



PRESS RELEASE

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OCCA Welcomes New Program Director

The Otsego County Conservation Association is pleased to welcome Jeff O’Handley to its staff as program director. O’Handley has been serving as interim program director since August.

“I’m very excited to join OCCA,” O’Handley said. “OCCA does such great work in the county; I’m thrilled be part of this organization.”

A long-standing interest in the environment led O’Handley to pursue a degree in natural resources management (wildlife) from Cook College, Rutgers University. While attending college, O’Handley worked summers at a local natural history museum, where he learned his love of educating others. After graduation, O’Handley worked for several years at Queens College Center, an environmental education center located in Caumsett State Park on Long Island. He left to become an educator in what might seem like an unlikely place—New York City—when he took a position with the Central Park Conservancy.

“New York City seems like a strange place to be an environmental educator,” O’Handley explained. “But it’s just as important there as anywhere else, and for some people, Central Park was the only experience they had.”

After more than eight years at Central Park, Jeff, his wife, Susan and their two children moved to Hartwick where they started Wildlife Learning Company, an environmental education business. Over the next eight years Jeff, Susan, and their collection of permanently-injured raptors and other animals were a fixture at events like Earth Festival and the Otsego County Fair. They were also frequent visitors to classrooms throughout the region.

“People respond very favorably to animals, even those thought of as ‘ugly’ or ‘scary’, like turkey vultures and snapping turtles,” O’Handley said. “Their interest in the animals made it easier to get across important information about our environment.”

It wasn’t all animals, however. WLC partnered with OCCA in 2005 to create Burn Barrel Biology, a program focusing on the negative environmental and health impacts of open trash burning. The following year, WLC spearheaded the effort to bring recycling to the Otsego County Fair.

“I’m proud of both programs,” added O’Handley. “We diverted about three tons of material from the landfill over three years at the County Fair. And I thought the burn barrel program was fun and informative, and handled what was a touchy topic for many in a sensitive way.”

Upon assuming the role of interim program director in August, O’Handley led OCCA’s stewardship programs, including water chestnut eradication efforts on Goodyear Lake and the Oneonta swamp, and highway cleanup along State Highway 80 in the Town of Springfield as per OCCA’s Adopt-a-Highway agreement. O’Handley was also tasked with making OCCA Oktoberfest a reality – securing funds, vendors and exhibitors; coordinating logistics; and organizing publicity. With that event successfully behind him, O’Handley is looking forward to applying his program creation and delivery talents to other areas. He is now working on the EcoTeam school program, outreach to farmers for the Recycling Agricultural Plastics Project, and planning OCCA’s 2014 nature walk series, among other things.

“Jeff is a welcome addition to our team,” said OCCA Executive Director Darla M. Youngs. “His environmental education background and practical experience make him a great asset to the organization and an integral partner in our work to protect, preserve and enhance the environment. He has hit the ground running.”

“Whether it’s simply letting people know about what we’re doing, or informing them about an important issue, education should be a part of everything we do,” O’Handley said. “I’m looking forward to helping advance OCCA’s mission.”