



*Cooperative Extension Supports
Youth Environmental Stewardship*

Promotional Article

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Landfill visit can spark youth learning and activities

On average, every person in Wisconsin generates about five pounds of trash every day. If you live in an average household of four, your family throws away 7,300 pounds of stuff every year.

What happens to all that garbage after the sanitation workers throw it into their big trucks? In Wisconsin, workers haul it to a landfill, where it slowly grows into a massive mountain.

“Most people have never seen a landfill, and when they do, they are amazed by the size. Landfills are so huge the equipment used to handle the garbage looks like toys. You’ll see paper blowing around and seagulls scavenging for food scraps,” Elaine Andrews, an environmental education specialist with University of Wisconsin-Extension, said.

Andrews has worked to develop a new environmental education program and website especially for youth groups, and for volunteers and educators who work with youth. This initiative is called CES YES. The initials stand for Cooperative Extension Supports Youth Environmental Stewardship.

Andrews says a visit to a landfill can demonstrate to youth the importance of reducing the amount of trash we generate by making wise choices about what we purchase and about composting, recycling or reusing things instead of throwing them away. Youth can also learn about how much it costs local governments to construct, maintain and eventually close a landfill.

“Young people have a natural interest in learning about and protecting the environment. And they can be very effective at encouraging their families and communities to take steps to reduce the amount of waste they generate,” she added.

During a field trip to a landfill, youth can see first-hand what sanitation workers do. They can come to understand the big consequences of small individual decisions. Should we throw out or compost kitchen scraps? Should we toss junk mail, newspapers and containers in the garbage bag or send them for recycling? When we're shopping for something, could we buy the same item without so much packaging? Should we use paper plates and napkins, or choose to use cloth napkins and real plates that can be washed and used again?

Andrews also encouraged a visit to a recycling center where youth can learn how plastic, glass, paper and other materials can be collected and transformed into new useful items.

She said that a number of websites provide excellent background information about waste issues.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources offers a youth-friendly electronic magazine about natural resources and the environment. It includes ideas, activities and tips for learning about recycling. <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/ce/eeek/>. WI DNR also has more information for adults and older youth at <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/aw/wm/index.htm>.

The UW-Extensions Solid and Hazardous Waste Education Center (SHWEC) website <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/shwec/uwqb/landfill.htm> offers additional information for adults and older youth. One excellent resource is an overview of solid waste issues written by Joseph Van Rossum, a SHWEC recycling specialist, at <http://www.uwex.edu/shwec/Pubs/pdf/Overview%20of%20Waste%20in%20Wisconsin.pdf>.

Wisconsin BeSmart is a coalition of local governments, state agencies, non-profit organizations, businesses, schools and environmental organizations. It lists dozens of educational resources for educators and volunteer leaders, to encourage reducing, recycling and reusing materials on a website at <http://www.besmart.org/>

Encourage youth to get involved in their communities and the environment with resources from CES YES. This initiative provides lots of help and information about things young people can do as environmental stewards. It's available on a website at <http://nrem.net/cesyces>. Or you can ask for local recycling information at your county Extension office.