

An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-based Education

DISCUSSION PAPER
APPENDICES

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By:

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DISCUSSION PAPER APPENDICES

INDEX TO REFERENCED PROGRAMS	i
INDEX TO AUTHORS	iii
DISCUSSION PAPER, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	vii
A. DEFINITIONS	A1–A29
1. Applying U.S. Community Development Process Lessons	1
2. Environmental Education versus Community-Based Education	15
3. Community-Based Environmental Education - Research, Definitions	17
4. Resources and Recommendations on Educating for Sustainability	23
B. OPPORTUNITIES: Overview of the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency	B1–B19
C. SKILLS: For Delivery of Community-based Programs	C1–C2
D. KEY CHARACTERISTICS: Community Education	D1–D17
1. From Research and Summary Articles	1
2. From U.S. Community Development	4
3. From Environmental Education Examples	5
4. From International Examples – Community Development and Environmental Education ..	7
5. From Project Interviews and Group Discussions	10
E. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: Education Resources	E1–E6
F. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: Community Examples	F1–F18
1. Education Strategies That Work – Organized by categories: Personal Action, Service, Environmental Monitoring, Vision Planning, Change Research, Internal Responsibility, Recognition, Advocacy (samples selected from Appendices A, D, and E)	1
2. U. S. Models	6
3. International Models	16
G. EPA: Community-based Activities	G1–G7
1. Education Program Examples – Regions 3 and 10	1
2. Environmental Protection Resources	4
3. Links to Extension	7
H. CANADIAN MODELS: Summarized by EcoLogic & Associates, Nova Scotia, Canada	
1. Community-Based Environmental Education	2-18
2. Community-Based Environmental Education – Bibliography	2-20

Compiled by Elaine Andrews, Bill Dickinson, Anne Camozzi, Chris Feise, Susan Handley, Susan McDowell, Bonnie Smith, Kelly Warren, and Greg Wise in partial fulfillment of a grant from USDA CSREES established in cooperation with US EPA.

INDEX TO REFERENCED PROGRAMS

The following programs are described in the Appendices. Some are also referenced in the text or tables of the “Discussion Paper.” To locate information about the program refer to the page numbers at the bottom of the designated Appendix.

Alberta, Sustainable Communities Initiative	H7
Burnside Industrial Ecosystem Project	H8
Clean Nova Scotia Foundation	H12
Community Coalition for Environmental Justice	F6
Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) “Know Your Watershed” Program	F6
Educating Young People About Water	F14
A guide to program planning and evaluation	
Environment Canada, Action 21 Network	H9
Environmental Education Through Adult Education	F16
African Association for Literacy and Adult Education (UNEP)	
Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)	F5, F6
Environmental Sustainability Kit	
Farm*A*Syst, Home*A*Syst	F1, F15
Give Water A Hand	F1, F7
Global Rivers Environmental Education Network (GREEN)	F2, F7
Sourcebook for Watershed Education.	
The Good Neighbor Project	F4, F7
GreenCOM - The Human Nature Project	A17, F3
Green Communities Assistance Kit, US EPA	F3, G6
Groundwater Guardian	F5, F8
How to Plan a Conservation Education Program	F17
INFORM	F8
Making Less Garbage - A Planning Guide for Communities	
Preventing Industrial Toxic Hazards - A Guide for Communities	
Inland Fisheries Advisory Committee: River Watch	H11
Institute for International Cooperation	F16
of the German Adult Education Association (IIZ/DVV)	

Monroe County Pennsylvania – Water Quality School	F1, F9
Mountain Association for Community Economic Development	F2, F10
National Association of Service and Conservation Corps (NASCC)	F1, F10
National Environmental Education Advancement Project (NEEAP)	F10
The National Round Table on the Environment and Economy	H3
The Natural Step	F4, F10
Pennsylvania Environmental Council	F11
Pennsylvania Groundwater Policy Education Project	F11
“Lessons from Successful Project Leaders”	
River Network	F5, F11
Rural Environmental Planning for Sustainable Communities	F3, F13
Save Our Streams - Volunteer Trainer’s Handbook	F2, F9
Izaak Walton League of America	
Sea Change Resource Center	F4, F13
The SONDEO	F3, E2
A Rapid Reconnaissance Approach for Situational Assessment	
Urban Resource Partnerships	F14
USDA Natural Resource and Environmental Management	F14
Community Needs Assessment	
U.S. EPA	
Community-Based Environmental Protection:	G4
A Resource Book for Protecting Ecosystems and Communities	
Community Based Environmental Protection Strategies	G4
Sustainability in Action:	G4
Profiles of Community Initiatives Across the United States	
U.S. General Accounting Office	F15
Agriculture and the Environment: Information on and Characteristics of Selected Watershed Projects	
Watershed Education –	F15
Goals and Strategies for Training, Communication, and Partnerships	
Watershed-based community planning	F3, G6
Top 10 Watershed Lessons Learned, US EPA	

INDEX TO AUTHORS

This index lists the first author of published research and case studies described in the Appendices. To locate information about the publication refer to the page numbers at the bottom of the designated Appendix. See Appendix H, Bibliography for additional references.

