
INTRODUCTION



Environmental Education Materials: Guidelines for Excellence

is a set of recommendations for developing and selecting environmental education materials. These guidelines aim to help developers of activity guides, lesson plans, and other instructional materials produce high quality products and to provide educators with a tool to evaluate the wide array of available environmental education materials.

These guidelines are grounded in a common understanding of effective environmental education. For many environmental educators, that understanding is rooted in two founding documents of the field: the *Belgrade Charter* (UNESCO-UNEP, 1976) and the *Tbilisi Declaration* (UNESCO, 1978).

The *Belgrade Charter* was adopted by a United Nations conference, and provides a widely accepted goal statement for environmental education:

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, attitudes, motivations, and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones.

A few years later, at the world's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education, the *Tbilisi Declaration* was adopted. This declaration built on the *Belgrade Charter* and established three broad goals for environmental education. These goals provide the foundation for much of what has been done in the field since 1978:

- To foster clear awareness of and concern about economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;

- To provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
- To create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment.

As the field has evolved, these principles have been researched, critiqued, revisited, and expanded. They still stand as a strong foundation for a shared view of the core concepts and skills that environmentally literate citizens need. Since 1978, bodies such as the Brundtland Commission (Brundtland, 1987), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio (UNCED, 1992), the International Conference on Environment and Society in Thessaloniki (UNESCO, 1998), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (United Nations, 2002) have influenced the work of many environmental educators.

Environmental Education and Learning

Environmental education is good education. Environmental education is learner-centered, providing students with opportunities to construct their own understandings through hands-on, minds-on investigations. Learners are engaged in direct experiences and are challenged to use higher-order thinking skills. Environmental education supports the development of an active learning community where learners share ideas and expertise, and prompt continued inquiry. Environmental education provides real-world contexts and issues from which concepts and skills can be learned.

Environmental education recognizes the importance of viewing the environment within the context of human influences, incorporating an examination of economics, culture, political structure, and social equity as well as natural processes and systems. As conceived in this document, the goal of environmental education is to develop an environmentally literate citizenry. Through comprehensive, cohesive programs,

learners explore how feelings, experiences, attitudes, and perceptions influence environmental issues. They become knowledgeable about natural processes and systems and gain an understanding of human processes and systems. Learners are able to investigate and analyze environmental problems and issues using a variety of techniques. They also use basic science and math skills and explore the nature of bias. They develop a sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, are able to understand the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in our democratic republic, and they gain the skills necessary for citizenship.

A knowledgeable, skilled, and active citizenry is a key to resolving the environmental issues that promise to become increasingly important into the next century. While our schools play a major role, cultivating environmental literacy is a task that neither begins nor ends with formal education. Many parts of our society shape attitudes toward and knowledge about the environment—family, peers, religion, community, interest groups, government, the media, etc.

Environmental education often begins close to home, encouraging learners to understand and forge connections with their immediate surroundings. The awareness, knowledge, and skills needed for these local connections and understandings provide a basis for moving out into larger systems, broader issues, and a more sophisticated comprehension of causes, connections, and consequences.

Environmental education fosters skills and habits that people can use throughout their lives to understand and act on environmental issues. It emphasizes critical and creative thinking skills along with other higher level thinking processes that are key to identifying, investigating, and analyzing issues, and formulating and evaluating alternative solutions. Environmental education builds the capacity of learners to work individually as well as cooperatively to improve environmental conditions.

For each environmental issue there is not just one right answer or solution—there are many perspectives and much uncertainty. Environmental education cultivates the ability to recognize uncertainty, envision alternative scenarios, and adapt to changing conditions and information.

Knowledge, skills, and habits of mind translate into a citizenry that is better able to address its common

problems and create advantage of opportunities, whether environmental concerns are involved or not. Through the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) is taking the lead in establishing guidelines for the development of coherent, cogent, and comprehensive environmental education materials and programs. These guidelines also point the way toward using environmental education as a means for meeting the standards set by the traditional disciplines and providing students with opportunities for synthesizing knowledge and experience across disciplines. Good quality environmental education facilitates the teaching of science, civics, social studies, mathematics, geography, language arts, etc. It is hoped that these guidelines will help educators develop meaningful environmental education programs that integrate across and build upon the disciplines.

In an effort to assure that these *Guidelines for Excellence* do reflect a widely shared understanding of environmental education, they were developed by a “writing team” comprised of environmental education professionals from a variety of backgrounds and organizational affiliations. This team took on the challenge of turning ideas about quality into usable guidelines. In addition, drafts of these guidelines were circulated widely to over 1,000 practitioners and scholars in the field (e.g., teachers, educational administrators, environmental scientists, and curriculum developers), and their comments were incorporated into successive revisions of the document.

References

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