

None of this would be possible without the dedication of our exceptional staff, volunteers, Board of Trustees, and generous supporters. I am especially grateful for the steadfast leadership of our Board Chair, Bob Frentzel, whose guidance and commitment have helped position the Nature Museum for continued growth and impact.

Thank you for believing in the Nature Museum and for investing in a future where people and nature thrive together. Because of your support, we are not only celebrating an extraordinary year, we are building the foundation for even greater impact in the years ahead.

With gratitude,

Erin Amico
President & CEO



Erin Amico
President & CEO

Mission & Vision

The mission of the Nature Museum is to create a positive relationship between people and nature to grow our region's connection to the world of nature and science.

We envision a future where all people value and champion the science and wonder of nature.



Attendance

Like many cultural and conservation organizations, we're facing changes in funding and increased costs to care for our animals, exhibits, and educational programs. To sustain this important work and continue delivering high-quality experiences for our visitors, we began implementing ticketed entry to the Butterfly Haven along with a $5 admission fee for non-members. This shift is necessary to help support the care of our butterflies and the specialized environment they require, while helping fund the conservation, education, and science programs that bring the Nature Museum to life every day. Our butterfly shipments are subject to an increased tariff this year as well. Free access to the Butterfly Haven is always included in all Nature Museum membership levels. The Nature Museum is proud of the great value our memberships can offer guests.



ATTENDANCE

	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY26 vs FY25
Paid Visitors	45,342	46,560	43,752	-6%
Member Visitors	37,845	36,760	39,783	8%
Comp Visitors	35,023	36,318	27,748	-24%
Total	118,210	119,638	111,283	-7%

REVENUE

	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY26 vs FY25
Paid Visitors	$488,689	$515,419	$507,320	-1%
Memberships	$272,495	$298,144	$362,029	30%
Butterfly Haven	-	-	$120,472	-
Total	$761,184	$813,563	$989,821	26%



