

# EXPERIENCING THE OUTDOORS

Newman Wetlands Center in Hampton encourages education, appreciation for the natural world.

by AISHA WHITE

Nature is full of examples of interconnectedness. From habitats where plants and insects thrive to humans who explore outdoor spaces, worlds intersect. Newman Wetlands Center in Hampton is helping visitors get acquainted with the world around them. Opened in October 1995, the center was the brainchild of Clayton County Water Authority General Manager Melvin L. Newman. During a trip to Alaska, Newman was inspired by a nature center he visited and wanted to recreate something similar in his own region. Now in its 26th year, the Clayton County center has admitted hundreds of thousands of people while pursuing its mission of educating the public on wetlands conservation and inspiring community action for the health of the local watershed.



PHOTOS CREDIT: DANIELLE BUNCH

The land on which the center sits has a rich cultural history tied to the Freeman family—one of the first Black families to own land in the area post-slavery. Just above the wetlands is an area that was once designated for Black boy scouts. Philanthropist J. K. Orr secured over 500 acres of land to be used by the scouts. When the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, the Boy Scouts of America integrated. The land would later be bought in the 1970s.

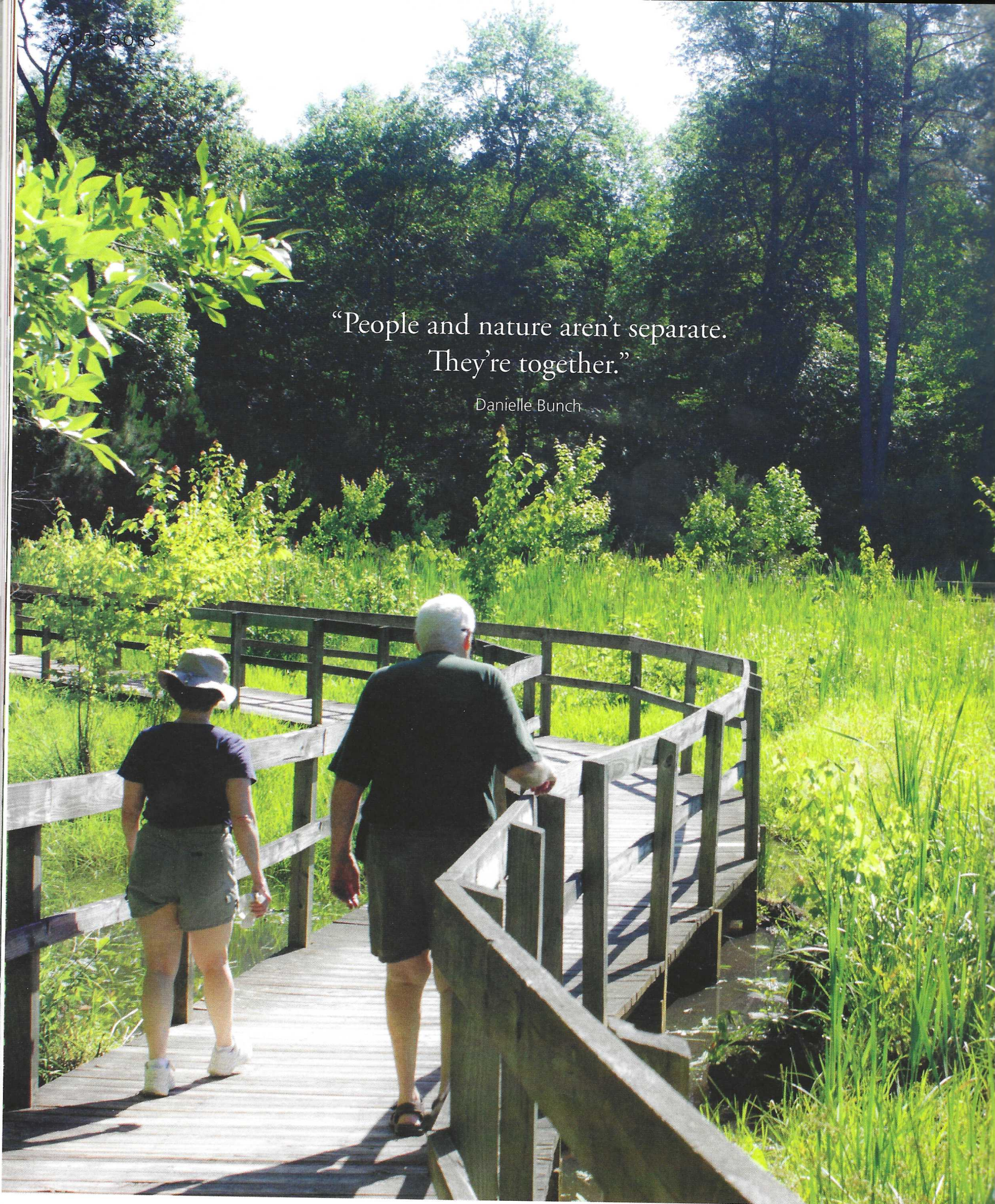
Danielle Bunch is senior conservationist at Newman Wetlands Center. While her job description can vary seasonally, some of her duties include preparing programming, managing gardens, trail maintenance and interacting with visitors. She finds joy in getting people out in nature to find connections in ways that are unique to them and helps them care about the space, see it as a part of who they are as individuals, view it as a part of the community and want to protect it.

Programming at the wetlands center spans across a broad range of areas, from amphibian night hikes and story time to an art program and many others. Visiting the location is free of charge; there is also no fee associated with parking. Guided programs are \$1 per person, and art programs are \$5 per person. Birders and wildlife photographers can enjoy access to public reservoirs during select dates and times with a standard wildlife viewing permit. The permit-plus option includes guided field trips to constructed treatment wetlands designed to process treated wastewater. They are also home to birds, otters, minks and more. From winter to early spring, there are trips to the treatment wetlands.



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They’re together.”

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The indoor learning center is made up of a classroom, exhibit space and restroom area. Renovations are also underway to make a portion of the learning center an immersive space that complements the outdoor surroundings. Newman Wetlands Center features a half-mile main trail consisting of boardwalk and crushed gravel that is not difficult to maneuver. It is ideal for small children. Other trails are unpaved and can be a bit more challenging due to the incline of the land, but they are not particularly difficult or long. The wetlands center was the recent recipient of a tourism grant that will go towards making the site even more accessible.

In preparation for a trip along the trail, some visitors may bring along water or wear comfortable shoes. While these items are important to have on hand, respect is also an essential part of a visit to the wetlands center. Respect at the center should be held for the land through leaving-no-trace practices. The term refers to the act of interacting with nature in a way that leaves the environment in the same state it was in when a person arrived. Running and cycling are discouraged at the center. Respect for others is encouraged to make for a successful outing at this safe space. Groups are also welcomed to visit the center.

“People and nature aren’t separate,” Bunch said. “They’re together.”

Bunch always cared about nature and wildlife, but she realized early in her environmental education career that not everyone had those connections. She wanted to help them find them. People are often surprised about what they see at the center—things they do not typically see elsewhere. With its free offerings and varied programs, Newman Wetlands Center removes financial barriers and empowers visitors to experience nature without hesitation. H

For more on the Newman Wetlands Center, visit [CCWA.US/Newman-Wetlands-Center](http://CCWA.US/Newman-Wetlands-Center).