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If We Are So Smart, Why Do We Need Environmental Education?

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The ERIC bibliographic database has more than 18,500 citations related to a broadly defined concept of environmental education (nature education or outdoor education or ecology education). Nearly 9,900 are periodical articles and nearly 8,800 are ERIC documents (ED). The oldest citation retrieved is a 125-page report, *Conservation Education in Rural Schools: Yearbook*, published in February 1943, by Effie C. Bathurst, and the most recent (as of February 7, 2008) is the journal article, "How Does Your Garden Grow? Teaching Preschool Children about the Environment" by Susan D. Witt and Katherine P. Kimple, published in *Early Child Development and Care* in January 2008.

For millennia humans have recorded their impressions about their surroundings. Long before there were written languages, people created images on cave walls, stone tablets, pottery, and sculptures. Today we rely on the instantaneous electronic transmission of ideas, perceptions, and concepts about the places -- our environments -- where we live, work and play. Our interactions with other peoples, species, and resources in these environments provide us with learning experiences. These experiences, in turn, provide us with an awareness of who we are and how we are related to all that is around us. This is the essence of environmental education: to study and explore the living and nonliving natural resources that surround us and to better understand the complexities of their interactions, to quantify their existence, and assure their viability; all while fostering a sense of responsibility and respect for all of those resources. The best way to promote that responsibility and respect is development of environmental education in the context of providing a greater understanding of the scientific basis of those natural resources in settings to demonstrate the socioeconomic, political, and cultural relationships that will forge a better understanding for environmentally responsible and sustainable behaviors.

For many decades a number of environmental organizations, such as the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club, have used environmental education to solicit support for their causes. Conservation groups, such as Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, and more regional groups like the Adirondack Mountain Club have a long history of developing a wide range of environmental, nature, or outdoor education programs. These environmental education activities have been provided through their attempts to educate the public at-large about specific issues related to the need for conserving natural resources, improving ecological conditions on which plants and animals are dependent for their survival, and assuring the healthy quality of environmental conditions to maintain or improve a perceived quality of life and living.

So important was this new and emerging concept of environmental education that the U.S. Congress enacted a law to provide and protect it:

The National Environmental Education Act (NEEA) of 1990 calls on the EPA to provide national leadership to increase environmental literacy. The Act encourages partnerships and builds upon longstanding efforts conducted in the environmental education field by Federal and State agencies, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. To implement the Act, EPA's Environmental Education Division in Washington, DC, along with support from environmental education coordinators in the 10 Regional EPA offices, has developed the following mission and goals.

The mission is to advance and support education efforts to develop an environmentally conscious and responsible public, and to inspire in all individuals a sense of personal responsibility for the care of the environment.

The goals include: expand communication and partnerships; educate youth to protect the environment; promote the pursuit of environmental careers; educate the adult public to increase environmental literacy; and educate across international boundaries.(1)

The NEEA technically expired in 1996 and has since provided minimal albeit, the only consistent federal funding for environmental education. However noble the efforts, attempts to reauthorize the Environmental Education Act have consistently failed since 2000 (2). The Bush Administration has proposed eliminating its funding each year since FY2003. In most instances, the United States Congress has come to rescue federally funded environmental education programs, such as in 2007 when Congress again opposed the Administration's recommendations to terminate the program. The House proposed \$9 million to continue the program in passing the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for FY2008 (H.R. 2643, H.Rept. 110-187) on June 27, 2007. The Senate Appropriations Committee also recommended \$9 million to continue the program in reporting its version of the bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91) on June 26, 2007(3).

Recent efforts were taken to secure a commitment for environmental education in provisions of the No Child Left Inside Act, as advocated by organizations such as the Sierra Club and the North American Association for Environmental Education (4).

As our world enters into a new era of scientific and technical achievement never before seen on this planet, the need for understanding the fundamentals of science, economics, policies, and their interactions in those environments where we live, work, and play becomes much more critical. The need for viable and cogent environmental education campaigns is greater now than ever before simply because of the pressures of a growing world population, the implementation of new technologies, and the need to protect and conserve our natural resources are bigger more complex, critical, and too often more controversial than ever.

Professional associations at various levels such as the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) and the New York State Outdoor Education Association (NYSOEA) promote excellence in education for programs developed and implemented by nonformal organizations, K-12 classrooms, universities (both instructors and students), government agencies, and corporations. These efforts also include the development of standards and guidelines for formal and informal educational programs and collaboration with efforts of groups like the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) in providing training for environmental educators at all levels (5).

Through such combined efforts, we look at environmental education as an opportunity to empower individuals from pre-school to seniors in a greater understanding of nature and the

environment. Such empowerment promotes an environmental literacy that is essential for understanding the intricacies and complexities of our environment and the relationships, interactions, and responsibilities we humans have in it.

We can look with pride at our achievements and see the benefits of previous environmental education efforts. However, we need to look forward and meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles we see in front of us. There is perhaps in 2008, during a most critical year in which we elect a new President of the United States, more of a need to promote environmental issues and concerns than ever before in our history. It is hoped that our presidential candidates show a strong commitment to the environment including commitments to improve funding and support for environmental education.

We need environmental education in nonformal settings of nature centers, museums, places of worship, parks, and youth groups to develop a sense of wonder about a child's perceptions of their place in the world. We need environmental education programs in elementary and secondary schools to stimulate and inspire children to sustain their interests and concerns for the environment. We need environmental education programs in our colleges and universities to hone the skills and expertise needed for a deeper sense of understanding about the environment (6).

Lastly, we need environmental education campaigns to inform the public at-large to garner their support from community involvement to political action to overcome funding shortages and the obstacles of inaction and neglect with regard to assuring the quality of our environments and the conservation and protection of our natural resources.

This is why environmental education is needed.

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