Andrews, E.	F14, F15
Ayres, J.	A5, E1
Bainer, D.	E1
Batten, T.	A2, A3
Beckenstein, A.	E1
Bennett, A.	A8
Berger, I.	A17
Booth, E.	A17, F3
Blowers, A.	A23
Butler, L.	E2, F3
Byers, B.	A17
Cairn, R.	F1, F7
Camozzi, A.	H
Cary, L.	A2
Cawley, R.	A2, A3
Chavis, D.	A5, E2
Christenson, J.	A2, A4
Cole-Misch, S.	F7
Darby, J.	A8
De Young, R.	A18
Domack, D.	E3
Drohan, J.	F11
Dunbar, J.	A8

Dwyer, W.	A18
Environmental Defense Fund	F6
Ficks, B.	G6
Firehock, K.	F9
Fishbein, B.	F8
Flora, C.	A6, E3
Frederickson, H.	A8
Gardella, R.	A15
Gigliotti, L.	A19
Gordon, D.	A4
Hammock, J.	A8
Harker, D.	F2, F10
Hauswald, E.	A8
Heine, A.	F16
Himmelman, A.	E3
Howe, R.	A19
Huie, J.	A8
Hungerford	A15, A20
Hustedde, R.	E3
International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives	A28
Israel, G.	E4
Jansen, L.	A20
Jones, B.	A1, A4
Katzev, R.	A20
Kaye, G.	A6, E4
Koneya, M.	A8
Kretzmann, J.	A6, E5
Kreifels, C.	F5, F8

Lewis, S.	F4, F7
Litrell, D.	A9
Long, H.	A9
Lotz, J.	A9
Maser, C.	A2, A9, A24
McDowell, S.	A5
McKenzie-Mohr, D.	A21, A28
Miles, L.	A9
National Association of Service and Conservation Corps	F1, F10
National Forum on Partnerships Supporting Education about the Environment	A25
Nuzum, R.	F6
Oberle, W.	A9
Olden, K.	A19
Parko, J.	A9
Pell, K.	A9
Ploch, L.	A9
President’s Council on Sustainable Development	A26, A27
Ravitz, M.	A9
Roth, C.	A15
Rothman, J.	A4
Rugumayo, E.....	F16
Sanders, I.	A2, A3
Ruskey, A.	F10
Sargent, F.	F3, F13
Sexton, K.	A19
Sidel, V.	A19
Simmons, D.	A15
Shaffer, R.	A10

UNESCO	A28
US EPA	F15, G4
USDA.....	F14
USDA CSREES	F1, F14, F15
US GAO.....	F15
University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension	E6
Vaughn, G.	A10
Voth, D.	A10
Wallin, P.	F5, F11
Walzer, N.	A5, E5
Warren, R.	A10
Weaver, J.	A10
Weintraub, B.	A21
White, S.	A21
Williams, R.	E5
Wilkinson, K.	A10
Winans, J.	E6
Wise, M.	F8
Wood, D.....	F17

DISCUSSION PAPER – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From “An EPA/USDA Partnership to Support Community-Based Education – Discussion Paper.” EPA 910-R-98-008

The capacity of democratic institutions to solve problems and create a better future depends on the knowledge and involvement of citizens in a community decision-making process that encourages systemic thought and broad-based action... Broad-based action is needed because local government alone cannot accomplish long-term solutions to community problems. Nor can individuals, businesses, community groups, or state and federal agencies do so by working in isolation. --- The President's Council on Sustainable Development, 1996

Managing the environment requires a local investment. Local activities affect *the quality of the local environment*. People have a common interest in protecting and improving *their community's quality of life*. Understanding these conditions has led both US EPA and USDA to seek to encourage environmental management through locally-based decisions and voluntary compliance with regulations.

This project investigated ways to strengthen the USDA Cooperative Extension, US EPA, and community partnership to support the local decision-making process and to more effectively plan and deliver locally relevant environmental education to all audiences.

Community-based education is not a new idea. It has been more commonly applied with community economic development, housing, youth, and health issues than with environmental concerns, however. Community-based education means more than "education based in the community." It implies an education plan created as a result of community involvement and designed to match community interests. While numerous environmental education activities have come from this approach, the principles involved are not broadly understood either by trained environmental educators or by natural resource professionals.

Federal and state agency environmental management goals cannot be accomplished until education and natural resource professionals can work confidently and competently in collaboration with community members and with professionals from other agencies.

The term *community-based environmental education* is used to draw attention to several needs:

- § to ensure that environmental education has an obvious connection to the community
- § to emphasize the link between local activities and a quality environment
- § to ensure that environmental education is relevant to people's lives

Recent research about how community members work together to make change and how individuals make decisions about what they will do provides a foundation for a new way of thinking about the role of environmental education in the decision-making process.

This project focused on two issues: How to support community involvement in decision-making about the environment, and how to most efficiently and effectively use the strengths of the sponsoring agencies, US EPA and USDA, when working with communities. Project findings are presented in terms of EPA and Cooperative Extension roles and partnership possibilities.

