

NAAEE Conference Strand: Sustainability

Wisconsin School Forests' Role in Achieving Sustainable Communities

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Abstract

Sustainability is a goal that nearly everyone supports. Although most people accept the basic concept of sustainability, specific actions or processes to achieve sustainability have not reached consensus. Regardless, education, at K-12 and community levels, is essential if we are to move society in a more sustainable direction. The Wisconsin school forest program provides an example of efforts at a K-12 level to incorporate the core content of education for sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY

Terms such as sustainable development, sustainable agriculture, sustainable resources use, community sustainability, and sustainability are commonplace. Although the basic concept of sustainability, has been around a long time as illustrated by Pinchot's (1910) statement that "conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time" it is only recently that the idea has been so widely embraced and applied to most human activities (Molnar, *et. al.*, 2001).

Regardless of the sustainability paradigm one accepts, there are some basic rules that govern life on earth. These principles have emerged from the fields of physics, ecology, biology, and the social sciences.

- Matter does not appear or disappear – there is no “away.”
- Things fall apart. There are two practical aspects to this law. One is that energy has to be used to maintain things in a “whole” state (see the next principle). The second is that regardless of how well we try to “dispose” of toxic wastes, they eventually will escape.
- There is value in order. Things with more order, i.e., less entropy, have more value.
- Plants create structure and order. Plants capture the energy of the sun and convert it into biologically available energy.

- Everything exists in a system and relationships are integral. Systems are maintained through their relationships.
- Organisms have social and biological needs.
- Humans are communal organisms. We have high social needs and can not meet all of our needs alone.

If we accept these principles as the “basics” for life on earth, then we can say that sustainable societies must attain the following conditions:

- Remove from earth or produce materials only as fast as the earth can reprocess these materials.
- Use chemicals that are normally abundant or break down easily into non-toxic chemicals.
- Protect the productive capacity of the earth to make order and provide ecosystem services.
- Make systems-based decisions that take into consideration the full impact of our decisions.
- Emphasize the health of the natural and human communities in which we exist.

(Natural Step, 2006)

Note that these conditions are goal oriented. They do not prescribe specific actions nor do they define an explicit endpoint. The conditions suggest an on-going process that moves us away from our current economic system and towards “creating new ways to live and prosper while ensuring an equitable, healthy future for all people and the planet” (Natural Step, 2006).

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

If we, as a society, are to meet the conditions for sustainable societies, then we need to engage and educate our citizens. The following is a list of education for sustainability (EfS) core

content areas that will help to develop the capacity of people to contribute to sustainable societies (Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, 2006).

- Environmental Literacy
- Systems Thinking
- Multiple Perspectives
- Sense of Place
- Sustainable Economics
- Citizenship
- Creativity and Visioning
- Sustainable Natural Resource Management

THE WISCONSIN SCHOOL FOREST PROGRAM

The Wisconsin School Forest program develops and promotes the use of outdoor education sites owned by school districts. The program, which is part of Learning, Experiences, & Activities in Forestry (LEAF), is a partnership between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource-Division of Forestry and the Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The LEAF School Forest program provides assistance and resource to help school districts develop and utilize their school forests

In 1928, the Wisconsin school forest program began with three parcels in northern Wisconsin. Since then, the program has grown and evolved considerable. Today there are 348 registered school forest parcels in 195 (47% of all) school districts.

The vision of the school forest program is that every student will visit their school forest to enhance their learning in all subject areas. Students will increase their understanding of

sustainable natural resource management and of their role in developing sustainable communities. School forests will serve as outdoor classrooms that will connect students with their natural and human communities through place-based, experiential environmental education.

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY AT WISCONSIN SCHOOL FORESTS

Environmental literacy is at the core of school forest education programs. School forest curricula are generally based on the progressive environmental education sub-goals that begin with awareness and ecological concepts and continue through active participation in addressing environmental issues (Hungerford and Volk, 1990).

To counter increasing attention focused on standardized and nationalized education and decreasing time spent outdoors by children, school forests serve as a focus to re-localize education and connect students to their natural and human communities. A sense of place is essential in creating relevancy in education as well as assuring that we strive to live well in our place. We typically identify ourselves through our relationships – with family, friends, neighbors, the land, a community, etc. As Wendell Berry says, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know *who* you are.”

The goal of sustainable natural resource management is to supply ecological, economic, and social benefits now and into the future. For most students, the school forest will provide the only opportunity to become involved in and understand sustainable natural resource management. Ideally, students will play an integral role in the management of their school forest through developing management plans, implementing management activities (when practical), and by adding value to forest products. If we don’t engage and educate them as students, chances are that there will be few opportunities for them to become educated as adults.

School forests are a less formal setting than the classroom for parents and community members to become involved in students' education. Recent research found that continuing involvement in outdoor education also "increased willingness of parents to come into school for events and meetings" (Peacock, 2006). Partnerships with businesses can be formed at the school forest by utilizing local companies and professionals. The school forest can serve as a community resource by hosting community education events, demonstrating sustainable natural resource management techniques, creating products for community use, and providing a recreation site.

Forest products (both timber and non-timber) and rental of facilities can generate income for the school. There is also incredible opportunity to more fully utilize school forest products at a local level – enhancing income and the connection between the school forest and the community. For example, students could build bird houses or furniture from lumber harvested at the school forest and sell these products in the community. This connection to products and the local economy provides the chance to more fully examine our current economic system and the attempts to develop economic systems that support sustainability.

CONCLUSION

If we hope to create sustainable communities, we need to develop comprehensive education programs to provide citizens the skills, knowledge, and experiences to effectively participate in the process. Education for sustainability programs that utilize outdoor education sites provide the foundation for developing environmentally and socially literate citizens. The Wisconsin school forest program is an example program which is embracing education for sustainability. School forests have incredible education value as outdoor environmental education classrooms that connect students to place, demonstrate sustainable natural resource

management, strengthen school and community relations, and provide income for schools. Most importantly, these outdoor classrooms stimulate lifelong learning. Students with school forest experience are better prepared to participate in discussions and activities to help move our society towards sustainability.

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