

# In Praise of Environmental Education

Environmental education is as old as the hills and as fresh as tomorrow's sunrise.

MIRIAM S. WETZEL

When I was a freckle-faced third grader in a one-room schoolhouse, the teacher, Mrs. Van Ormer, succumbed to our pleading three or four times a year and took us for a hike through the Pennsylvania hills. She shared her knowledge of the local flora and fauna and even taught us the Indian trick of moving through the forest leaving no sign that we had been there. Our motivation was to get out of schoolwork for a day, but after our time with Mrs. Van Ormer, we never again carelessly plucked a sprig of wild arbutus or uprooted a lady slipper.

## Environmental Education Then and Now

That was environmental education. So are the well-organized programs being

conducted in established environmental education facilities from Maine to California, and so are the many types of day trips and overnight experiences planned and carried out by individual schools. All are cases of experiential learning which has as one of its most important aspects getting out of the classroom and away from the ordinary school setting with its ordinary behaviors.

Environmental education goes back more than 50 years when it was started by the Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan. In the 60s, the National Park Service, interested in promoting environmental education, set up National Environmental Study Areas where school children went to learn about their surroundings, and the National Environmental Education Devel-

opment program was a successful federal entitlement program—unfortunately, it suffered from the 1981 federal budget reorganization. Despite the budget cuts and little recognition in educational journals, though, environmental education continues to thrive quietly, like a hardy violet on the moss-covered forest floor.

The merits of environmental education are well-documented and need only brief mention here. All schools are located in an environment, and enhanced awareness of this environment, its unique plant and animal life, its fragility, and the delicate interdependence between humankind and the planet Earth are worthy of study. Plant and animal life exist even in large cities, but a subway or bus ride to the edge of urbanization affords access to much more, and the best experience, a camp or wilderness setting, abounds in natural habitats and ecosystems for study.

In the past, environmental education has been touted as an excellent way to teach the "basics." While it is true that all of these skills are involved in environmental study, I suspect that this argument has been oversold to parents and school boards. Environmental education needs no excuses. It stands on its own as a worthy component of the school curriculum.

John Santos, director of Nature's Classroom, a prototypic environmental education program with sites in three New England states, says, "The aim is basic literacy in the environment—to get kids to the place where they ques-



Photo: Miriam S. Wetzel

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**Figure 1. Budget for Two-Day Educational Environmental Camping Experience.**

Expenditures:		Income:	
Campsite Rental	\$ 300	Fees	\$ 720
Food (\$5 per individual: 180 campers, 40 staff)	1,100	\$4 per student (5 meals)	
Insurance (\$1 per camper by special arrangement with local insurance company)	180	From student	300
Two training sessions by Chewonki Foundation staff	150	Activity Account	
Nurses' supplies	30	School Board	830
Books, recreation supplies, and equipment	90	support from special funds	
	<hr/> \$1,850		<hr/> \$1,850

tion." The justification for getting children out of the classroom is their enhanced ability to learn when they go back in. In addition to teaching about our natural surroundings, environmental education has the potential to increase other cognitive learning and social development. Increased positive self-image, trust, and group cohesiveness are valuable outcomes of a well-run environmental education program. After a week at Nature's Classroom, one teacher wrote:

What a change in the kids after the week we spent with you. They have always worked well as a group, but now they are truly amazing! The petty battles and quarrels have almost disappeared—all the kids seem to take more responsibility for themselves and the group.

### What About Cost?

The best of all possible worlds is to have some funds allocated in the school budget. A laughable idea in the face of cutbacks? Not necessarily. It just means that principals and administrators have to do their homework before budget time and convince the superintendent, school board, and community that it is, indeed, a cost-effective component of the educational program.

Environmental education has to do with understanding and preserving the natural world, learning to use resources wisely, and living in harmony with nature and one's fellow human beings. It requires no expensive textbooks, no ex-

tensive equipment, and no additional staff. Costs vary according to the type of program, ranging from \$75 to \$100 per pupil for a week-long residential program, to as little as \$10.50 per student, which was the cost of our homegrown two-day program.