Many other agencies and groups also work on environmental topics and/or with communities. The intent of this project was not to exclude or minimize the value of their work, but, instead, to closely examine opportunities for improved partnership between the sponsoring organizations.

As EPA, Extension, and communities strive to understand and improve their partnership, staff will need to analyze how, where and when to become involved. In many cases, other organizations or agencies are better positioned to provide financial and technical support. EPA and Extension professionals need to understand the conditions in which they may be uniquely positioned to instigate or facilitate a particular activity.

The project steering committee reviewed research, written case studies, and EPA and USDA agency activities. They also investigated exemplary local programs selected for having three crucial elements: considering the whole community, linking environmental education to management of local ecological units, and linking it to goals for community sustainability. Project findings are supported by these resources as well as by participant recommendations. Material in the Discussion Paper Appendices includes: an annotated bibliography of published case studies and research, and detailed summaries of individual and group discussions.

Tables in the report specifically address:

- § elements of a good community-based education model
- § tools or resources needed to better facilitate community-based education about the environment
- § EPA and Cooperative Extension roles and partnership issues

Report Findings

The project produced six major findings. These summarize key actions that EPA and Extension professionals can take to strengthen partnerships and support the local decision-making process.

The goals of the EPA/Cooperative Extension Partnership are to:

- X Enhance community efforts that:
 - C Expand the community's capacity to improve environmental quality
 - C Integrate environmental management goals with other community development activities
 - C Lead to environmental improvement
 - C Increase involvement of more community interests (both groups and points of view) in community environmental management activities

- X Ensure that staff understand the principles of community-based education and commit to using it in their work, as appropriate.

- X Ensure that communities have access to the information they need and know how to use the information.

- X Ensure that staff have opportunities to work collaboratively.

To meet these goals EPA and Extension professionals should work cooperatively to:

Finding 1 - *Commit to authentic efforts* with communities. This means that participants' perspectives and contributions can, and often do, change the direction or focus of the effort, goals are established through genuine collaboration, and all participants commit to them, even when they differ from the initial ideas, plans or missions of some participants.

Finding 2 - Be ready to *support community assumption of responsibility* for environmental management. Professionals should identify or create resources that enable communities to respond effectively.

Finding 3 - *Become familiar with a community-based approach*. Professionals should understand which members of a community are affected, how to use a community-based model for supporting local education, and how to assess where their expertise might fit.

Finding 4 - Make every effort to improve their own ability *to facilitate* community-based education and *to support* community educators with the information and skills they need to be effective.

Finding 5 - Understand their *role* in local initiatives. EPA and Extension professionals should understand and be able to articulate their organization's legislative mandate and how their organization already supports community-based education. While maintaining sensitivity to the role of other organizations, they must investigate how their role could evolve through personal professional development and collaboration with others.

Finding 6 - Work collaboratively to:

- § Coordinate their efforts with each other and officially support their partnership
- § Exercise flexibility in how they apply their resources and skills
- § Help describe environmental and socio-economic characteristics of communities or geographical regions
- § Make existing resources more readily available
- § Determine appropriate opportunities for input of their expertise with communities
- § Expand the role of communities and partners
- § Set priorities for how they will work with communities
- § Provide professional development opportunities for themselves
- § Celebrate successes and give credit to all organizations that participate

An opportunity

US EPA and USDA Cooperative Extension each have proven strategies and resources for working with communities. The strengths of these agencies have been and can be powerful tools in supporting goals identified by EPA in the Community-Based Environmental Protection program and in supporting goals of the President's Council on Sustainable Development. Steps to bring agency professionals together will allow these talented and committed people to devise ways to expand use of their skills and resources.

A new examination of EPA's environmental goals, interests, and capabilities (information, assessment techniques, financial resources, shared approaches, agency coordination, and enforcement policy adjustment) would highlight ways to encourage and support local based environmental education efforts.

Similarly, State Extension services can exercise their considerable talents as experts, conveners, educators, and facilitators, applying these talents to environmental topics. Extension personnel can constructively engage the expertise and resources of public agencies, such as the US EPA, with community agencies and interest groups.

We face a challenging social, political, and fiscal climate. As these organizations share similar objectives – linking resources and people – it is both necessary and proper that they form a partnership to help build local capacity to identify and address community environmental challenges.

Each organization believes that citizen-based efforts can make a difference, that linking the expertise of natural resource professionals with that of education professionals is a key to successful local efforts, and that community and national partnerships are necessary to develop accurate information and disseminate it economically. This report details a model which can be used to help establish working partnerships in communities across the country.

The Project Steering Committee expects that using project findings will help the sponsoring agencies establish collaborative relationships. These relationships will link local, regional, and national resources to provide accurate and cost-effective mechanisms that help citizens better identify and address environmental concerns in their communities.

EPA and Cooperative Extension will know they have been successful in adapting to a new way of doing business when they find that communities are assessing their own environmental management needs, devising strategies for managing and monitoring improvement, and expressing satisfaction in seeing improvement in local environmental quality and protection.

The Discussion Paper Appendices

References listed in the Appendices are not all inclusive, but intended to broadly represent research, case studies, and opinions on our topic. We would appreciate learning about any additional programs or relevant research. Please forward information to:

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