

# EARTH CONNECTIONS

## Engaging Youth in Community Environmental Activities

Youth can be valuable partners and resources in helping protect our environment and in addressing environmental concerns. They have the power to make a difference in their communities, but often need the encouragement of adults before taking on the challenges of environmental stewardship. This brochure will help you engage youth in an environmental action project, find great program ideas and educational resources, and plan how to work with partners to meet project goals.

**A companion brochure, *Planning Youth-Directed Natural Resources and Environmental Action Programs*, can be found on the CES YES web site:**

**<http://www.cesyes.net>**

### What is Environmental Education and Stewardship?

Environmental education programs:

- X **Provide opportunities for youth to gather information.**
- X **Increase knowledge and awareness of systems and issues.**
- X **Build commitment and interest.**
- X **Foster cooperation in resolving environmental concerns and issues.**

Environmental stewardship is the concept of encouraging young people to serve their communities as protectors of the environment. Youth learn to understand and appreciate a broad range of perspectives and to take responsible

action – not only on their own behalf, but on behalf of future generations. To develop creative, community-based solutions for environmental issues, it is important for leaders to help youth:

- X **Understand ecological concepts.**
- X **Be aware of environmental issues.**
- X **Develop scientific questioning and investigation abilities, and critical thinking skills.**
- X **Build leadership skills.**
- X **Develop the confidence needed to address environmental concerns.**



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Photo by Jeff Miller, UW-Madison University Communications

*Youth have a natural curiosity about science and the environment. They are eager to help protect our natural resources.*

## Is Youth Environmental Stewardship Important to You or Your Organization?

If your answer is yes, you'll be pleased to know there are people and resources in your community, county, and state that can help you get started. Many 4-H Extension agents, young educators, volunteer leaders and teachers lack knowledge or experience with environmental education. But you can provide valuable experiences for youth to learn about the environment even if you are not a trained environmental educator. This brochure and the CES YES web site will guide you to resources and professionals that will help.

## Engaging Youth

Youth have a natural curiosity about science and the environment. Young people are not only interested in and willing to address environmental concerns and issues, but they are very eager to help protect our natural resources and make Earth a better place to live.

Successful environmental stewardship initiatives rest on a core set of beliefs:

- X People are motivated when they understand how their choices improve their lives and life in their communities.**
- X Environmental issues are best managed at the local level.**
- X Youth should be full and valued partners in local environmental problem-solving.**

Two important points are often overlooked. First, young people have talents and interests to contribute to projects and they want to make their own decision about how to help. Second, there is an additional opportunity for learning if the action project is both a local priority and relates to a specific community need.

The CES YES web site helps leaders find education resources that help youth choose projects that meet a real need and that match their skills and interests.

## Finding Materials and Resources

A vast amount of environmental education materials and programs are available for promoting environmental awareness and engaging youth in natural resources stewardship. In many states the 4-H Youth Development Program of the Cooperative Extension Service has a variety of project books for youth, guides for adult leaders or volunteers, and educational resources. Some states have county or state 4-H programs that focus on environmental education. There are also national 4-H programs such as the *National 4-H Forestry Invitational Contest* and the *Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program*.

Federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, have environmental education materials and programs in which the public can participate. Many federal agencies have regional offices and facilities such as parks and refuges that provide program opportunities. State and county agencies, including departments of natural resources and soil and water conservation districts, have education outreach components that might meet your needs.

In addition, there are numerous non-governmental organizations, such as the North American Association for Environmental Education ([www.naaee.org](http://www.naaee.org)), that provide environmental education resources, programs or stewardship opportunities. The CES YES web site includes details about many agencies and organizations that support youth environmental stewardship.

<http://www.ces.net>

## Environmental Program Ideas

Youth enjoy many different types of environmental programs and stewardship activities. Here are just a few of the possibilities:

- X **Go on a field trip to study habitats and ecosystems.**
- X **Visit a landfill, resource recovery facility or materials separation facility.**
- X **Conduct a wetland restoration project.**
- X **Plant vegetation for erosion control.**
- X **Adopt a road and conduct litter pick-ups.**
- X **Start a compost bin.**
- X **Conduct a beach, wetland, or stream clean up.**
- X **Work on a streambank or riverbank restoration project.**
- X **Develop a new nature trail or rebuild an old one.**
- X **Clean up a local park.**
- X **Encourage others to reduce, reuse, recycle.**
- X **Plant trees.**
- X **Plant a butterfly garden in the community.**



## Working with Partners

Successful environmental stewardship programs require a broad view and the ability to bring together diverse values and experiences. Partnerships can help foster the leadership skills needed by young people as they prepare to deal with environmental issues and concerns. Developing partnerships with organizations can help provide ideas, technical assistance, materials, resources, programs, service-learning opportunities and training.

Groups can work with a variety of agencies and organizations: public and private; profit and nonprofit; and federal, state and local. National programs such as *The Nature of Learning*, *Give Water A Hand*, *Earth Force*, and *Learn and Serve America* provide educational materials, partnership tips and service-learning opportunities for youth. The CES YES web site has links to these programs.



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Finding a good partner will take some effort. Check with local organizations for ideas and consider the many groups mentioned in this brochure or listed on the CES YES web site. The phone book is a good source. We recommend these important tips for working with a partner:

- X **Identify possible mutual benefits.**
- X **Develop a partnership agreement that includes goals and objectives and identifies responsibilities.**
- X **Make a plan for assessing the partnership on a regular basis.**  
*How well are things working?*
- X **Recognize partner contributions.**



## Schools as Partners

Many youth educators choose schools as partners, and schools often reach out to youth organizations.

Be prepared to work with a school by approaching the opportunity with a few resources in hand:

- X **Background information about the environmental topic**
- X **Lists of resource materials**
- X **Ideas for how to explain the benefit of the collaborative opportunity**
- X **Success stories from others who have accomplished results with a similar partnership**



Photo courtesy of USDA/NRCS

Youth educators will be welcomed as school partners because they can:

- X **Provide resources or materials.**
- X **Help plan an event, such as a festival.**
- X **Train teachers or volunteers.**
- X **Provide teen leadership training.**
- X **Assist with in-class activities, simulations, or field trips.**
- X **Help analyze data.**
- X **Link to after-school programs.**
- X **Help students use computers.**
- X **Mentor teen activities.**
- X **Help develop an outdoor school site.**

## Summary

Youth are interested in addressing environmental concerns and issues – they are eager to help protect our natural resources. It is important to provide educational opportunities for youth to learn about environmental conservation, pollution prevention, natural resources and stewardship. These learning opportunities should develop leadership, decision-making and critical thinking skills and help young people identify environmental concerns. Youth have the power to make a difference in their communities and adults can support young people who want to take action.

*For more information about engaging youth in environmental activities in your community, visit the CES YES web site at*

***<http://www.cesy.net>***



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