A good portion of the outlay in our low-cost program went for food. Parents can see the logic in paying a fee to cover food costs because they would have those if the child were home. Diligent searching can locate funds from private business and foundations. Nature's Classroom encourages parents to help their children earn a realistic part of the money themselves. Bake sales and car washes should be a last resort because they can become burdensome to school and community alike. If the commitment to environmental education is strong and plans are made far enough ahead, the money can be found.

There is a cost in time to be considered also. Centers such as Nature's Classroom in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and the Chewonki Foundation in Wiscasset, Maine, offer well-planned programs with a minimum investment of preparation time on the part of school personnel. For our two-day program, teachers volunteered to spend the overnight time and to attend two after-school training sessions, but schools should not take voluntary participation for granted.

With time and cost as the primary

factors determining a school's involvement in environmental education, the main options are:

1. A residential program at an established site, usually of one week's duration
2. An individually designed and implemented program, two days to one week.

### Sources of Information

A residential program is definitely the best way to go; it's well worth the modest cost per student. In New England, information about such programs is available in *A Resource Guide to Out-Door Environmental Education in New England*, published by the Massachusetts Environmental Education Society, 15 State St., Boston, MA 02109. In other parts of the country, contact the nearest Environmental Protection Agency or write for *The Conservation Directory* from the National Wildlife Federation, 1412 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036. This directory not only contains additional information about national use and management of environmental resources, but also provides local contacts that are useful for planning an environmental education project. The listings in ERIC under Environmental Education and Outdoor Education provide additional references.

### Two-Day Program: A Way to Start

For 180 sixth graders in our school in Windham, Maine, we chose the intermediate route—a two-day, do-it-yourself program. My personal experiences with environmental education—one-room schoolhouse style—had long since faded when a sixth grade teacher proposed our program. Initially, we grappled with the usual clichés: the school board won't go for it, the parents won't go for it, it will cost too much; but all our fears were laid to rest. What could have been our only obstacle, reluctance on the part of the sixth grade teaching staff, proved nonexistent. They endorsed the idea wholeheartedly and everything else fell into place. We designed an estimated budget (see Figure 1) and went to the school board. Because of a successful week-long experience by two sixth grade classes at Chewonki Foundation two years earlier,

the board endorsed the proposal and provided funding. With this and the use of a local Boy Scout camp in return for a \$300 donation, we were able to keep the cost to parents at \$4.

An essential part of our preparation, however, was two four-hour sessions for all teachers and volunteer staff with professional trainers from the Chewonki Foundation. To justify the time spent out of the classroom by the students, we made a firm commitment to design a sound educational program and found this list of books and journals helpful in preparing lesson plans and activities:

Fluegelman, A., ed. *The New Games Book*. New Games Foundation. New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Gross, P., and Railton, E. *Teaching Science in an Outdoor Environment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

Santos, J. *And This Our Life*, Vol. I and II, available from Nature's Classroom, Maple Rock Farm, RFD #1, Southbridge, MA 01550.

Van Matre, S. *Sunship Earth*, American Camping Association, Bradford Woods, Marlensville, IN 46151.

*Journal of Environmental Education*, 4000 Albemarle St., NW, Washington, DC 20016.

*Journal of Outdoor Education*, Northern Illinois University, Department of Outdoor Teacher Education, Taft Field Campus, Box 299, Oregon, IL 61061.

Four books on environmental studies in urban schools, developed by and for teachers through an ESEA Title III grant, may be obtained from: McDonough 15 School, 721 St. Peter St., New Orleans, LA 70116. Titles are: *Craw-*

*fish; Doodlebugs; Recycling Aluminum; Catching Insects*. A book on taking urban classes camping in state parks, available from the same source, is *Big and Small Are Camping Again* by Carol Brown and Jackie McCorkle. The *Journal of Environmental Education* 13,2 (Winter 1981-82) contains an annotated bibliography that is a gold mine of environmental and outdoor education reference sources.

### Safety First, Last, and Always

We take tremendous responsibility any time the welfare of children is in our hands, whether in the schoolyard or the wilderness. The seriousness of this responsibility should cause us to plan carefully but should not freeze us into immobility. Environmental education in all its variations has tremendous learning potential for students and teachers alike. □

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