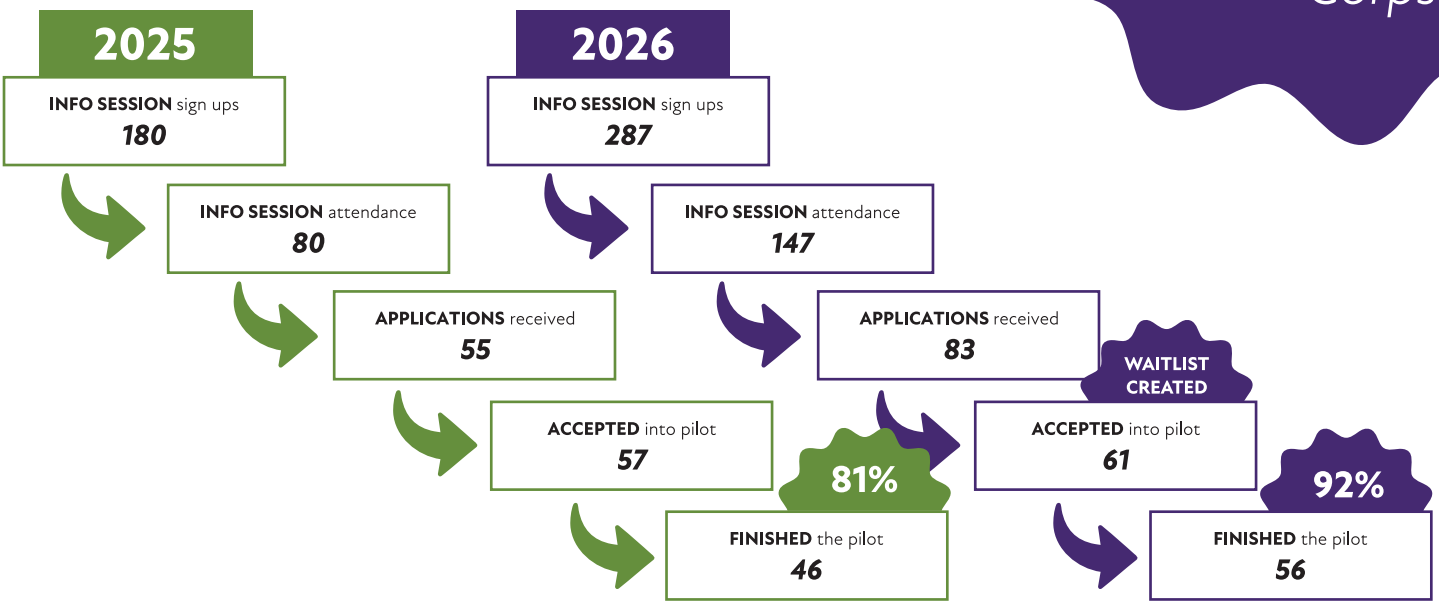



Chicago Conservation Corps (C3)

For the first time this year, the Nature Museum team had to develop a waitlist due to the fact that we had reached capacity for the cohort. There were 20 people on this waitlist. In FY26, 54% of accepted applicants identified as part of a historically disenfranchised racial group. Additionally, 56% of accepted applicants identified as having a household income under the Cook County 2020 census median of $64,660.

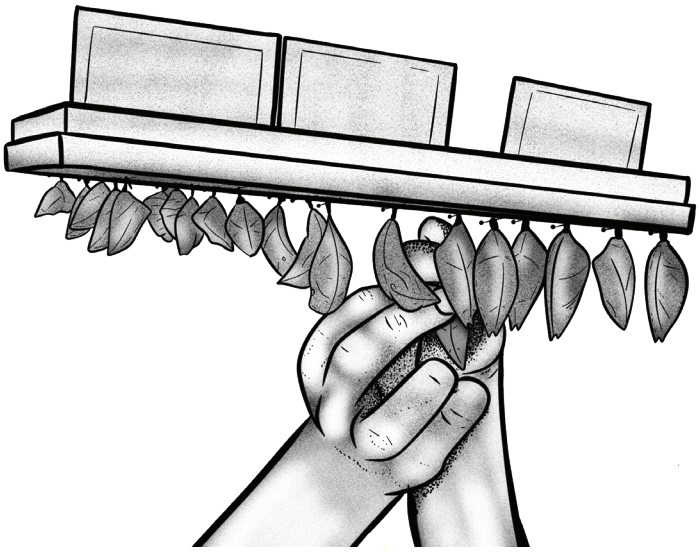
With each project completed, an average of 130 people are impacted each time. Year over year, the demand to participate in the Chicago Conservation Corps is rising, and we are actively working to meet the community's needs and enthusiasm for this crucial conservation program.

2026 MARKS THE 20TH YEAR *of the Chicago Conservation Corps!*



Biology & Collections

The Nature Museum's Biology and Collections teams continued to advance conservation science, strengthen biodiversity monitoring, and expand the Museum's collections throughout the year. Interest in community science programs reached new heights, with the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network receiving 167 new volunteer applications, nearly triple the typical number of applications, and inspiring the launch of new butterfly monitoring networks in Pennsylvania and New Hampshire. The Illinois Odonate Survey and the Calling Frog Survey also experienced record participation, welcoming 42 new odonate monitors and over 120 new frog monitors for the 2026 season. This year was truly an exciting moment for the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network, as it officially surpassed 1 million butterflies observed at the end of the previous monitoring season!



The Museum's field conservation projects made significant progress across Illinois. The Forest Amphibian Conservation Project documented successful breeding in our wood frog reintroduction sites, along with northern leopard frog, boreal chorus frog, eastern tiger salamander, and blue-spotted salamander eggs despite ongoing drought conditions in northern Illinois. Long-term monitoring of Blanding's turtles by Dr. Callie Klatt Golba continued in Lake County to assess population health and guide future conservation efforts, while new team surveys were introduced to strengthen collaboration and communication among field staff. Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat and her team completed research for the Morris Animal Foundation Wildlife Health grant, examining disease prevalence and documenting heavy metal accumulation in Smooth Greensnakes in Cook, DuPage, and Lake counties. The team observed record nesting output of Smooth Greensnakes, and documented only the fifth recorded Graham's crayfish snake in DuPage County in the past 30 years.

