

Cobscook Currents

Spring 2021

"Weaving together is so powerful—it is a literal act of weaving together community. In this simple and ancient art, we connect with others whose fingers have touched the same threads to create a fabric with a common purpose. It is a deep rooted bond in the heart that can change the way we define our neighborhood!"

-Susan Barrett Merrill

Connection:

Reflections from a High School Student

Welcome to the spring edition of Cobscook Currents!

A little over two years ago, I found myself in Downeast Maine having moved from Wyoming where I had been homeschooled. I knew no one, and being sixteen, I decided I wanted to enroll in a public high school. I was intimidated by the idea of being surrounded by all sorts of cliques where I didn't belong. Then I found out about Cobscook. I knew immediately that this was where I belonged: a tightly-knit environment all about connection, whether it be a connection to the community, environment, people, or skills.

It's been about a year since the COVID lockdown began, and isolation last spring was especially difficult while school was online. When school resumed in September, though, students were pleasantly surprised by the new system. Educators managed to restore the Cobscook experience. We were back in person, canoeing, building guitars, and learning by experience—in fact, on October 5th, we took our first trip of the year.

For four days, we canoed on Grand Lake Stream, sharing meals around campfires, and building our skills. Oh, how challenging it was for new paddlers to battle the wind! It seemed a theme for this trip that voices would be lost on the air and tents would flap like birds' wings deep into the night. Nature instilled an inanimate desire in boats and tents alike to flip, but on few occasions did it succeed. Our third day was easily the most challenging; we would land at a place nicknamed "Rabid Rabbit." Where did this mystical nickname come from? None of us knew; all we knew was that this landing was an extraordinary nightmare. The wind was rough and the water levels were low; there were a thousand ways to be involuntarily dunked, but with great determination, we persevered. There was great cheering as each boat landed. With great challenges come glorious victories. We spent that night celebrating and new faces suddenly felt familiar. Friends became like family.

Connection through challenging outdoor experiences is unparalleled, but we have learned that connection is still possible through virtual means. In this edition of Cobscook Currents, you'll learn about the different ways Cobscook Institute is still fostering connection—through virtual programs, insights from a high school program alum, explorations in shared leadership, and more.

Enjoy!

Emrys McDonald

Cobscook Experiential Program
High School Junior





Cobscook Center

Program Highlight: Making in Place

"It's a delight and privilege to witness the energies shared in the joint conversation space that Anne and Daphne managed to set up in one fleeting virtual session."

A Making in Place participant shared that sentiment after the first meeting in January, facilitated by artist and activist Anne Shields Hopkins. There was such a hunger for this kind of connection among creatives that we had to open up an additional discussion group to accommodate.

Making in Place has consisted of regular virtual open studios and discussion spaces for creatives and self-proclaimed "Downeast Dabblers" to gain inspiration, focus, and a sense of community via Zoom while the pandemic prevents in-person gathering. Each week, there have been opportunities to be in creative community with each other and explore the process of being a maker.

In just the first few weeks of the program, Anne noticed "a sweet atmosphere of love" that developed between everyone. One participant shared that she hasn't been this happy and engaged in a very long time—even before the pandemic. The community connections have supported a piece of her that she didn't know was lacking attention. Another participant shared, "It's been really good, and I'm actually kind of shocked at how cool Zoom open studio is!"

March 15th was the 52nd consecutive virtual Monday Night Music Circle since the pandemic started preventing in-person music nights.

"Music has been a big part of my life. I like that no matter where I go on this planet, I may not speak the language, but music is a language that everybody understands. I look forward to Monday, especially now when we haven't had a lot to look forward to since this bug invaded the planet." -Dave Wilder

For more information about Monday Night Music Circle, visit cobscook.co/events or call (207) 733-2233.

Upcoming Programs

- Downeast Spring Birding Festival, Memorial Day Weekend
- Regular virtual music nights and writers' groups

For current program information, visit cobscook.co/events or call (207) 733-2233.



Cobscook Experiential Programs Orange River Water Quality Monitoring Project

An important goal of Cobscook Experiential Programs is to engage teens in meaningful conservation work so that they may become lifelong advocates for natural systems. Recent graduates of our program have gone on to college to study marine biology, environmental education, and conservation law (just to name a few career pathways pursued by Cobscook graduates). A trend among our grads is that they care about eastern Maine and many either stay or return to the area to contribute to making it an even better place.

