

The History & Philosophy of Environmental Education

Objectives:

- Explore definitions of environmental education (EE)
- Examine the history and philosophy of EE as it is practiced in the United States and Pennsylvania.
- Examine some basic principles of EE
- Learn about issues and challenges facing the field of EE

What is Environmental Education?

Early Definitions: The Roots of EE

Environmental education as we know it today can be traced historically to **three main educational movements**: nature study, conservation education, and outdoor education (Disinger & Monroe 1994).

Nature Study

In 1891, Wilbur Jackman published *Nature Study for the Common Schools*, which ushered the nature study movement into formal education. Students ventured outdoors to “study nature, not books,” as Louis Agassiz put it. Nature study encouraged a thematic, holistic approach to learning, and actually contributed to some of the approaches used in elementary science education today, such as inquiry, discovery, and learning by first-hand observation.

Conservation Education

The Dust Bowl of the 1930’s awakened Americans to rethink the basis of our traditional agricultural practices and to the need for a new movement called conservation education. The assumption behind the movement was that teaching about conservation in the schools would raise Americans’ awareness of environmental problems and the importance of conserving natural resources, thus improving behavior toward the natural world. Many federal, states, regional and local resource management agencies adopted conservation education as part of their mission, and many still carry on this mission today.

Outdoor Education

By definition, outdoor education is education that takes place outside. More an educational method than a subject matter content area, outdoor education can be a vehicle for all subjects of the curriculum, so long as L. B. Sharp’s philosophy, “teach outdoors what is best taught outdoors, and indoors what is most appropriate there,” is followed (Disinger and Monroe 1994). The popularity of outdoor education flourished in the 1950’s with the advent of the school camping movement. Today’s outdoor educators make use of activities that include residential camping, nature study, and cooperative group challenges and ropes courses.

- Think about the EE activities your organization carries out. How many constitute nature study, conservation education, or outdoor education?
- Appendix 1 shows a time line of events that shaped the development of EE in PA.
- See Activity I.

How EE is Defined Today

International Consensus

An early milestone in the development of environmental education was the 1975 International Workshop on Environmental Education, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The result of this workshop was a **global framework for EE, which defined EE in terms of a goal** (Volk & McBeth 1997):

The goal of environmental education is to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills and attitudes, motivations and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones.

Two years following the Belgrade workshop, the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, held in **Tbilisi, USSR**, outlined **five categories of EE objectives** (UNESCO/UNEP 1978):

- ❖ **Awareness:** to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness of and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems.
- ❖ **Knowledge:** to help social groups and individuals gain a variety of experience in, and acquire a basic understanding of the environment and its associated problems.
- ❖ **Attitudes:** to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment, and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection.
- ❖ **Skills:** to help social groups and individuals acquire the skills for identifying and solving environmental problems.
- ❖ **Participation:** to provide social groups and individuals with an opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working toward resolution of environmental problems.

Winther, Hungerford and Volk's Definition

Winther, Volk and Hungerford (1994) defined EE with one overarching goal and four subgoals. **The overarching goal of EE** is:

To aid citizens in becoming environmentally knowledgeable and, above all, skilled and dedicated citizens who are willing to work, individually and collectively, toward achieving and/or maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between the quality of life and the quality of the environment.

They defined **the four subgoals of EE** as:

- ❖ **Ecological foundations:** To provide learners with a strong foundation of knowledge of ecological concepts to permit them to make sound decisions with respect to environmental issues.
- ❖ **Investigation and evaluation:** To develop the knowledge and skills necessary to investigate environmental issues and evaluate alternative solutions for solving these issues.
- ❖ **Conceptual awareness:** To guide learners in becoming aware of how both individual and collective actions may result in environmental issues which may be resolved through investigation, evaluation, values clarification, decision making and citizenship action.
- ❖ **Environmental action skills:** To develop the necessary skills for learners to take positive environmental action to achieve/maintain a dynamic equilibrium between the quality of life and the quality of the environment.

Environmental action is often broken down into four main categories (Winther, Volk, & Hungerford 1994):

- ❖ **Persuasion** - attempting to convince others that a certain action is correct.
- ❖ **Political action** - bringing pressure to bear on political entities or individuals to convince them to act positively toward the environment.
- ❖ **Consumerism** - buying/not buying certain things because of their impact on the environment.
- ❖ **Ecomanagement** - or any physical action taken on behalf of the environment.

National EE Advisory Council

The National Environmental Education Advisory Council (1996) prepared a report on the status of EE in the United States. This report defined EE as follows:

Environmental Education is a learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address these challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action.

Pennsylvania Master Plan for EE

The PA Departments of Education and Environmental Resources (1984) gathered a group of formal and nonformal environmental educators into a task force to create a state Master Plan for environmental education. Below is the definition of EE from that document.

Environmental education is a learning process concerned with the interrelationships among components of the natural and human-made world, producing growth in the individual, and leading to responsible stewardship of the earth.

- What are some common threads in all of these definitions of environmental education?