The Museum also expanded and enhanced its living and scientific collections. The Judy Istock Butterfly Haven successfully passed its USDA containment facility inspection, and Allen Lawrence began creating a digital archive of every butterfly species displayed in the Haven to support future interpretation, marketing, and exhibit development. New additions to the Living Collections included 40 native fish for our Riverworks exhibit and an American toad, a plains gartersnake, and an eastern milksnake. Dawn Roberts and Dr. Callie Klatt Golba also launched a new crayfish reference collection that will provide an important historical record for future research on wetland ecosystems. Dawn and her team are processing and digitizing donations to the collections, including historic photographs and original papers documenting local habitats and bird studies from over 100 years ago. These materials expand the Museum's ability to preserve and share knowledge about nature in the region and will be made available for research.







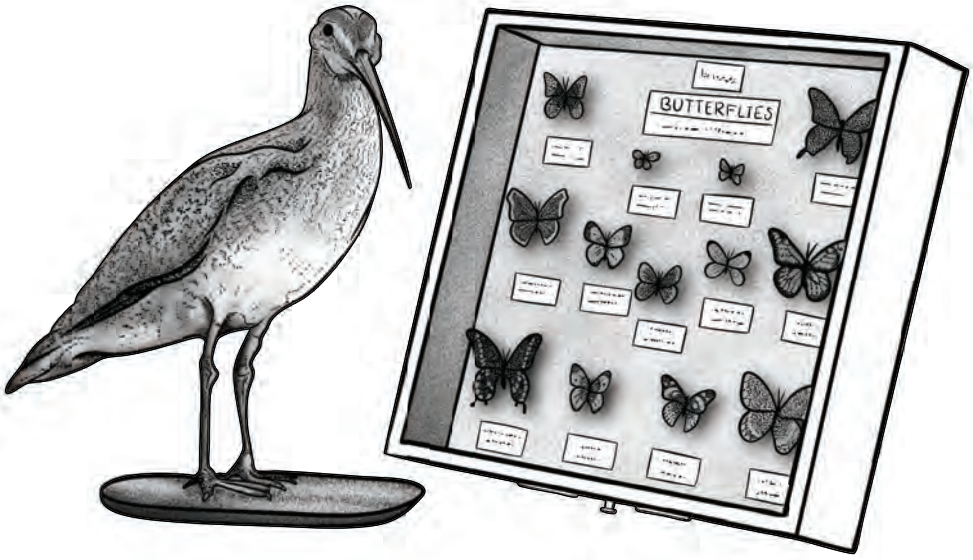
Museum scientists continued to share their expertise locally and nationally through presentations, publications, and collaborative research.

Dr. Callie Klatt Golba served on a panel hosted by the Shedd Aquarium for Chicago Water Week, entitled, "Protecting Freshwater Starts with Wetlands"

Dr. Klatt Golba's species spotlight of American toads and Dr. Sacerdote-Velat's wood frog stories from the field were featured on Midwest Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation

Dr. Sacerdote-Velat coordinated a multi-state smooth greensnake nest monitoring project with state and federal research partners

Dawn Roberts co-authored a presentation titled "Building a collaborative working group to standardize paleontology data infrastructure in the Arctos collections management system" given virtually at the 2026 Digital Data in Biodiversity in Research Conference



Our scientists were recognized with prestigious honors,

including Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat receiving the Chicago Bird Alliance's Protector of the Environment–Vocation Award and Dr. Callie Klatt Golba receiving the Smithsonian Mason School of Conservation's inaugural Alumni Impact Award.

Education

Year over year, the Nature Museum and its partner schools have seen a steadily increasing rise in the price of bus costs. An examination of bus reimbursement costs through two of our educational programs shows that in FY23, the average cost of a bus was $282; in FY24, the average cost of a bus was $332; in FY25, the average cost of a bus was $342; and, this year, in FY26, the average cost of a bus was $380.