The Orange River water quality monitoring project began as an outgrowth of our work with Downeast Salmon Federation, and was related to issues emerging from community dialogue related to the prospect of dam removal and a vision for the restoration of sea-run fish passage into the Orange River watershed.

In the fall and spring, students measure nitrate, nitrite, and phosphorous levels and collect data on temperature, turbidity, pH, and dissolved oxygen. Additionally, students conduct surveys on the macroinvertebrate life found in the watershed. These chemical and biological indicators help us understand the health of the watershed and we share this important data with the public to encourage understanding and improvement of the health of the Orange River watershed.



July 31 - August 14

Application Deadline: May 31

River Camp is a two-week summer camp for teens interested in outdoor careers, conservation, ecology, and outdoor skill building.

Apply now: cobscook.me/rivercamp

Letter from an alum

Dear Cobscook Experiential Program High School Students,

As you read this, I am hiking 500 miles of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Virginia with a classmate for college credit! I would never have attempted such a trip if it weren't for my experiences at Cobscook.

I was a homebody before I came to Cobscook Experiential Programs. I was content to stay in my comfort zone, play games on my computer, and eat chicken nuggets for the rest of my life! But then I attended River Camp and later, the high school program, and I learned to appreciate a good challenge and try something new. Cobscook helped me learn to step into uncertainty.

When I was a freshman, I was so shy, I hardly talked at all. But the supportive, community feel helped me to start speaking aloud in full sentences and give presentations in front of important scientists and fishermen! Sure, I would get really nervous before presentations, but my classmates were always there to offer a group hug and help me through it. I learned that the things you think you won't like often become your favorites.

In addition to trying things I didn't think I'd like, I also learned to try things I didn't think I would be good at. That helped me discover new passions and celebrate the little joys along the way. Life is going to throw hard things our way, so the goal is to figure out ways to celebrate moments as you go—challenging myself has really helped me with that. That's a big part of why I chose to hike this section of the Appalachian Trail: I feel pretty sedentary a lot of the time and wanted to remind myself that I am athletically capable of such a trip. The wilderness and expedition skills I built at Cobscook helped prepare me with the fundamental skills to be a leader in the backcountry and in my life. These skills are transferable to just about any career or educational path you could take.

If there's one piece of advice I would give to current high school students, it would be to make connections with people. Connection opens a door to prompt greater relationship development and leads to opportunities. If you want to connect with me, reach out! I have gone into outdoor education because of the valuable connections I had and I want to give back.

Wishing you a happy, healthy, and fun spring!

Lexie Morrill
Class of '19



Thank You!

Your support has helped keep our high school students learning in-person and outdoors this school year. Our Giving Tuesday campaign helped us get more ice skates that kept us active and outdoors this winter.

Huge thanks to our 2020 donors

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**Every gift to Cobscook
Institute is essential and
much appreciated. We have
carefully reviewed this list
to include everyone who
supported our work in 2020.**

**If your name has been
omitted in error, please let
us know.**



A Learning Journey in Action: Shared Leadership at Cobscook Institute

Pandemic as Portal: An Opportunity to Imagine Another World

Nearly a year ago, Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy put out a call to use the global virus as an opportunity to restructure ways of being that are ultimately destructive to people and the planet. She wrote in a Financial Times article, “Pandemic as Portal:”

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging ... dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies..... Or we can walk through lightly.... ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

This has been a hard year. Lives lost. Financial struggle. Separation. Isolation. It has highlighted the inequities that already existed. At Cobscook Institute, we have used our tradition of responsiveness to pivot programming and adapt to the challenge before us. We’ve heard from people about their immense appreciation for our continued programming; we’ve been a lifeline for our students; we’ve pivoted use of our gathering spaces to instead be used as incubator spaces for mission-aligned small businesses. And we are excited to gather again in person and to welcome people back to our homeplace for celebration, learning, and connection.

And yet, we are changed. We emerge anew with fresh ideas and perspective. With an urgency that we not return to normal, but instead to continue to innovate and collaborate in order to be most relevant and impactful. With that commitment, we are refreshing programming and community engagement. This takes time and listening and we are committed to it.

We make the road by walking

To be a responsive, inclusive, equitable organization, those values must be reflected within the organization. For this reason, we are exploring and implementing models of distributed leadership.

We are a learning organization, and therefore we will experiment. As educator and co-founder of the Highlander Folk School, Myles Horton, said, “we must make the road by walking.” We have commenced a year of walking and of learning from other organizations and models while also learning from practice: evaluating and adapting based on what works best in our setting.

