

# Environmental Education: Not Just For Kids



by Kathleen Cowles Paul

Ask anyone to envision “The Environment.” Almost invariably, a peaceful natural setting will come to mind—a setting that won’t have any people in it. Ask the same person to envision “Environmental Education,” and the image will most likely shift to include children going on a nature walk through that idyllic setting.

As Environmental Educators, we have to ask: where’s the relevance? And, more to the point, where are the adults?

Although environmentalists and educators have made great strides by including Environment & Ecology standards among those mandated for Pennsylvania’s K-12 schools, we have to ask whether—in a time of global climate crisis and mounting environmental impacts—this is going to be enough. Even if we do a great job of teaching children to understand natural relationships and the importance of reducing one’s impact upon the environment, will they be able to apply these concepts to real life once they leave school to begin their adult lives and professional careers? Even if our schools lay an excellent foundation of environmental stewardship, who will help our young adults build a lifetime of sustainable practices?

Several recent authors have commented upon this apparent disconnect between “environmentalism” and the “real world.” Although the standing definition of Environmental Education includes the admonition that effective EE “fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action” (UNESCO, Tbilisi Declaration, 1978), it’s difficult for children to “take responsible action,” given their limited scope of practice. And Environmental Education as a field has been slow to include meaningful education for adults within its purview. As a result, some observers feel that “while [EE] seems to have created a vast



A workshop explaining the benefits of community gardening

number of people whose eyes and hearts have been opened to nature’s beauty and our human connection with it, their awakening and education has not been sufficient to provide them with the skills to make informed decisions to live more lightly on the Earth.” (Rick Flood, 2007)

Part of the problem stems from the difficulty inherent in teaching adults anything. Adults are rarely required to participate in educational activities and (unlike children) can “vote with their feet” by declining the invitation to attend any educational program that doesn’t seem useful or interesting. Possibly for that reason, Environmental Education programs for adults tend to focus on the “interesting” or avocational: fly-fishing, nature photography, eco-treks to other countries and adventure programming.

But there is a relatively new approach to environmentalism afoot, and it focuses upon making sustainability relevant to adults. Instead of framing nature as something “outside” of an adult’s daily responsibilities, this approach provides adults with the tools and resources that they need

to incorporate earth-friendly practices into their everyday professional and personal lives. Groups such as the Blue-Green Alliance (a partnership between the United Steel Workers and the Sierra Club) are working to combine state and national energy independence with new “clean & green” jobs for Americans. The Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the economic and social prosperity of Pennsylvania food and agriculture, working with “the farmers that grow our food, the consumers that eat the food, and those concerned with the ecological well-being of our environment and natural resources.” The Green Building Alliance (GBA) supports the design, construction and operation of environmentally responsible—and high performance—buildings and businesses, thereby enhancing “the human health, economic, environmental, and social value of new and existing development” in the Greater Pittsburgh area.

I would contend that these groups and others like them are involved in the practice of Environmental Education. They are helping adults apply the concepts of interrelationships, ecology and sustainability to real world situations by providing information and access to resources. In fact, I would further argue that this is the real goal of EE in K-12 formal and nonformal settings: to produce adults who understand and appreciate the natural world, causing them to actively seek out ways to combine stewardship with their everyday professional and personal lives.

That being said, how are we (as professional Environmental Educators) supporting those who took their childhood nature walks to heart and now want to “do the right thing” as adults? Are we helping farmers figure out how to shift to biofuels and organic production so that they can save the family farm? Are we educating business managers who are considering bankruptcy because their companies can’t survive skyrocketing energy bills? Are we using our skills to support factory workers who lose their livelihoods as manufacturing jobs move overseas? Are we working with homeowners who can’t make sense of alternative energy subsidies? Are we educating township supervisors who have to make difficult land use decisions with minimal

or no training? And if we aren’t providing these educational services ourselves, are we in regular communication with the groups that are—inviting them to the EE table so that we can all share our skills, resources and insights?

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, in their recent book “Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility,” suggest that the only effective response to environmental calamities such as climate change and habitat destruction will be “a reinvention of environmentalism that rekindles human aspirations for a better future and unleashes the vast human potential all around us to accomplish it.” As Environmental Educators, we are in an excellent position to provide leadership to this initiative.

At the Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education (PCEE), we are taking this challenge very seriously. We accomplish our mission (“to link all Pennsylvanians with environmental resources”) primarily through our website and monthly electronic newsletter, providing links to environmental education resources, programs and facilities all over the state.



Interest in the website has significantly grown over the past two years, with the number of annual hits increasing from 1.8 million in 2005 to 3.1 million in 2007. And yet our current website almost exclusively serves teachers and naturalists, providing access to a wide variety of environmental activities and other resources for K-12 education. This is an important service, and we intend to continue providing it. However, we are missing the mark if we continue to think of Environmental Education as something that essentially ends with high school graduation. It’s time for EE to grow up.

Our response to this challenge is the development of a completely redesigned website, now in its final stages of design and beta testing. We'll continue to provide a full range of educational resources for childhood educators working in the K-12 arena, but our new site will also offer a similar range of environmental resources for other Pennsylvanians, including those working in the fields of agriculture, business & industry, environmental non-profits, local government and higher education—as well as adults in the general public. The information and resources are already out there, but they're often scattered and hard to find.



Our goal is to provide easy access to the services, resources, funding, educational opportunities, partnerships and career opportunities that will help adults in all of these professions succeed both environmentally and economically. Each group will be provided with links to statewide resources for environmentally-sound solutions to the challenges that they face every day. For example:

- farmers will find links to funding for alternative fuel and energy sources;
- local government officials will be directed to best practices and training in sustainable development;
- businesses will find sources for low-cost energy audits and green/high performance building supplies;
- homeowners will gain easy access to information about alternative energy retrofits, low-toxic pest control and environmentally-friendly landscaping.



At the same time, we will continue to link all Pennsylvanians to environmental events and educational programs at nearby nature centers and parks.

I've been told by several foundation officials that they no longer fund Environmental Education because EE doesn't demonstrate significant "outcomes." I would submit that every child who grows up to be an adult who recycles or who thinks about the source of his food or who consciously conserves energy is a successful "outcome" of Environmental Education. The successful outcomes of Environmental Education are the many adults who are trying to live more sustainable, earth-friendly lives. It's up to us, as Environmental Educators, to support them with the information and resources that will make this possible. When you think "Environmental Education," continue to think of children—but also think of educating the farmers and business people and homeowners and government officials and all the rest of us grown-ups, doing our best to live and work in harmony with the planet.

For more information about the Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education visit:  
[www.pcee.org](http://www.pcee.org)