This price increase affects several of our grant funded educational programs at the Nature Museum. We pride ourselves on doing our best to offer fully grant funded educational experiences to teachers and their students. A very important part of a grant funded experience is a bus trip to the Nature Museum, whether it is for a field trip workshop or a Science on the Go iteration. However, due to the rising cost of buses, we have been required to put a $350 cap in place for the amount of money the Nature Museum can reimburse for a bus. This means that some schools are still having to pay out of pocket for a portion of their Nature Museum educational program. For some schools, this extra cost means that they are unable to afford to come for a trip to the physical museum as part of their program. We elected to implement the cap on reimbursement funds as a way to stretch the available grant dollars as far as we can.

The Nature Museum education team recognized a gap that needed to be filled within our community. Every year, there are several holidays that are recognized by the local schools that are not recognized by many employers. Therefore, many working parents in the community are left scrambling to find suitable childcare for the days that the kids are out of school but the parents are still working.

That's where the Nature Museum came in. In FY26, we offered 9 day-off camps throughout the year on holidays and off-days that most parents were still working during. This initiative was incredibly successful and saw 281 participants in our day-off camps. Historically, the Nature Museum had only offered summer and winter camp during the traditional vacation blocks away from school for students. This addition of day-off camp provided Chicago parents with the opportunity to enroll their children in an educational, fun experience on a day when they would have to be finding childcare during their work day.








Program	FY25	FY26 Goals	FY26
Student Programs:			
Field Trip Workshops (at the Nature Museum)	634 workshops	740 workshops	626 workshops
Camp: Summer	427 campers	440 campers	394 campers
Camp: Winter/Day Off	89 campers	300 campers	322 campers
Nature on the Go (in communities)	89 workshops	55 workshops	82 workshops
After School Science Club	8 schools	8 schools	8 schools
Overnights	4 events	5-6 events	4 events complete
Multi-touchpoint School Partnerships with Teacher Professional Development:			
Science on the Go (SOG)	153 classrooms	140 classrooms	141 classrooms
Whole School Science Partnership (SSP)	3 schools	N/A lost funding	N/A lost funding
Science Teaching Network	32 teachers	32 teachers	27 teachers
Teens & Young Adults:			
DePaul undergraduate: *Environmental Education Theory and Practice*	1 quarter-long course	1 quarter-long course	1 quarter-long course
Seasonal Teen/ Young Adult Staff	25 staff and interns	25 staff and interns	30 staff *(11 young adults,19 teens)*
Community Partnerships:			
Chicago Park District Park Voyagers	6 parks; 105 students	6 parks	6 parks; 129 students
OST Community Partnerships	12 community groups	10 community groups	4 community groups
Illinois Department of Natural Resources ENTICE educator partnership workshops	2 workshops, 25 educators	2 workshops	2 workshops, 20 educators