Following a tradition

There is a rich cross-cultural history of collaborative leadership, community organizing, indigenous education, democratic education, and cooperative development. These are practices and pedagogies that have informed our curriculum, community work, and programming through the years and that are now informing our leadership structures. In addition, there is an emergent energy within non-profit organizations to look at how their internal structures can actually perpetuate the oppressive structures that their programming aspires to transform. We are tapping the wisdom, methodologies, and research of old and new. And we are working as a team to identify a structure that most effectively supports our mission and programs.

What does this look like for us?

We have:

- Designed an interim structure that centers collaboration, distributed responsibilities, and leadership development, with built-in supports and accountabilities.
- Established a board/staff leadership team.
- Broken down our work into a collection of roles that are distributed among staff.
- Created working groups to independently manage specific aspects of the organization while staying connected.
- Invested in professional development to build staff capacity.

In April and June, we will evaluate. Third and fourth iterations and evaluations will follow. Our hope is to start next year with new systems and structures that best serve our work.

An Invitation: Accompany us on the journey

We will share our learning with our networks over the next year and we invite you to share resources and experience with us.

In addition, we've talked to other groups exploring distributed leadership about establishing a cohort for co-learning and resource sharing. If you or your organization is involved in similar initiatives, please reach out!

“Why share and distribute leadership? To be more resilient, adaptable and nimble as an organization. To tap the insights and passion all staff have for what Cobscook offers. When we engage our whole selves, empower each other, increase equity in decision-making, learn to really listen, and give and receive clean feedback, we build trust. Shared leadership is about building a culture of trust, practicing leadership that makes room for others—including our communities.” Sanna McKim, Board Co-Chair

Ways of Giving: The Generosity of Being in Connection

By Suzanne Bowles

After 6 years in international philanthropy, I jumped at the opportunity to come on as Head of Development at Cobscook Institute starting in January. Like many of you, I felt called by personal connection--a culture of generosity that can only be achieved through community.

But more importantly, why have you--the hundreds of community members of Cobscook Institute--carved a place in your heart for this mission? We sent an online survey to learn what you think, why you give, and how Cobscook Institute delivers on its mission. I thought you would like to see some of the responses!

“I showed one of my art pieces and others liked it and chose it for our theme - felt good.”

“I was involved in the early planning of the Commons and Heartwood Lodge. This was an exciting time in the history of the Cobscook Institute, required a great deal of commitment, and a sense of community.”

“...I made mugs and volunteered to manage the pottery studio in exchange for work space. I had not yet moved my pottery studio here, and did not yet have employment, so I had been floundering. It was great to be a part of this place and this community. I felt included, re-connected, and productive. I felt like I was finally home.”

Cobscook Institute delivers on its mission by: *“Reaching out to members that are trapped by the pandemic, enduring isolation and needing inspiration and hope.”*

Cobscook Institute’s *“Patience with differences is always appreciated.”*



Jim Miner and Don Sprangers at an early Pizza Night.

And here's what some of you said is the "secret sauce" of Cobscook Institute:

"Friendliness and attention to detail."

"Community education full of support and inclusivity, mixed with a staff full of enthusiasm and smiles, with ready forgiveness, plus a smattering of educational resources, a maximum dose of excellent IT, a beautiful campus, strong marketing, and ready answers."

"Relationships - real relationships and tending processes that ensure for and invite energetic, broad access and pathways to participation."

"Respectful and caring interactions."



I can tell you this for sure--it will be a joy to give with equal generosity of spirit and watch the fabric of our community grow from our contributions of all kinds. What a rich community we have!

The biggest and best way to give is continuing to nurture community connection. As far as money--lots of small amounts can add up very quickly and big amounts can go a very long way toward what we care about.

Here are some ways that may fit a range of generous souls:

- Join Board members by giving a sustaining monthly gift, ensuring we have year round stability. Even 10 dollars a month goes a long way! Visit cobscook.co/donate
- If you are among the fortunate few who can see the stimulus check as extra, consider using that money to support program scholarships for those who cannot afford participation.
- Consider making Cobscook Institute part of your legacy by including us in your will or as a benefactor on retirement accounts, life insurance policies, bank or brokerage accounts, or Certificates of Deposit. Visit cobscook.co/donate or call 207-733-2233 for more information.

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