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## 2017 Educator of the Year

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### *Brett Amy Thelen of the Harris Center for Conservation Education*

The CCCD is honored to recognize Brett Amy Thelen of the Harris Center for Conservation Education as the 2017 Educator of the Year. Brett served as the Science Director for the Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory (AVEO) from 2007 to 2009, and joined the Harris Center in 2011, when AVEO became their citizen science arm.

In her role as the Harris Center's Science Director, Brett manages their conservation research programming – facilitating research on Harris Center protected land and coordinating citizen science projects and public education programs. Brett's passion for connecting community members to the natural world is contagious and has helped fuel the growth and success of several citizen science projects in the Monadnock region.

Brett grew up in New Jersey and frequently hiked with her father. She remembers always appreciating nature for its beauty, but wasn't inspired to look deeper until later in her life. After receiving her B.A. in Literary & Cultural Studies from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, Brett spent some time traveling. During that time, she remembers the crystalizing moment that inspired her passion for conservation work – at an outdoor, overnight concert in the Everglades of Florida. As the concert came to an end, Brett remembers watching the sun rise over



wading herons and glistening waters, juxtaposed by a field of trash left behind by concert-goers. It was in this moment that Brett knew that she needed to do more to help protect the natural world she so loved and appreciated.

Brett had her first taste of citizen science while working on a horseshoe crab monitoring and tagging project with AmeriCorps Cape Cod sixteen years ago. The experience taught Brett that all people connect to the landscape in different ways and that citizen science projects allow people to, as she put it, “dip their toe in and see what science is like and know that what they’re doing is making a difference.” Brett received her M.S. in Environmental Studies: Conservation Biology from Antioch University New England and eventually returned to the

Cape Cod National Seashore to complete her thesis work focused on citizen science, before joining AVEO in 2007.

Arguably the most popular citizen science project that Brett coordinates is the Salamander Crossing Brigades. Salamander migrations are a “weather dependent natural phenomenon” in which amphibians make their way toward vernal pools to breed, and often get killed while crossing busy roads. Each spring, Brett trains volunteers to safely usher migrating amphibians across roads during the first big rainfall events of the year – often referred to as “Big Nights.” Since 2007 the project has trained nearly 1,000 volunteers, ushered nearly 35,000 live amphibians across roads, and identified nearly 60 crossing sites throughout the Monadnock region.

“People want to make a difference,” Brett says. “They want the opportunity to help, especially in our current political climate where things feel hopeless and scary. Citizen science at its essence is a hopeful act – you’re doing this because you care and because you believe that there is a future for this species or ecosystem and you want to help ensure that that future is a good one.” The Salamander Crossing Brigades are unique in the way that volunteers come back year, after year, after year. Drawn to the experience of holding live animals in their hands and to quite literally saving the lives of hundreds of animals in just a few hours, volunteers recognize right away that they’re making a difference. “My favorite nights of the year are the

first warm, wet nights of spring when I grab my reflective vest and headlamp and help amphibians cross the road, collecting citizen science data and practicing inter-species good will,” said Jessica Baum, volunteer now in her 5<sup>th</sup> season. On any given “Big Night,” individual crossing sites may host up to 25 volunteers, who usher upwards of 1,000 amphibians to safety.

There is no doubt that the commitment of volunteers is directly linked to the passion Brett brings to the programs she directs. Sarah Wilson and her elementary aged daughter Emily began volunteering with the Salamander Crossing Brigades nearly 10 years ago and were instantly hooked – in great part due to the personal connection they made with Brett. “Brett is such a wonderful, positive influence on the citizen science world of the Monadnock Region. Her knowledge of the natural world is impressive and her passion for the topic is infectious,” said Sarah. Sarah went on to join additional citizen science projects after working with the Brigades, and years later Emily eventually wrote her college admissions essay on her experiences growing up volunteering with the Brigades. “I feel lucky to know Brett and am appreciative of the positive influence she has had on my daughter - and me!”

Though popular indeed, the Salamander



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## Educator of the Year continued

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Crossing Brigades are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to citizen science and public programming with the Harris Center. The Vernal Pool Project trains volunteers to identify and document vernal pools (small, temporary ponds that serve as critical amphibian breeding habitat) in the Monadnock region – the “first step in protecting the habitat,” as Brett points out. The goal of this project is to document vernal pools on lands where information is needed for conservation planning, and to use the data to inform land protection efforts.

Project Nighthawk is an urban bird monitoring project first developed in 2007 by NH Audubon and coordinated in Keene by the Harris Center. Volunteers for this program are trained to watch for the state-endangered Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) on summer evenings in downtown Keene. By observing the behavior patterns of local nighthawks, volunteers help to identify potential rooftop nesting sites, with the ultimate goal of documenting and protecting the breeding birds.

Past projects include invasive plant surveys and water quality monitoring. In 2006-2008,

AVEO volunteers also surveyed nearly 800 culverts in the Ashuelot watershed, leading to the Falls Brook stream restoration project in Swanzey, NH – implemented in part by the CCCD and completed last year. With every project, Brett notes that it is important to be mindful that the data be used for something – in this case, volunteer surveys ultimately led to the stream restoration project in Swanzey, and in 2008, land up for sale on N. Lincoln Street in Keene was purchased as conservation land by the City of Keene after the Conservation Commission and City Council reviewed Salamander Crossing Brigade data.

“We as a culture are becoming less and less connected to the landscape that sustains us,” says Brett. “Citizen science is a point of connection for a lot of people, and anything that we can do to reconnect ourselves and our communities is important.” Citizen science provides an entry point into a world that many have never experienced. It offers tools, resources, and comradery to create an inviting and sustainable system of volunteerism that provides participants with a sense of connection and importance. It informs decisions, encourages participation and builds community.

Brett emphasizes that, “if we were connected more to each other and more to the land, we’d all be better off – this is just one point of connection and we need lots of them.” We thank Brett for the valuable services she provides to our community and it is with great honor that the CCCD presents Brett Amy Thelen with the 2017 Educator of the Year Award.