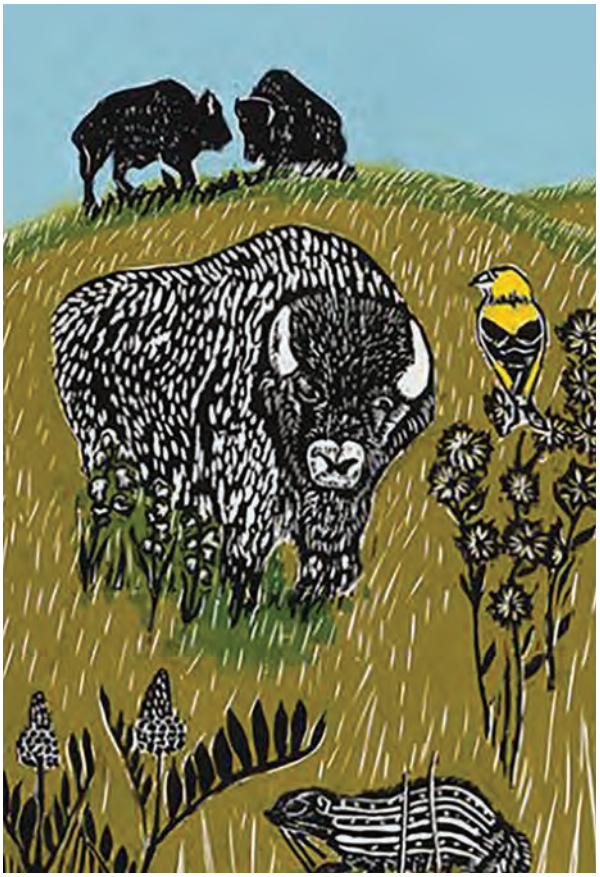
Exhibits

Over the past year, the Nature Museum developed one major temporary exhibition, By a Thread: Nature's Resilience, the result of months of collaboration across every Museum department. Planned, developed, and curated entirely in-house, the exhibition draws on the Nature Museum's extensive collections and the Biology team's research to explore biodiversity, conservation, and the actions needed to protect our natural world.

On view from June 20, 2025, through June 30, 2026, the exhibition invited visitors to engage with biodiversity through hands-on experiences, including identifying local frog calls, examining rarely displayed collection specimens, and exploring an immersive infinity room inspired by our scientists' fieldwork. Guests also contribute to a collaborative butterfly installation, reinforcing the message that everyone can play a role in conservation. The exhibition reflects the Museum's evolving approach to exhibit design by offering engaging experiences for visitors of all ages, expanding beyond our traditional focus on younger audiences, including unique interactive data visualization activities using our community science data from the region.

In conjunction with the launch of By a Thread: Nature's Resilience, the Nature Museum also developed a temporary exhibition in the Marquis space next to the main temporary exhibit space. This exhibit was called Night Flyers, and featured specimens directly from the Nature Museum collections. In the Night Flyers Exhibit, guests learn how owls play a key role in nature by keeping rodent populations under control. In this exciting exhibit, guests uncover the secrets of these mysterious birds: how they survive, what makes them skilled hunters, which species live nearby, and what we can do to protect their populations.

In addition to this flagship exhibition, the Nature Museum presented several temporary art exhibitions that celebrated the intersection of art and nature while highlighting Illinois and regional artists. This ongoing commitment was recognized with the Museum's first-ever Illinois Arts Council General Operating Support grant.



Temporary art exhibitions included:

A Brush with Nature (June–October 2025), featuring Tulip Petal III by Rory McEwen on loan from the Driehaus Museum alongside watercolor works by regional artists.

Fractal Forms Found in Nature (October 2024–October 2025), showcasing Chicago artist Allison Svoboda's watercolor, ink, and collage works inspired by specimens from the Museum's collections.

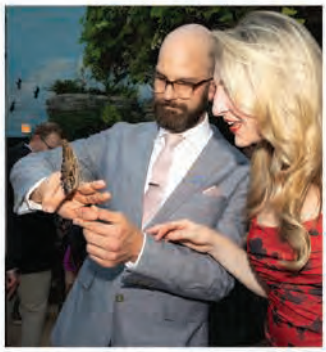
The Language of Water: Art, Ecology, and Engineering (May–September 2025), featuring artist-in-residence Lindsay Olson's exploration of wetlands through the lens of science and art.

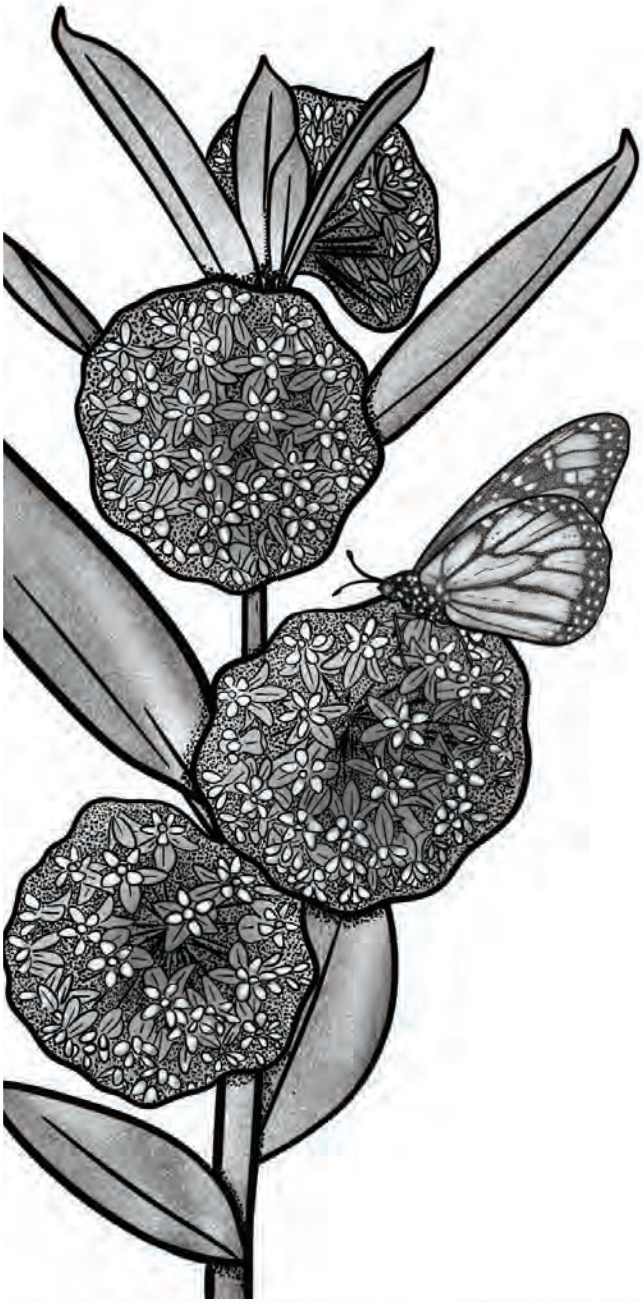
Magical Botanicals by Gabriella Boros (September 2025–January 2026), presenting prints, paintings, and multimedia works exploring the relationship between plants, people, and spirituality. *Photo featured on the left.

The ReLeaf Print Project (October 2025–October 2026), a community-created exhibition developed with the Lawndale Pop-up Spot and artist Jesús Oviedo through collaborative printmaking workshops.

In Blue: Cyanotypes by Mariano Chavez (January–June 2026), featuring cyanotype prints of local flora, fauna, celestial objects, and historical specimens from the Chicago Academy of Sciences collections.





Butterfly Ball

At the Nature Museum's annual Butterfly Ball, held on May 1, 2026, we honored three incredible nature champions. Adele Simmons received the Monarch Award for Outstanding Community Impact, John Edelman & Suzanne Krohn received the Catalyst Award for Leadership in Sustainability, and GCM Grosvenor received the Leadership Award for Science & Education. The 28th Annual Butterfly Ball successfully exceeded the fundraising goal set forth for this event.

Marketing

We were fortunate to receive a significant in-kind donation from a local, sustainably-focused furniture company, Shelfd, valued at over $100,000 and made possible through the generosity of a Nature Museum member family. This gift enabled a complete reimagining of our Museum Store, providing an opportunity for the Marketing team to evaluate both our merchandise mix and overall merchandising strategy. As a result, the store now features a refreshed look and feel and approximately 30% more retail space. Since reopening in September, we have seen a modest increase in sales, and our team continues to refine merchandising and operational strategies to maximize the potential of the enhanced space.



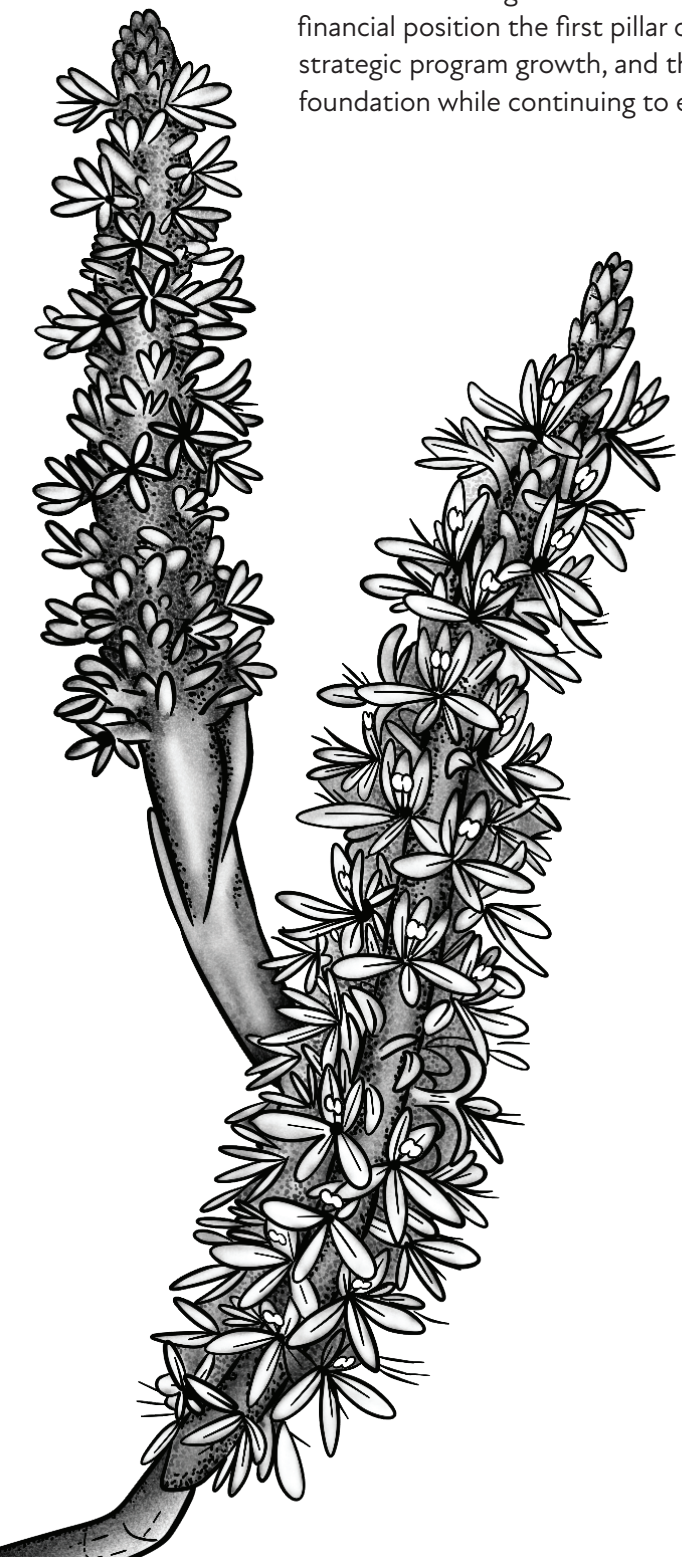




Long Term Financial Stability

The Nature Museum inspires people to build meaningful connections with nature, fostering a future in which all people value and champion the science and wonder of the natural world. Through nationally recognized education, conservation, and sustainability initiatives, the Nature Museum serves thousands of students, teachers, and families each year while equipping Chicago communities with the knowledge and resources to advance local environmental stewardship.

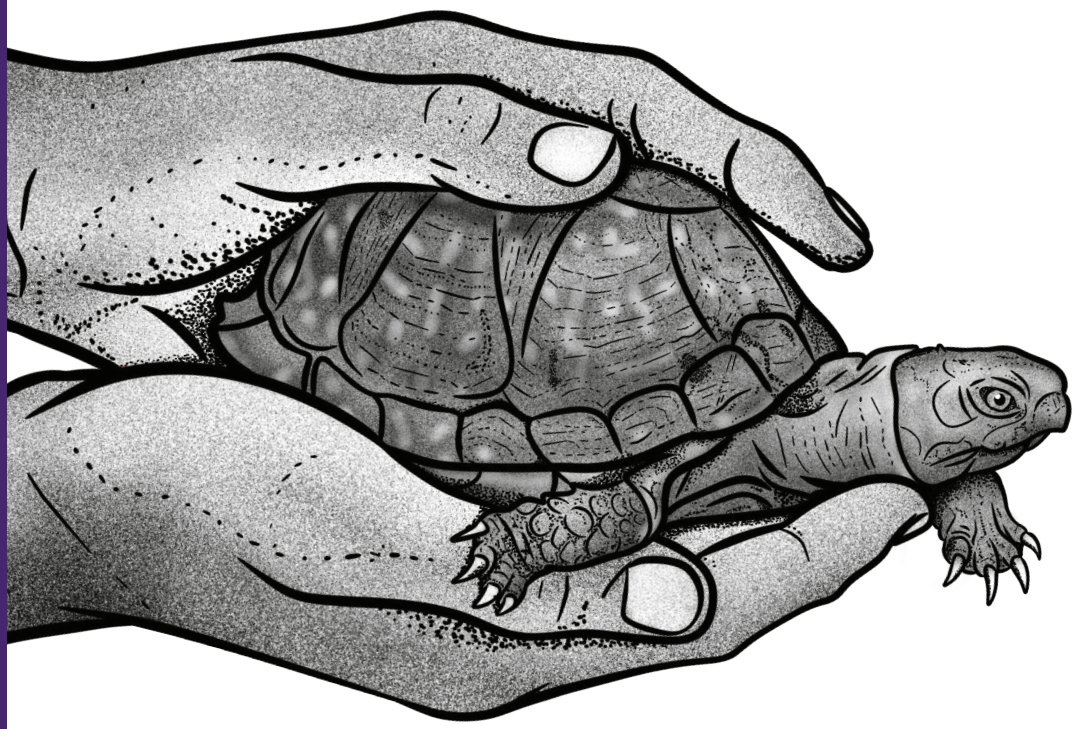
To ensure the long-term sustainability of this mission, the Nature Museum has made strengthening its financial position the first pillar of its strategic plan. Over the past year, disciplined financial stewardship, strategic program growth, and thoughtful cost management have strengthened the Museum's financial foundation while continuing to expand audience engagement.



The Nature Museum has demonstrated a strong ability to grow and diversify earned revenue. Over the past year, revenue from its camp program has increased significantly, with an additional increase projected in the coming fiscal year. This growth has been driven by the successful introduction of new offerings, including after care programs and day-off camps, which respond directly to community needs while creating new revenue opportunities. In February 2026, the Nature Museum implemented a $5.00 fee to enter the Judy Istock Butterfly Haven. This shift was developed to bring in more earned revenue, align with the practices of fellow institutions, and respond to rising costs of operations, including tariffs. As a result, this new fee structure resulted in over $90,000 of earned revenue in just five months. Private event rentals and public forums also continue to represent a key financial and strategic lever for the Nature Museum, which serves as a convener on topics of nature, biodiversity, and sustainability.

At the same time, the Nature Museum has implemented operational efficiencies and cost-saving measures, including the automation and consolidation of key budget management functions, further strengthening its financial performance. Contributed revenue continues to be an area of growth potential and successful fundraising remains critical to the advancement of the Nature Museum.

The Nature Museum performed well against the FY 2026 approved budget and ended the year with a modest net gain from operations before depreciation. The external auditors are scheduled to conduct the annual audit and preparation of financial statements in the coming months, which will be posted on the Nature Museum's website upon completion.



Museum Staff

As of June 30, 2026

President's Office
Erin Amico, President and CEO

Advancement
Erin Gallagher

Biology
Allison Sacerdote-Velat, Curator of Biology and Herpetology / Vice President of Conservation Research
Lily Barajas
Callie Klatt Golba
Dania Gamez
Teresa Hagan
Seth Harper
Allen Lawrance

Collections
Dawn Roberts, Senior Director of Collections
Jessica Weller

Exhibits
John Aldridge
Jonathan Pollock
Alexander Sharkey

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Dahlia Martinez
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